



Mediatization of Politics in the Digital Age: Applying Strömbäck and Esser's Four-Dimensional Framework to Contemporary Political Communication

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of media technologies has fundamentally reshaped how political communication is produced, circulated, and interpreted. This article analyzes the mediatization of politics by applying Strömbäck and Esser's (2014) four-dimensional theoretical framework to recent examples from the 2024 United States presidential election cycle. While the original theory explains the long-term structural shift in which political processes become increasingly influenced, and in some cases governed, by media logic, contemporary developments such as viral imagery, meme-based political messaging, and influencer-style campaigning reveal new dynamics in the mediatization process. Drawing on foundational literature in mediatization, media logic, and political communication, this article demonstrates how digital platforms amplify media logic through personalization, dramatization, speed, and virality. Contemporary political discourse, exemplified through cases such as the "weird" rhetoric, the viral photograph of Donald Trump following the assassination attempt, and Kamala Harris's strategic engagement with youth-oriented meme culture, illustrates the deepening integration of media logic into political practices. The article concludes that mediatization has reached a stage wherein politics and media have become structurally interdependent, with profound implications for democratic processes, political representation, and public sphere deliberation.

Keywords: mediatization, media logic, political communication, 2024 U.S. election, memes, viral imagery, Strömbäck & Esser

1. Introduction

Media have become the principal channels through which citizens encounter politics, transforming not only the dissemination of political information but also the very nature of political competition and decision-making. As Strömbäck and Esser (2014) argue, the media's increasing institutional autonomy and structural influence have made them indispensable to political actors' strategic communication efforts. This transformation aligns with broader meta-processes such as globalization, individualization, and digitalization (Hjarvard, 2013; Krotz, 2007).

The objective of this article is to enrich and academically extend the original response paper by situating contemporary examples of political communication within a rigorous mediatization framework. Using Strömbäck and Esser's four-dimensional model from *Mediatization of Politics*, the article examines how 2024 U.S. election discourse exemplifies the deeper entanglement between media logic and political logic. It argues that viral messages, semiotic imagery, and meme-driven communication reflect a heightened phase of mediatization that demands scholarly attention.

2. Theoretical Framework: Mediation vs. Mediatization

2.1 Mediation

Mediation refers to the transmission or communication of messages through media technologies. It is largely descriptive and static, focusing on the role of media as channels



(Schulz, 2004). Traditional political communication, such as televised speeches or newspaper reporting, fits within this paradigm.

2.2 Mediatization

In contrast, mediatization describes a dynamic, long-term process in which media increasingly shape social institutions and cultural practices (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013). As Strömbäck and Esser emphasize, mediatization becomes evident when political actors adapt their behavior to media logic, anticipating how messages will be received, amplified, or distorted (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, pp. 3–18).

Key definitions include:

- Media as socio-technological institutions, not just channels
- Media logic replacing or overshadowing political logic
- Increasing dependence of politics on media visibility and performance

This distinction is crucial for understanding contemporary political communication, which increasingly relies on digital virality, visual symbolism, and platform-specific engagement strategies.

Table 1. Mediation vs. Mediatization

Concept	Definition	Characteristics
Mediation	Message transmission	Static, channel-based
Mediatization	Media shape institutions	Dynamic, structural

3. Strömbäck & Esser's Four Dimensions of the Mediatization of Politics

Strömbäck and Esser (2014) conceptualize mediatization through four interrelated dimensions, each representing a deeper stage of media influence.

- 1- Information Source**
- 2- Media Autonomy**
- 3- Media Logic**
- 4- Political Logic**

Figure 1. Four Dimensions of Mediatization

3.1 First Dimension: Media as the Primary Source of Political Information

In contemporary societies, the media have become the dominant source of political information (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 7). Citizens encounter politics primarily through screens, social feeds, and algorithmically curated content.

In the context of 2024, young voters increasingly rely on:

- TikTok explainers
- Instagram posts
- Viral memes
- Influencer commentary

This shift exemplifies Schulz's (2004) notion of *extension*: media expanding communication beyond temporal and spatial limits.

3.2 Second Dimension: Media Autonomy from Political Institutions

The media's institutional autonomy is foundational to mediatization. As media organizations become more commercially and technologically independent, they gain the power to define political relevance (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

Digital platforms amplify this autonomy through:

- Algorithmic gatekeeping
- User-led amplification



- Platform-driven trends

Thus, political communication is increasingly shaped by media ecosystems beyond politicians' direct control.

3.3 Third Dimension: Media Logic Guiding News Content

Media logic includes norms such as dramatization, personalization, negativity, and visual appeal (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Esser, 2013). Political issues are reframed not according to their substantive importance but based on their media attractiveness.

Examples include:

- The "weird" rhetoric during the 2024 campaign (He, 2024)
- The viral circulation of emotionally powerful images
- Meme-based humor replacing formal policy messaging

These illustrate the shift from policy-based coverage (political logic) to media-driven storytelling (media logic).

3.4 Fourth Dimension: Political Actors' Adaptation to Media Logic

The deepest stage of mediatization occurs when political actors internalize media logic and shape their behavior accordingly.

This can be observed in:

- Candidates producing content optimized for TikTok
- Emoji-based communication to reach Gen Z
- Politicians staging photo-ready moments
- Campaigns collaborating with influencers

Strömbäck and van Aelst (2013) describe this as *anticipatory media effects*, where politicians behave not based on present realities but on anticipated media reactions.

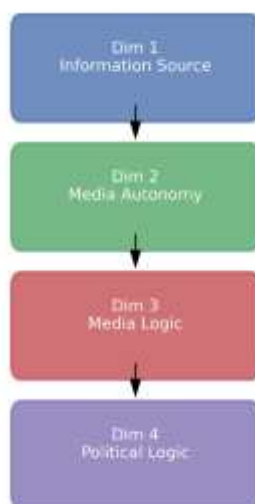


Figure 2. Relationship Between Mediatization Dimensions

4. Analysis: Contemporary Political Examples Through the Lens of Mediatization

4.1 The "Weird" Effect and Meme Politics

The "weird" discourse, popularized after a humorous television remark by Tim Walz and amplified across digital platforms, exemplifies how political narratives are now shaped by meme culture rather than structured debate (He, 2024). The term spread precisely because

it aligned with media logic: simplicity, humor, emotionally charged content, and rapid viral potential.

This reflects:

- Third dimension (media logic shaping political narratives)
- Fourth dimension (politicians adopting meme-friendly rhetoric)

4.2 The Viral Trump Assassination Attempt Photograph

As Franklin (2024) notes, the iconic image taken seconds after the attempt on Donald Trump's life became emblematic due to its semiotic power—presenting Trump as heroic, defiant, and protected under a symbolically significant American flag.

From a mediatization perspective, this image demonstrates:

- Media logic privileging visual dramatization
- Personalization of political communication
- The substitution function described by Schulz (2004), where mediated images replace firsthand experiences

Politically, the image arguably influenced voter perception more effectively than any policy message.



Figure 3. Trump Rally Image (2024)

4.3 Memes as Tools of Political Engagement

Building on Shifman's (2013) work on digital memes, political memes represent a hybrid communication form that blends humor, intertextuality, and ideological cues.

Chang et al. (2024) show that AI-generated memes further accelerate political persuasion by combining visual templates with algorithmic creativity.

Examples from 2024 include:

- Remixable templates of candidates
- Memes framing opponents as "cringe" or "weird"
- Viral sound bites reinterpreted through animated formats

These forms exemplify highly mediatized political communication oriented toward youth audiences.

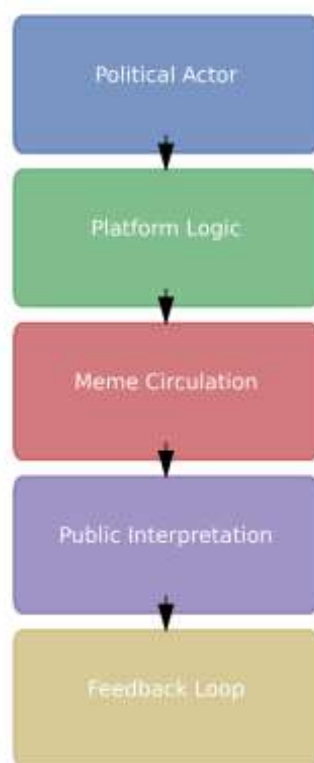


Figure 4. Meme Logic Pipeline

4.4 Kamala Harris's "Brat Summer" Strategy

Harris's appropriation of the "brat" aesthetic, originating from Charli XCX's pop culture phenomenon, illustrates political adaptation to media logic. By participating in the trend, Harris tapped into Gen Z cultural capital, demonstrating an understanding of platform-specific visual identity (Demopoulos, 2024).

This case illustrates:

- The fourth mediatization dimension (political actors adapting to media logic)
- The blending of pop culture and political branding
- A postmodern campaign style relying on aesthetics, affect, and participation

Table 2. Contemporary Examples Aligned with Mediatization Dimensions

Example	Dim 1	Dim 2	Dim 3	Dim 4
'Weird' Effect	✓		✓	✓
Trump Image	✓		✓	✓
Brat Summer			✓	✓
AI Memes	✓	✓	✓	✓

5. Discussion

The examples analyzed demonstrate how deeply media logic penetrates modern political processes. The transformation is not merely technological but structural. Political communication has shifted toward:

- Personalization over policy
- Emotion over deliberation
- Visuality over textual argument
- Virality over institutional authority



This aligns with Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) notion of the "third age" of political communication, where media-centered logics reshape democratic engagement.

The implications include:

- Diminished agenda-setting power of political institutions
- Increased susceptibility to misinformation and emotional manipulation
- Stronger reliance on platform dynamics rather than civic norms
- Reconfiguration of the public sphere into fragmented, algorithm-driven micro-audiences

While mediatization does not eliminate political logic, it forces politics to operate within media-determined boundaries.

6. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that mediatization is not simply the increased use of media in politics but a structural transformation in which media logic reshapes political communication, strategies, and public perception. By applying Strömbäck and Esser's four-dimensional framework to contemporary examples from the 2024 U.S. elections, it becomes clear that politics today is co-produced by media systems, platform logics, and participatory digital cultures.

The relationship is now one of interdependence: political actors rely on media visibility to maintain relevance, while media rely on political content to drive engagement. As viral aesthetics, memes, iconic photographs, and pop-cultural references, continue to dominate political communication, understanding mediatization's impact becomes essential for evaluating the health of democratic processes.

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