

Journalism and Royalty: Historicizing the Myth of the Mediated Centre

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Provided that there is a dominant centre of power in society, the media have always regarded it their responsibility to cover that centre. For symbolic reasons at least, the head of state personifies the national power centre, whereas the citizens inhabit the periphery and are supposedly dependent on the media to get information from the social centre.

Today, national centres of power tend to be represented as synonymous with the actual buildings that symbolise the concentrated leadership of politics – the White House in the US, 10 Downing Street in the UK, the Kremlin in Russia. The Swedish equivalent of this is Rosenbad, the Government’s Office. Historically, however, the national ‘centre’ of Sweden has been the Royal Castle.

In spite of Swedish monarchy being de-politicized in 1974, king Carl XVI Gustaf and the royal family are still represented as if they were part of our national centre, and royal family occasions continue to take on their traditional character of media events.

The aim of this paper is to deconstruct and reconstruct the myth of the mediated centre as a historical product, and to explore the state of this myth at different stages in time. I will do this through an examination of visual and verbal press material from three Swedish royal weddings – in 1888, 1932 and 1976, respectively.

Introduction

One of the most frequently applied and important justifications of journalism is its close connection to democracy – without journalism and the news media, democracy would apparently be impossible in modern, highly populated nation-states. This focus on the democratic functions of journalism derives not only from journalists and media companies, but also from scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, whose theory of the public sphere (1962/1989) laid the philosophical ground for advocating the necessity of media in democratic societies.

This question seems no longer open to discussion, and the degree of freedom of the press is easily converted into a measurement of the state of democracy. For example: since 2002, the international organization RSF (Reporters sans frontières; Reporters without borders) publishes an annual World Press Freedom Index, measuring the state of press freedom in the world. The index is based on 50 criteria for assessing the liberty of the press, assembled in a questionnaire distributed to partner organisations of RSF and their correspondents in 168 countries worldwide (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=19391, accessed 2006-10-24). Although the index is explicitly concerned only with violations of press freedom and disregards violations of human rights, in news reports of the results of the survey journalists and media are made to “stand for” democracy as a whole, in a metonymical relationship. Countries with a high index rate are branded not only as enemies of press freedom, but governmental actions taken against journalists and media companies are equalled to state violence against private citizens.

Background: The Theory of the Myth

This is only one example of how the media are placed – or place themselves – in the very centre of society, as the beating heart of democracy. In his book *Media Rituals* (2003), British media scholar Nick Couldry elaborates extensively on what he calls “the myth of the mediated centre”. This myth is based on two assumptions. Firstly, the assumption that there is a natural symbolic centre in society, the values and events of which we should all be familiar with. Secondly, the assumption that the media have legitimate and necessary access to that centre. The myth of the mediated centre thus tells us that we are dependent on the mass media for obtaining knowledge about the central values and the important events in our society. All alternative ways of communication are more or less ruled out by this myth. The idea of the social centre being a mediated centre stems from the media, and as citizens in the periphery we are unwittingly made to understand and accept not only the importance of being informed of what goes on in the centre, but also that this information is provided only by the media. In Couldry’s words:

The idea that society has a centre helps naturalise the idea that we have, or need, media that ‘represent’ that centre; media’s claims for themselves that they are society’s ‘frame’ help naturalise the idea, underlying countless media texts, that there is a social ‘centre’ to *be* re-presented to us. (Couldry 2003: 46)

Thus, the myth of the mediated centre does not tell us that the media are the symbolic, cultural, political or whatever centre of society, but it does tell us that the media encircle this centre like the walls of a medieval city, that they grant themselves the right to keep this centre under constant surveillance and to administer all communication both ways between the centre and the periphery outside.

Researching the Myth: Aim and Material

Couldry plants the myth of the mediated centre firmly within the contemporary context of today's "media culture" or "media society", where the media are omnipresent and pervade everything. However, if the constructed character of this myth – as all myths – were taken seriously, it should be possible to trace its origin to a certain period in time. Thus, the aim of this paper is to deconstruct and reconstruct the myth of the mediated centre as a historical product, and to explore the state of this myth at different stages in time. I will do this through an examination of Swedish journalism in daily and weekly press.

Provided that there is a dominant centre of power in society, the media have always regarded it as their responsibility to cover that centre. For symbolic reasons at least, the head of state personifies the national power centre, whereas the citizens inhabit the periphery and are supposedly dependent on the media to get information from the social centre. Today, national centres of power tend to be represented as synonymous with the actual buildings that symbolise the concentrated leadership of politics – the White House in the US, 10 Downing Street in the UK, the Kremlin in Russia. The Swedish equivalent of this is probably Rosenbad, the Government's Office. Historically, however, the national 'centre' of Sweden has been localised in the Royal Castle. In spite of the Swedish monarchy being de-politicized in 1974, king Carl XVI Gustaf and the royal family are still to a considerable extent represented as if they were part of our national centre, and royal family occasions continue to take on their traditional character of media events. In order to enable a consistent historical perspective of this study, I have chosen to examine the myth of the mediated centre in press material from three Swedish royal weddings – in 1888, 1932 and 1976, respectively. The analysis covers visual and verbal reporting from daily and weekly press.

Quantitative overview of the material

Daily papers: Aftonbladet (AB), Dagens Nyheter (DN), Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)
Weekly magazines: Idun (1888), Svensk Damtidning (SvDam; 1932 and 1976)

Wedding I: Prince Oscar & the noble Ebba Munck, Bournemouth, March 15, 1888
Period of study: March 14-31 in the dailies; January through March in Idun
Number of journalistic items: 59 (whereof 8 in Idun)
Number of visuals: 7 (only in Idun)

Wedding II: Prince Gustav Adolf & princess Sibylla, Coburg, October 19-20, 1932
Period of study: October 16-24 in the dailies; N:o 44 in SvDam
Number of journalistic items: 45 (whereof 15 in SvDam)
Number of visuals: 107 (whereof 45 in SvDam)

Wedding III: King Carl XVI Gustaf & ms Silvia Sommerlath, Stockholm, June 19, 1976
Period of study: June 18-20 in the dailies; N:o 26 in SvDam
Number of journalistic items: 134 (whereof 14 in SvDam)
Number of visuals: 283 (whereof 74 in SvDam)

This schematic overview demonstrates first and foremost an immense increase in the use of visuals, and also increasing – as well as more concentrated – media coverage of royal weddings generally. Due to the technical development during the 20th century speeding up the photographic publication process, the later observation periods are shorter than the first, but still cover the wedding reporting in its entirety.

More detailed information on the material demands a closer analysis of themes and categories in texts and visuals. We can easily increase our knowledge of the wedding reports by posing a couple of straightforward questions:

- In what ways are the relations between royalties, people and media (= centre, periphery and media) depicted and constructed in texts and visuals?
- How does journalism report and/or reflect on its own participation in the royal weddings?

In the following, the weddings are treated chronologically, starting in 1888.

1888: “Warm and Incere Congratulations from the People of Sweden to the Young Prince and His Bride!”

The engagement between prince Oscar, second son of king Oscar II, and the noble Ebba Munck, lady-in-waiting to crown princess Victoria, caused some turmoil in Swedish high society. Male members of the royal house were not allowed to marry beneath their rank, and Ebba Munck was considered “a woman of the people”, in spite of her noble lineage. In order for this marriage to be possible at all, prince Oscar had to produce a formal, written request to the king (his father), asking for permission to marry the woman he loved and to denounce his right to the throne along with his royal titles and privileges. This letter, as well as the king’s formal letter of consent, was printed *verbatim* in the press, where also a considerable interest in the future legal position of the prince was apparent.

The formal and social difficulties hindering the union of prince Oscar and Ebba Munck endowed the wedding reports with an unmistakably romantic flavour, reminiscent of old folk tales about pure-hearted princes falling in love with beautiful but poor girls:

...one of the fair maidens of the court...has won a King’s son...in spite of prejudice and paragraphs she won as her husband the man her heart has chosen...her gentle being...her warm and full heart...she, whose beauty, amiability and other characteristics have attracted a prince’s attention and captured his heart...does well deserve the happiness bestowed upon her...

...a member of the Swedish royal house...the young prince...has given up the velvet cloak and the princely crown...has declined the prospect of glory and power...generally admired and loved for his modest personality and his humane openness...on his way to win a lasting popularity...

The wedding ceremony in St Stephen’s church, Bournemouth, was described in vivid detail in the daily papers as well as in the weekly magazine. Additionally, the magazine presented an exclusive woodcut depicting the ceremony in the choir.

The readers are clearly imagined as royal subjects, with somewhat subordinate positions on the social ladder. Being but vaguely gendered in the daily press, they are explicitly addressed as women in the magazine. A considerable part of the reporting in the dailies consists of the rendering of telegrams sent to the newly-weds from different educational and military associations or organisations all over Sweden, which supposedly serves an integrative function across regions and social positions, and actively includes the male population in the tributes. The inclusive mode unites the papers and the people in heartfelt exclamations such as that in the section title, “warm and sincere congratulations from the people of Sweden to the

young prince and his bride”, or “we are convinced that all our female readers join us in cordially wishing the newly engaged couple good luck”.

Another prominent trait in the reporting is the consumerist perspective towards the audience. Apart from actual commercial objects such as plaster busts, paintings and pictures of Ebba Munck or the couple being advertised, the papers devote considerable space to two different types of self-advertising. One is the extensive and competitive promotion of exclusive visuals, indicating the ‘must-have factor’ of the issue in question. Another is the frequent reference to the presence of numerous international papers and journalists at the wedding, indicating the general news value of the event. The first type can look like this:

On the occasion of prince Oscar’s engagement to miss Ebba Munck, this issue is published today Monday instead of Friday. We have undertaken this change so that *Idun* may have the opportunity, before any other paper, to present their honoured female readers with the very newest portrait of the day. It is produced in the atelier of the court photographer Gösta Florman and cut in wood by Mr W. Meyer. (*Idun*, n:o 5, 1888)

Notable here are the status-signalling title “court photographer” (which adds a touch of grandeur to the magazine) and the almost explosive news value of the portrait of the bride-to-be, which is believed shortly to appear in many other papers. All *Idun*’s 7 visuals on the occasion of this wedding are held forward as exclusive originals. The most promoted illustrations appear in n:o 12, and are referred to in a special appendix numbered 11 ½:

This week’s issue of *Idun*, intended to be a festive issue on the occasion of prince Oscar’s marriage, cannot be published until the beginning of next week, since several illustrations, manufactured especially for *Idun* by a most distinguished foreign illustration company, have not reached us in time due to severe weather conditions. [...] The festive issue will contain a number of illustrations, among them the actual wedding ceremony in St Stephen’s Church in Bournemouth (exquisite woodcut) etc etc.

The apparent wish of the press to be connected with cutting-edge technology, already before the break-through of press photography, is perfectly consistent with modern journalism’s occupation with ‘the new’, ‘the current’, ‘the very latest’ (cf. Schudson 1978, Hartley 1996). By permitting reporters and photographers to take part of and technologically reproduce such an intimate family event as a wedding, the royal family supports and helps push this desire for technological modernity. At the same time, however, traditional elements of the event are held forward, such as the Swedish queen’s ceremonial arrival at the church.

Despite the use of the latest technology, journalism positions itself within the bourgeois private sphere rather than in the public sphere (Habermas 1962/1989) – the images of the newlywed couple acquire the status of private family pictures, and their wedding is depicted as if it were just as important to remember as a wedding within one’s own family. In the extensive wedding reports, the royalties are in fact not primarily constructed as power holders or sovereigns but rather as members of the readers’ (extended) family, and journalism adopts the role of this family’s central figure, the inquisitive and well-informed aunt or uncle who knows everything about everyone and is thrilled to share this with absolutely anyone.

Despite this constructed familiarity, the centre/periphery model does not quite apply in late 19th century Sweden. The organisation of society emerging in the 1888 wedding reports is more hierarchically than centrally oriented, with the king on top and the subjects beneath him, and the media adopting the role of communicator between top and bottom rather than the distributor of one-way information from the ruler to the ruled. The media pride themselves at

being given access to the wedding ceremonies and thereby having the opportunity to bask in the glory of the royal personages, but this is presented as a privilege gracefully bestowed on the media by royal benevolence, not as mandatory democratic procedure. This is a very important difference from today's naturalised conception of the mediated social centre, where every major event is preceded and followed by countless press conferences and press reports. The journalism of 1888 obviously predates the myth of the mediated centre, and thereby also describes a different society, a society where family and friends probably were of greater importance than the media as channels of information and formers of opinion. However, journalism possesses a certain social status, acquired partly through its graciously sanctioned, physical presence to the royals at the wedding, partly through its outspoken use of the latest technical equipment, symbolising the rapid progress of industrialist society.

1932: "Gustaf Adolf expresses his gratitude on 30 meters of sound-film"

The wedding of prince Gustaf Adolf, grandson of king Gustav V, to the German princess Sibylla of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was in many ways a classic royal wedding, knitting the family ties of the royal houses of Europe closer to each other. Accordingly, one of the most striking elements in the press reports from Coburg is the verbal and visual parading of innumerable royalties with a considerable variety of more or less complicated titles and origins. The media's preoccupation with royal and ex-royal titles and family ties reflects the turmoil on the European continent in the period between the world wars, when old nations fell apart and new nations and ethnic communities were consolidated or strove for independence.

Another striking element in the reports is the parading of Nazi uniforms – only a couple of days before the royal wedding, the city of Coburg hosted the celebrations of the 10-year anniversary of the S.A., and made Adolf Hitler an honorary Coburg citizen. Add to this that the mayor, who led the civil marriage ceremony, was a uniformed member of the NSPD (although civilly dressed during the ceremony), and that princess Sibylla's father, grand duke Carl Eduard, had arranged for S.A. and S.S. soldiers to assist the ordinary police force during the festivities, and the settings of the wedding begin to take on their particular and time-bound appearance.

The traditional fairy-tale narrative is somewhat missing in the reports from Coburg, and the renderings of the royal protagonists are rather impersonal and not respectful in the same way as they were in 1888. Due to the fact that the wedding takes place in Germany and not in Sweden, the hooraying and flag-waving citizens in the streets are not Swedish subjects but inhabitants of Coburg, and nationalist-royalist sentiment does not quite present itself. Rather, the Swedish media depict a specifically German setting – made up of *Hochzeit-Bier und Würstchen*, *Stahlhelme* and swastika banners – which appears quite strange and even slightly threatening, in spite of the age-old family ties between Swedish and German royalties. More than anything, the Coburg wedding is represented as a grand spectacle, and the press invites Swedish readers to watch and be amazed at this predominantly visual event.

Journalism combines two discourses in the reports from this wedding: on the one hand the traditionalist discourse, stressing history, dynasties, lineage and heritage, and on the other hand the modernist discourse, stressing the rapidity, accuracy and complexity of (media) technology. The obvious fascination with cameras, film cameras and microphones constitute a parallel track to the wedding reports. As demonstrated in the section title above, "Gustaf Adolf expresses his gratitude on 30 metres of sound-film", these tracks are united into a story of the merging between tradition and modernity, between history and progress. It is actually quite difficult to tell which part of the headline is the most important, "Gustaf Adolf expresses his gratitude" or "on 30 metres of sound-film".

The sound-film event appears in all four papers, and contains several elements of interest to this study. It begins with an American company (Fox) filming a brief interview with the

prince at an occasion when neither the German nor the Swedish filmmakers had their camera equipments ready. A little later, however, the Swedes and the Germans join their film forces and manage to persuade the prince to express his gratitude for the gifts and congratulations. His speech and the consecutive dialogue with the film photographers are extensively quoted in three of the papers, while the fourth (the evening paper *Aftonbladet*) contains an interview with the Swedish filmmakers. The prince's speech is 'reviewed' by a German film technician, who says that the prince has "a splendid voice for sound-film" and would be a great success in film business. Thus, the prince transcends the traditionalist royal discourse and enters the discourse of technological modernity, the realm of the media.

The merging of these two discourses is also made visible in some of the photographs from Coburg, where the journalistic thrill of achieving a kind of technological domination over the royals is almost tangible.



Figure 1. From *Svensk Damtidning*, No. 44, October 1932.

Picture 1 (above) is captioned "the bridal couple under the press photographers' camera fire", and shows the newly-weds entering the courtyard through a vault in the far left of the image. Photographers with camera equipments are surrounding the courtyard, kneeling behind the royal Mercedes or crowding in the thorny rose bushes in order to get their pictures of the royal couple. Obviously, the gathering of members of the international press corps in Coburg possesses considerable news value in itself; this is but one of many similar images, depicting the interaction between media and royalties. The frequent military metaphors in the articles – "cannonades of camera shots", "battalions of filmmakers and photographers beleaguering Coburg Castle", "murdering fire from the photographers' batteries" – imply that there is a sort of battle going on. Evidently, journalism is at war with royalty, and possibly, this war is

about the control of the social centre. What we see in the visuals and texts from Coburg is in fact the scaffolding of the myth of the mediated centre, the machinery of the journalistic working process laid bare for everyone to see and admire – and in due course legitimize.

When it comes to the relations between royals, media and audience, the earlier hierarchical organisation of society seems to be approaching the centre/periphery model, and rather than satisfying the royals' demands for respect and subordination, the media increasingly strive to simultaneously create and satisfy a public demand for rapid and stable access to newsworthy events such as royal weddings. As we have seen, however, the royals take advantage of the new media technology too, in order to strengthen their position in the national centre. The centre is contested, power relations are unstable – but citizens are unmistakably directed towards the periphery.

1976: “‘YES’ – AND THERE WAS A QUEEN. 500 Million Witnesses to the Wedding on TV”

In 1976, the 30-year-old king Carl XVI Gustaf married tourist hostess Silvia Sommerlath from Heidelberg, West Germany. They met during the Olympic Games in Munich 1972, when Carl Gustaf was still a crown prince, and managed to keep their relationship a secret for almost four years. At the time of their wedding, the papers were teeming with fairy-tale narratives about the ordinary girl who fell in love with a king and won the love of his people. Apart from the enormous extent of the press coverage, the reports from this wedding stand out in two important aspects: national(ist) sentiment is uninhibitedly evoked, and the central role of national as well as international media in this event is emphasized and taken for granted. A few headlines can exemplify these tendencies:

“This is Silvia: our new queen”

“How beautiful she is, the people cheered”

“180 000 happy Stockholmers in royal revelry”

“The bridal couple in radiant cortège. Blue-and-yellow flags. Happy onlookers in quadruple lines. Salutes and cheers for the royal sloop”

“Here is my Silvia – your queen”

“Welcome to us”

“The day we got a queen. SILVIA’S FAIRY-TALE WEDDING”

“Joyful family ceremony in front of millions. 200 years since the last time”

“The picture TV couldn’t show: The kiss Sweden has awaited for four years”

“Not one colour-TV left for hire for the wedding tomorrow”

“We saw everything up close – except the kiss”

“Perfect TV-wedding for millions. 180 000 by the cortège”

This is obviously not just any royal wedding; the huge media attention is legitimized by a purely quantitative news value – 500 million people cannot possibly be wrong, this really was

an important event made public by the media. The great number of television viewers worldwide justifies the enormous media coverage, which renders possible the huge public attendance of the wedding through the media, in a perfect circular definition.

The media's participation in the royal wedding 1976 is neither status rising (as in 1888) nor challenging (as in 1932) – it is simply a normal and necessary element of contemporary society. By this time, the myth of the mediated centre is completely naturalised and therefore invisible. The media make a point of complementing each other; what is not seen on TV is shown in the press, and the other way around, in the tailor-made model of the mediated social centre. The wedding reports from Stockholm 1976 surely sketch the contours of a media event, coronation style (Dayan & Katz 1992) – except that the king of the day is not the Swedish king, but the media themselves.

Beyond the Myth

These analyses have demonstrated that the myth of the mediated centre is a journalistic construction, with a history and a pre-history. The material of this study does not, however, render it possible to tell more exactly when this myth was naturalised. Neither does it allow for conclusions about the present state of the idea of the mediated centre. Still, I believe this study does accomplish something important in deconstructing the myth and foregrounding its processual character, as well as acknowledging the crucial role of different journalistic genres and modes of representation in the gradual establishment of this myth.

Couldry (2003: 66) stresses the close connections between media events and the construction of an idea or a sense of 'the centre', something which the present study confirms and also displays in visual and verbal detail. In a later article (2004), Couldry sketches a possible itinerary for media studies beyond the media-centrism implied and promoted by the myth of the mediated centre. This route leads out of the national centres and into the periphery of local, subcultural and alternative media. I would however propose another road to get beyond the mediated centre. This is the path of historical media studies, a direction I have briefly described in this study. Studying the past is an eminent way to get perspectives on the present and thereby be able to understand it differently. A final *caveat* should be added, though: studying the past does not mean focusing entirely on change and ignoring continuity. Too much of media studies is oriented towards change, and fails to see the things that remain the same, or that change very slowly in Braudelian *longue-durée* fashion. The myth of the mediated centre is undoubtedly central to contemporary journalism (and to media studies), but it has not always existed, and will not continue to exist forever. This is something that can be learned from historical media studies.

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