Michelle Stack
**Deep Mediatization and the U.S. News and
World Report Education Rankings**

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Working Paper No. 45, September 2023

# Deep Mediatization and the U.S. News and World Report Education Rankings

## 1    Introduction

This study examines the impact of U.S. News and World Report (USN) education rankings as a rich example of deep mediatization. The study also investigates the role of academics, non-profit entities, and their parent companies in validating rankings by appearing to be neutral third parties. Academic criticism of the U.S. News and World Report (USN) education rankings began soon after its inaugural publication in 1983. University rankings existed long before the U.S. News & World Report (USN) rankings; however, the USN rankings represent a leap in the reach and number of rankings and the regularity of publication. In 1987, the USN produced its Best Colleges and Best Graduate School rankings and in 1990, the Best Hospital rankings. In 2008 USN reported its "biggest single audience day" with 2.2. million visitors on the day of publication on usnew.com of Best High Schools (U.S. News Information, 2018). The U.S. News & World Report owner, Mortimer Zuckerman, explained to Washington Post journalist Thomas Heath (2013) that rankings saved his company: "Thanks to the rankings, we were … better positioned to take advantage of a web platform than most other magazines." According to Heath's article, universities and hospitals paid up to $20,000 to use the "Best of" badge from USN, a substantial chunk of the 30% of revenue USN receives from online advertising displayed on its rankings' pages or as part of the co-sponsorship of events. USN rankings have become a substantial business and are viewed as legitimate tools for decision-making in higher education.

## 2    The Impact of Rankings on Education

The impact of rankings goes beyond the confines of the university to the impact which immigrants are seen as desirable (Rauhvargers, 2013), salary offered to new employees (Argue et al., 2022). Rankings affect tuition fees and research funding (Hazelkorn, 2017). Top-ranked institutions reinforce each other through faculty postings that state applicants should be from globally ranked, world-class institutions, or through the implicit assumption that applicants from top-ranked institutions are the most qualified (Smyth, 2017).

Academic Publishing monopolies also serve as third parties through what appear to be objective citation indices that are key to rankings. For example, Lariviére et al. (2015) document a dramatic increase in the influence of three oligarchic publishers — Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Wiley-Blackwell — who own 47% of the academic papers captured by oligarchic citation indices. Elsevier also owns the Scopus citation index and CiteScore, which are used to measure impact, and the USN and other rankers to determine the research productivity of universities.

Collecting user data by rankers allows the development of new products that can help institutions improve their rankings. This raises questions as to whether rankings operate as a social closure function to "promote ideological homophily"(Brewer, Hartlep, & Scott, 2018, p. 4) and create an "echo chamber" that amplifies and reinforces who and what is world-class. For example, the prestigious Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) rankings use the number of Nobel Prize winners in the faculty as a central indicator. Nobel Prize winners are most likely to work in a small number of top-ranked universities (Stack, 2020) and reinforce the power of these institutions by influencing the selection of future Nobel Prize winners (The Economist, 2021) and collaborating with other Laureates (Wagner et al., 2015).

## 3       Deep Mediatization, Communicative Figurations and the USN Education Rankings

Couldry and Hepp (2013) define mediatization as the interplay between changes in media and communications and changes in culture and society. Mediatization is characterized by the dependence of institutions, including universities and hospitals, on resources that the media controls and their submission to media rules to access other resources (Hjarvard, 2008). As Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) explain:

> Deep, at this point, has at least a double meaning. First, through the advanced spread of media by digitalization, the character of the social world we inhabit very deeply relies on these technologically based communication media. Second, being digital, these media are not only means of social construction through communication but, in addition and on a 'deeper' level, means of construction through datafication (p.6).

Hepp (2020) explains that deep mediatization goes beyond analyzing the operation of media and instead examines the role of media in the construction of social domains. The concept of deep mediatization guided the analysis of hyperlinks to the myriad of USN education rankings and connected business partners. This study also highlights the role of branded events such as the Times Higher Education Summit in creating a platform for university leaders to network with industry leaders and improve their rankings.

Hepp argues that deep mediatization (2020) is not a concept to analyze how media themselves operate, but how media operates in social domains and, in a second step, the role of media in a domain's construction (p.100). USN Rankings are a form of media that crosses domains (e.g., health, education, cars, and cruises) and constructs and links excellence across domains. I draw on what Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) refer to as a 'figurational approach' and in doing so I examine how figuration of human actors are "entangled with media as contents and technologies, which on a deeper level refers both to media organizations and infrastructures" (p. 16). They explain that media is not a domain but that paradoxically the transformations we see across domains are specific to domain and this becomes "especially concrete at the level of supra-individual actors, that is collectivities and organizations" (p.25).

USN rankings are communicative figurations with a clear frame of reference, which is evident across many rankings. USN rankings succeed by tapping into longstanding narratives of the best university (e.g., Harvard) while also creating spin-off rankings (e.g., regional) to increase the number of post-secondary institutions that compete in rankings aimed at tiers constituted by the USN (e.g., Global University Rankings, National University Rankings, Best Online College). The process of constituting and globally disseminating ranking products occurs through media ensembles that include the USN, media outlets, university websites, the government, and business networks. There is a separate and common logic to USN rankings that crosses numerous consumer, private, and public service domains. In all the cases, the market was assumed to be the answer. The constant connectivity provided by digital rankings allows USN to learn more about users and, by doing so, to market to different demographics. For example, parents reviewing educational rankings with their children will likely also find hyperlinks to safety rankings for cities and countries, and may also see links coming up for caring.com, which provides advice on how to choose a nursing home for aging parents, whereas their children are more likely to get links on travel experiences based on their search history.

As Hepp and Hasebrink explain, a media ensemble requires a process approach to understand how different actors (e.g., university media, rankers, prospective students, business

partners, and news media) interact within and outside universities as part of its communicative construction. Rankings are communicative figurations that constitute actors' communicative practices.

The use of fast metrics by rankers and the acquisition of the education sector have arguably resulted in media and education sectors becoming more integrated. In some cases, the two sectors are merged, as in the case of Bennett University in India, which is owned by a media company and lists Cornell University, Georgia Tech, and Florida International University as its partners. On their homepage, they state that they are ranked #2 by the Times Group and promote several media products.

Quak et al. (2019) contend, "Rankings attribute symbolic value to some and not to others" (p. 177). Those highly ranked are represented as more trustworthy and desirable. Therefore, 'if rankings are considered trustworthy, they produce a reputational effect, which has consequences for both the internal functioning of organizations and their external relations' (p. 177). Rankings are often represented as providing transparent information for consumers; however, consumers are given little, if any, information on the algorithms used and the decision-making processes for the choice of data and process of analysis. Rather than speaking transparently

The rankings put public institutions in mediatized competition with each other: for one to win, the others must lose. However, not all institutions are the same. Indeed, systems are highly dynamic and based on context. Nevertheless, ranking is a powerful semiotic system (Stack & Mazawi, 2021).

## 5        Methodology

This study draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is most often connected to the work of Norman Fairclough, who published an article in 1993 that examined the discursive frameworks used by universities as they struggled to marketize in the face of government cutbacks. His work provides an approach for analyzing power dynamics and social structures that are normalized and ubiquitous.  CDA focuses on power as a way to point to how social relations are constructed through institutions in ways that can exclude some and amplify the privilege of others. It draws on several fields, including linguistics, sociology, political science, health, and education, to analyze the social, practical, and political implications of discursive practices.  Websites provide a rich source of data for identifying who is present and where on a website. How many clicks, for example, do it take to get to information, and what does this tell the reader about what and who is deemed important? What hyperlinks are provided to encourage particular readings on websites?

The USN has 33 rankings within seven categories (education, health, cars, money, travel, law, and news) and many subrankings. USN rankings are predominantly shared and disseminated online on its website, social media channels, and on the websites of the organizations it ranks, think tanks, corporate, and other formal and informal partners. This study analyzes communicative figurations by analyzing who the USN networks with to create, legitimize, and distribute their products. I also examined the media ensembles encompassing these configurations.

To conduct this analysis, I first coded the web pages using a deductive process (Saldaña 2015).  I used a priori codes based on findings from previous research studies on rankings. I then coded again using an inductive process (Pryor, & Nachman, 2022) that allowed for the analysis of university rankings as part of a larger network of rankings and associated products. I focus on the following points:

1. Landing page for each USN ranking: best Grad Schools, best colleges, best global universities, and best high schools. Many of these rankings have sub-rankings that I also coded; for example, under Best Grad Schools, there are field-based rankings (e.g., MBA, Law, and Education).

2. Organizations collecting or validating data included AETNA, whereas major advertisers included College Compass, Crimson Education, TOEFL, and GRE. I coded these sites to understand how they used their engagement with USN to validate their products.

3. USN webpages that mention connections to other organizations (e.g., non-profits). Links to these organizations were coded concerning how organizations were linked to the USN Education rankings (e.g., research partners).

4. The type of organization connected to USN Rankings (e.g., a non-profit connected to a company).

5. Annual business reports and press releases published by the USN and partners concerning rankings. I coded any mentions of academic or business partners who were used as methodology validators.

The data were collected from January 1, 2019, to January 1, 2022.


## 6    Findings

The centrality of America as the dominant frame of reference is evident in how the USN defines the world class.

> Today, more students are exploring higher education beyond their borders. Universities worldwide compete for the best students, renowned facult and research dollars. Aware of these trends, major research universities in the U.S. have been competing internationally for many years; in fact, the American higher education model of research institutions is being copied by many other countries (Morse and Wellington, Oct 24, 2022).

From this statement, it appears that prior to the rankings, America did not need to compete for students; however, the statement also reassured American institutions that they need not worry too much, given that they are the model for institutions globally.

USN rankings include a constellation of actors that have specific roles, including the staff at the USN, advertisers, high-profile political figures, non-profits, and colleges and universities that provide data, and their consumers act as objective validators. For example,

A USN press release stated:

> Through USNews.com, users will be able to access Crimson Education's webinars, eBooks, and other content, offer unique insights  the college search and application process. Crimson Education will also provide a 10% discount on its services to U.S. News College Compass subscribers (U.S. News  World Report, 2020).

The press releasee explains that: "Since 2013, Crimson Education has supported students to stand out as top candidates as they follow the pathway toward their dream program and career" (U.S. News & World Report, 2020). Crimson also started an elite online academy with a tuition of $15,000 a year (Quintana, 2019). The company categorizes prospective clients based on those "able to afford 30K+ package" versus "unlikely to pay over $15K"

and does not pursue the latter (Slade, 2019). John Key, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, invested in Crimson and was an advisor (Collins, 2019).

*Media Ensemble*

The media ensemble to promote rankings includes (software products, hyperlinks to software products owned by members of the constellation, hyperlinks by businesses and universities, sponsors back to the USN rankings, and communicative practices, including face-to-face conferences, social media, media launches of different rankings that include videos, press releases, and third-party validation through attention to the role of business schools and non-profit think tanks in the methodology of the rankings.  In the example above, College Compass and Crimson are software products that appear in the USN educational rankings. Readers are told that the rankings are "powered by  the Clarivate. A hyperlink to Clarivate informs readers that it helps nations by providing:

> a single source of globally trusted research and innovation data for evidence-informed decision making,  can confidently evaluate the real-world outcomes of your programs, implement data-driven policy, and foster innovation to bolster nation's economic productivity (Clarivate).

Here, we assume that one model of educational governance based on metrics determined by a media company and partners will lead countries to greater prosperity based on "Stimulate public-private partnerships as one pillar of a robust triple-helix of government, industry, and academic collaborations" (Clarivate, Who We Serve, 2023).

Prospective advertisers are invited to build their branding campaign "seamlessly into the USNews.com rankings platform," which connects to "U.S. News's multi-day leadership forums [that] build upon flagship rankings to facilitate forward-thinking discussions with stakeholders across industry, government, non-profit, and academia" (U.S. News, Media Kit 2020). In addition, an editorial calendar provides prospective advertisers with information on when to advertise, based on their sector. Alongside the USN rankings are advertisements for conferences and webinars that are co-sponsored by other companies.

USN has active Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram channels to further distribute this message, which is also picked up by partners such as TOEFL.

Links to commercial networks across sectors are presented as public services. Hyperlinks connect readers to a multitude of USN rankings, right down to the rankings of individual doctors. For example, clicking on heart disease takes the reader to "A Patient's Guide to Heart Disease." A link on the sidebar provides a list of healthcare providers, where information is provided about hospitals close to where the reader lives, and is often linked to hospitals connected to universities and their top-ranked doctors. For example:

> A leader in medical education, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, is the only academic medical center in the country affiliated with two world-class medical schools: Weill Cornell Medicine and Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons  (Cornell, Office of External Affairs, 2021).

The ranking of individual doctors is related to the ranking of the hospitals in which they work and the university rankings associated with the hospitals. The template of rankings across different rankings is the same; therefore, moving from one to another is seamless, including where to apply, how to finance the desired educational or health experience, and how to improve one's chances of achieving a desired lifestyle. By deploying a network

of experts in business (in particular, the media and education technology industries), government and academic sector rankings are reinforced as legitimate tools for policymaking.

*Shared ways of communicating*

Prospective advertisers are invited to build their branding campaign "seamlessly into the USNews.com rankings platform," which connects to "U.S. News's multi-day leadership forums [that] build upon flagship rankings to facilitate forward-thinking discussions with stakeholders across industry, government, non-profit, and academia" (Media Kit US News, 2020). In addition, an editorial calendar provides prospective advertisers with information on when to advertise, based on their sector. In addition, the USNWR rankings are often advertisements for conferences and webinars that co-sponsor other companies.

An article titled 'The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test' provides links for readers to sign up to take the test and buy courses to prepare for it.  Included ar the names of the TOEFL course completers who performed well on the test and are now university students. The universities mentioned were hyperlinked to the prospective students. The advertising is embedded in what appears to be free informational content for prospective test takers and students. The TOEFL is owned by ETS (a non-profit), which advertises many of its products through the U.S. News site. In 2020, the company created the ETS Strategic to focus on equity investments, mergers, and acquisitions in the education sector. These products include proprietary platforms for recruiting students, language and reading assessments, and matching of prospective students and institutions.

The USNWR ranking platform also provides advertising by embedding hyperlinks more subtly. For instance, an article aimed at students about the importance of deadlines for applying for funding states, "The University of Florida, for example, sets its financial deadline for December 15, which is early compared to many other schools." This information is unnecessary for the topic but provides an advertising opportunity for the University of Florida.

*Intermediary organizations: Connecting Rankings to Policy Prescriptions*

What is evident is the emergence of intermediary organizations that lend legitimacy to the USNWR, including the RTI, ETS, and Aetna, which are branded as non-profits or foundations. However, they are all massive for-profit companies, many of which have been criticized for monopolistic and unethical practices. The line between non-profit and for-profit is blurred through this process. USNWR partnerships with non-profits are based on providing free, disinterested, and objective information as a public good aimed at helping people grow and learn. This public good is framed within networks of consumption.

There is a feedback loop of one set of rankings (e.g., education) linking to other rankings (e.g., "Best cities") and the constellation of actors that appear in multiple domains to promote education rankings and connected products. For example, college and university rankings include a hyperlink to the "Best Country" rankings, which in turn reference academics as validators of their products. BAV sponsors country rankings and provides hyperlinks to various USN rankings, including education, healthcare, and safest cities.

> BAV is the world's largest and leading empirical study on brands. We help our clients not only understand a brand against its category, but also provide insight into its larger role in culture. Developed with academic partners in Columbia, M.I.T., Dartmouth, and the University

> of Washington, B.A.V. uniquely captures the key dimensions that drive brand momentum, advocacy, and financial success in the marketplace. (BAV About Us, 2020)

The BAV Best Countries ranking has provided academic legitimacy by listing four universities in the United States. The Best Countries rankings were also sponsored by the Aetna Foundation, which provides funding for the healthiest community rankings. The healthiest community rankings are used in the best city, state, and country rankings and are part of the Community Health Leadership Forum, which seeks to address racism as a threat to public health (U.S. News Staff, 2020). Aetna also provides medical fellowships to minority students and workshops for minority students working in the healthcare field.

The USNWR rankings include industry validators (e.g., BAV), think tank validators (e.g., RTI), and academic validators (e.g., Wharton Business School). Validators can cross sectors; for example, the RTI is cited by the USNWR in many of their education and hospital rankings. USNWR is an example of media meta-capital at work.

The USNWR not only states who and what is top-ranked, but also draws on its various experts across sectors to state what policies at the level of government and educational institutions should be in place to beat competition. Linking corporate interests with non-profits plays a central role in the discursive framing of legitimacy. Raytheon, for example, built patriotic missiles. It partners with Boys & Girls Clubs in military communities in the United States to provide STEM activities. Raytheon also provided funding for a cybersecurity-focused high school in Alabama. Their projects focused on initiatives to produce workers who have learned to use their STEM abilities in the military. USNWR seamlessly normalizes education as a consumer product, as well as a matter of national security. By associating with the USNWR, Raytheon provides an external validation for what appears to be an altruistic educational service.

RTI International co-sponsors many USNWR's health and education rankings. RTI is "an independent, non-profit research institute dedicated to improving human conditions. Our vision is to address the world's most critical problems with science-based solutions in the pursuit of a better future" (RTI About Us, 2016). The USNWR works with RTI International, a "global nonprofit social science research firm, " to rank high schools. The RTI lists researchers and connections to academic institutions that legitimize rankings. Syntegrity is the for-profit wing of the RTI. It has multiple clients, including highly ranked universities, pharmaceutical companies, and Koch brothers, who are central players in providing funds to support the privatization of universities, and academics who deny climate change (Schwartz, 2021). Links to commercial networks across sectors are presented as public services. The feedback loop reinforces education and consumer goods that can be acquired by making good choices, including purchasing services from sponsors of rankings and associated products.

*Fig 1: Actor Constellations*

Validators Business
Partners: TOEFL, RTI,
Raytheon, AETNA,
ETS, Crimson, GRE,
Clarivate

Global, Gloal Regional, US National, Undergrad,
Grad, College, University

Total Rankings for Postsecondary = x

USA High School =National, Metro, state, Best
STEM, Best Magnet, Best Charter

Validators other USN
Products: College
Compass, Best
Hospitals, Best
Countries, Best States,
Healthiest Communities

Validators Universities:
Wharton Business
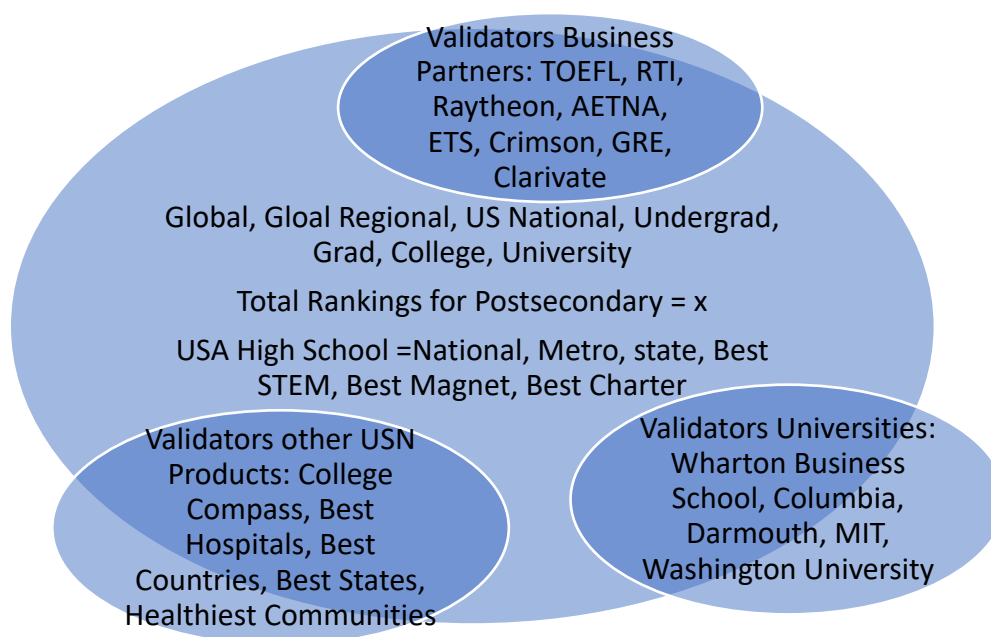School, Columbia,
Darmouth, MIT,
Washington University

Figure 1 points to how the USN is part of networks of interconnected business interests organized to provide a seamless experience, including where to apply, how to finance the desired educational experience, and how to improve one's chances of getting the lifestyle desired. Through deploying a network of experts in the business (in particular, the media and education technology industries), government and academic sectors rankings are also reinforced as legitimate tools for policymaking. The representation of neutrality of rankings is amplified through networks that continually refer to other members' products as science-based information that students and policymakers need to make good decisions. Tests such as the TOEFL, for example, are normalized on the USN website with the frequency of ads for TOEFL and testing preparation services. In addition, TOEFL on its site normalizes the rankings as key to making good decisions and advertises other services such as Crimson.

The USN rankings have industry validators (e.g., BAV), think tank validators (e.g., RTI), and academic validators (e.g., Wharton Business School). Validators can cross sectors. For example, the RTI is cited by the USN in many of their education and hospital rankings. USN is an example of media meta-capital at work. The USN rankings have the same template, including references to outside experts and a rigorous methodology.

These findings point to the ubiquity of USN across virtually every area of society as a component of its reach across various areas of life. The USN bolsters audience numbers for its plethora of rankings by providing hyperlinks to other rankings (e.g., a country ranking that links to university rankings). Its success is not merely that its rankings sell but that the same data can be used across rankings and hyperlinked to gain audiences to rankings

across sectors. The success of rankings is also grounded in the success of non-profits and foundations (set up by companies) to continually reinforce the message that private providers — across all sectors of life — are the best way to deliver choices in services and products. A universalized third party appears to have no interest other than objective measurements to help individual consumers and policymakers. The seamlessness across content, specifically about rankings and hyperlinks to partners that offer tutors, for example, also represents the USN as providing information to help students fulfill their academic dreams.

## 7    Conclusion

The USNWR provides a rich example of an organization that has mobilized a network of multinational interests and the meta-capital of the government and media to discursively institutionalize rankings. It institutionalizes rankings as a consumer good and source of information for public policy. Advertisers were invited to build their branding campaigns seamlessly on the USNWR platform. Rankings are omnipresent across domains and are specific to domains; for example, educational rankings tap into narratives of global excellence that tap into longstanding narratives of Global North World class educational dominance, while simultaneously building anticipation and a sense of objectivity through a horserace approach. The winner could be outrun if keen competitions do what the rankers recommend, including partnering with their network of business partners, whether as individual students availing themselves to Crimson tutoring or as institutions advertising on USN sites.  Education is interconnected with national rankings and health care. This competition is continually produced, reproduced, and widely disseminated through a network of non-profits run by companies that communicate rankings as necessary and useful through hyperlinking to the products and services of others in the network. The findings also point to the utility of mediatization as a lens through which to understand the reliance of public and private systems on resources controlled by the media.

In addition, intermediary organizations have emerged that lend legitimacy to the USN, including the RTI, ETS, and Aetna, which are branded as non-profits or foundations, even though they are all part of massive for-profit companies. The line between non-profit and for-profit is blurred through this process. It appears that USN partnerships with non-profits are based on providing free, disinterested, and objective information as a public good aimed at helping people grow and learn.

By deploying a constellation of actors in business (in particular, the media and education technology industries), government and academic sector rankings are reinforced as legitimate tools for policymaking. The USNWR business model is based on hyperlinking to a plethora of products in the Global Education Industry, including services to assist with recruitment, hiring faculty, selecting students, software, rankings, admissions counsellors, testing preparation, and settlement. Rankings do not stand alone but exist with other products in the same corporate network. Networks of power are based on legitimacy matching, which normalizes the self-confirmatory indicators of success. The partners are mainly large businesses or governments that legitimize each other's power and metrics for success. The circular reference to each other's success creates a powerful network of policies that normalizes "wraparound" corporate services across multiple domains of life.

The constellation of actors involved in the rankings includes the government, industry, academics, and non-profit organizations attached to large multinationals. The USN has maintained its reach through a media ensemble that includes hyperlinks to rankings with other products and services and communicating to audiences through various outlets, including commercial and university media and various industry partners. Evidence of the deep

mediatization of rankings is not limited to the USN, but is a broader phenomenon that has reshaped the landscape of higher education. The process of mediatization is not uniform across all geopolitical spaces. Different cultural and political contexts may lead to different forms of mediatization, and these differences should be considered when considering the implications of the USNWR in different contexts.

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