

## Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments

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### 1. The contexts of the concept

Why 'mediatization' as a topic for communication theory now? This rather ungainly word has been rising in prominence for the past decade, but many readers of this journal may still want to ask: What does it mean? What does it add to communications theory? And is it necessary at all? The purpose of this introduction to the special issue – apart from introducing and summarizing the articles that follow – is to provide some context for the emergence of 'mediatization' as a key theoretical concept for contemporary media and communications research, and to offer some reasons why it now deserves the full attention of scholars of communication theory.

The word 'mediatization' does indeed strike an odd note to the ears of native English speakers, provoking the immediate reaction: Why is such an awkward formulation needed? But we are long past the point in communications research when the instincts of native English speakers should have priority! A fully institutionalized field of communications research has a pressing need for common terms that can orientate researchers from many countries and geolinguistic regions towards shared problems and areas of inquiry. As Sonia Livingstone (2009) explained in her ICA Presidential address in Montreal in 2008, 'mediatization' – or in German: *Mediatisierung* – is a term with a long and respectable history in German-speaking countries. More important, it has emerged as the most likely 'winner' in a race between many terms, all cumbersome or ambiguous to varying degrees – mediazation, medialization, mediation – that have been coined to capture somehow the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice. Put simply, something is going on with media in our lives, and it is deep enough not to be reached simply by accumulating more and more specific studies that analyze this newspaper, describe how that program was produced, or trace how particular audiences make sense of that film on a particular occasion.

Until the mid 2000s the three approaches to media research just mentioned (textual analysis, political economy of production, audience or reception studies) comprised the majority of media and communications research. Together they still failed to answer key questions about why media mattered so much (and increasingly more). Cultural studies scholars argued with political economy scholars, and vice versa, about how much economic structures mattered for media's cultural uses (Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995; Morley, 1998); audience scholars challenged textual analysts to provide some evidence for their claims that textual content made a difference to anything outside the text and the immediate context of its reception (Lewis, 1991, p. 49); meanwhile audience scholars started to worry about whether the meanings audiences make from media are undecideable (Ang, 1996, p. 72).

True, while much media studies by the early 2000s seemed to reserve 'media effects' questions for the 'too difficult' tray, other areas of communications research pursued that question through very different approaches (for example in health communications or political communications) in work that focused on increasingly refined statistical methods for isolating certain causal consequences of particular messages or the agendas implied within them. Meanwhile another tradition prioritized the patterns and shifts in communication and communicative form that go broader than changes in media (see Jensen, 2011, for an excellent review).

All the time, however, the wider communications field lacked consensus on a common focusing concept for researchers who remained interested in the broader 'consequences' of media and communications for everyday life and across social space, yet were aware of the acute methodological difficulties of isolating and identifying such effects within the complex weave of contemporary experience. This problem – the problem of 'consequences' – goes back to the very beginnings of media and communications research when Lazarsfeld and Merton identified as the first 'effect' of media the sheer fact of media institutions' existence, but regarded this 'effect' as unresearchable because it could never be experimentally removed from the conditions of modern life (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1969, [1948]).

Meanwhile, from various directions in the 1990s and early 2000s, other approaches were emerging that sought to find a mid-range language for media's broad consequences for everyday life, or which at least point to this direction. Some of these approaches originated from outside the Anglo-American sites that had dominated communications research in its early decades. It is in this sense that the eventual emergence of 'mediatization' as an integrative concept in the late 2000s embodies the *de facto* internationalization of the field for which many have called (Curran & Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009).

We would like, before we turn in more detail to mediatization as a concept, to sketch out some of the factors and research streams that came together around the mid 2000s to make some concept such as mediatization a necessity.

First, there was the brute fact of media's growing role in everyday lives in so many developed countries by the mid 2000s, a decade that saw the normalization of fast internet access, the near universalization of mobile phones, the massive expansion of web search capacity, and the emergence of blogs, then YouTube, then social media as new communicative forms – in other words, the fact of media in our lives, every day, as a basic reference-point for children, friends, family, work. The omnipresent and multidirectional nature of media's contribution to the 'texture' of our lives (Silverstone, 1999, p. 6) came to require new approaches that moved away from the staid triangle of production-text-audience. Indeed this was already clear in the early 2000s before social media emerged (Couldry, 2000), and had generated a push to think about the whole range of practices related or oriented to media (Couldry, 2004). However, this stream of everyday experience with media was not in itself sufficient to stimulate the search for a common conceptual frame for understanding the mass of things we do with media.

Here, a second stream was important: the long tradition from the 1980s of looking far beyond the production-text-audience triangle towards the open-ended and non-linear (as we would now call them) consequences of media as they circulate through our lives. Two scholars were particularly important to this move, though they were not the only ones who made this move Roger Silverstone from the UK and Jesus Martin-Barbero from Colombia.

Silverstone had from the beginning of his career framed 'media' in a broad way: in terms of 'myth' (1981), or the production of knowledge about science (1985). Parallels had been for example in Germany where Herman Bausinger (1984) analyzed the interweaving of various media technologies for articulating families and other forms of communities. But from the late 1980s Silverstone (1994), together with David Morley, emphasized the role that television especially played in the regulation of one of society's basic structures, the family: not just the family in isolation, but the family as a node in various important regulatory grids (state, education, leisure, everyday knowledge). Silverstone took this further in a manifesto for studying media that, while it avoided an explicit conceptual architecture, insisted on the linked diversity of fields in which media mattered (Silverstone, 1999). This was followed during the early 2000s in essays that explored the concept of 'mediation' as a dialectical term for the continuous interchange whereby media shaped or were shaped by broader life and culture (Silverstone, 2005). Silverstone's work without doubt was by the time of his death in 2006 pointing to the site where scholars have since converged under the term 'mediatization', even though he did not use the term himself.

Jesus Martin-Barbero, by contrast, in *De los medios a las mediaciones: comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (oddly, it now seems, translated in English as "Communication Culture and Hegemony," 1993), had, unknown to Silverstone,<sup>i</sup> made a parallel move. This important book, which has since become in Spanish-speaking countries the acknowledged key reference-point for all media and cultural studies research, offered a remarkable historical panorama for understanding the cumulative diffusion of media of many sorts (including the 'cordela', or short narrative on paper held together by string) throughout Latin American countries dealing with a modernity very different (and more dominated) from that of Western Europe and North America, the paradigmatic site of most early communications research. While Martin-Barbero also did not use the term 'mediatization', he decisively opened the door to a 'media research' that traversed a wider domain of enquiry than just mass media messages, although sadly his book remained little noticed in the English-speaking communications research field for more than a decade after its translation.

A third key stream leading towards the recent convergence around 'mediatization' is much broader and more heterogeneous: We mean the emergence, and increasing dominance from the mid 1990s, of approaches to power that no longer located it inside powerful institutions, let alone powerful people, but saw it being reproduced everywhere in a huge network of linkages, apparatuses and habits within everyday life. The key influence here was of course Michael Foucault (particularly *Discipline and Punish*, 1979), but another later influence of growing importance – and itself influenced by Foucault – was the Actor Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and others, still barely acknowledged however in media and communications research by the early 2000s (but see Couldry, 2000, pp. 6-7). In addition, the growing interest of anthropologists in media was also of emerging importance from the early 2000s, with a crucial collection being published in 2002 (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002) and the now vast media anthropology online-list formed by John Postill around the same time (<http://lists.easaonline.org/listinfo.cgi/medianthro-easaonline.org>). Anthropologists also refused to limit the site of their inquiries to the media text, or the moments of its production and reception.

If by the mid 2000s, these multiple influences and research streams were converging around a need to find a common term for research into media's broader influences, some proximate causes were required to prompt today's emerging agreement around the term 'mediatization'

One such cause was the increasingly effective internationalization of the media and communications research field, evidenced by the increasing number of Non-American members in the International Communication Association (ICA) and the emergence of a separate European association, the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), whose former president François Heinderyckx became 2012 President-elect of the ICA. Another was the opportunities to meet that emerged between scholars whose first language was English and scholars from the rest of the world: important here were for example the 'Media, Religion and Culture' international conferences at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado (Boulder, USA) or taking place on various occasions beyond Boulder for example in Sigtuna (Sweden), Toronto (Canada), Sao Paulo (Brazil), Louisville (USA) and Eskisehir (Turkey). Specific conferences on mediatization and religion took place, organized by the Nordic research network on 'Mediatization of religion and culture' from 2006 and onwards (cf. Lövheim & Lynch, 2011). Further conferences were more topic-related, such as the conference 'Media Events in a Global Age' in Bremen, Germany (2007), on which the relationship between Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan's approach on 'media events' and 'mediatization' was already discussed (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Important also were international research collaborations such as the international network *Mediatized Stories: Mediation Perspectives on Digital Storytelling among Youth* led from Norway by Knut Lundby (see in detail Lundby, 2013a). In 2011 and 2012, a Working Group on mediatization research was formed in ECREA, which organized workshops and panels on mediatization that focused on topics such as researching mediatization outside the western world or power relations and mediatization (<http://mediatization.eu>). More recently, comprehensive and far-reaching research programs started, for example the research program *Mediatized Worlds* being coordinated by Friedrich Krotz at the University of Bremen (where also the research network *Communicative Figurations* is located, together with the University of Hamburg), the comprehensive research project *The Mediatization of Culture* with its main node at the University of Copenhagen, or the National Centre of Competence in Research Democracy at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and its research on the mediatization of politics – just to name a few of the major funded research programs on mediatization.

To sum up: The context of this special issue is an increasing institutionalization of research on the wider 'consequences' of mediated communications on our present cultures and societies. This institutionalization represents a broad and ambitious re-orientation of media and communication research away from models of theorizing influence as an 'effect' of media texts to a more extensive understanding of 'mediatization' as a way of capturing the wider consequences of media's embedding in everyday life.

## **2. Two traditions of mediatization research**

The emergence of the concept of 'mediatization' as outlined so far builds on longer traditions. Remarkably we can trace the use of this concept back to the beginnings of media and communication research in the social sciences. One example is Ernst Manheim (1933) in his post-doctoral thesis *The Bearers of Public Opinion*. In this book he wrote about the 'mediatization of direct human relationships' (p. 11). He uses this term in order to describe changes of social relations within modernity, changes that are marked by the so-called mass media. Jean Baudrillard (1976, p. 98), in *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, described information as mediatized because there is no level of reality behind its mediation. Within his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas (1984 [1981]) uses the term mediatization to de-

scribe a sub-process within the colonialization of the life-world. However, he does not refer to communication media but to generalized symbolic media like power and money. In his edited volume *Medier och kulturer*, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1990) characterized the cultural influence of media on culture as such (that is, beyond its contents) as mediatization. These examples demonstrate that the term mediatization in its different variants is deeply related to social and cultural research as a whole. However, these general uses do not, in themselves, promise any more detailed theoretical elaborations.

We had to wait for media and communication research to elaborate the concept further. Important early reference points for this were had been 'medium theory' in the tradition of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Joshua Meyrowitz (1995) on the one hand, and the 'ecology of communication' by David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979, 1988; Altheide, 1995) on the other. Medium theory contributed the idea of focusing not only on media contents but also on the influence of media in their materiality as a means of communication. Altheide and Snow's approach brought in an analysis that highlighted media's 'formatting' power – described by the concept of 'media logic'. These starting points were further developed in the 1990s. While early understandings of mediatization were rather metaphorical (Asp, 1990), later the concept became increasingly theorized (for example Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Krotz, 2001; Schulz, 2004). Within this formative phase of 'mediatization research' we can distinguish two more concrete traditions: an 'institutionalist' and a 'social-constructivist tradition' (cf. for the following argument in more detail Hepp, 2014).

Coming mainly from journalism studies and political communication, the institutionalist tradition understood media more or less as an independent social institution with its own sets of rules (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 110; 2013, p. 17). Mediatization here refers to the adaptation of different social fields or systems (for example, politics or religion) to these institutionalized rules. The latter are mainly described as a 'media logic' (Altheide & Snow, 1979): that is, in the widest sense of the word, institutionalized formats and forms of staging. This 'media logic,' on the one hand, takes up non-mediatized forms of representation; on the other hand, non-media actors have to conform to this 'media logic' if they want to be represented in the (mass) media or if they want to act successfully in a media culture and media society. Starting from this preliminary understanding of 'media logic', the concept diversified and became differentiated, while keeping the link to its original ideas.

The social-constructivist tradition's understanding of mediatization, by contrast, highlights the role of various media as part of the process of the communicative construction of social and cultural reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Mediatization here refers to the process of a communicative construction of socio-cultural reality and analyzes the status of various media within that process (Krotz, 2009; Hepp, 2012; Hepp, 2013, pp. 54-68). The term 'mediatization' here is designed to capture both how the communicative construction of reality is manifested within certain media processes and how, in turn, specific features of certain media have a contextualized 'consequence' for the overall process whereby socio-cultural reality is constructed in and through communication. The theorization of these media-specific forms for constructing socio-cultural reality is more open than in the concept of 'media logic', emphasizing the complexity of media as institutions and technologies.

While these two different traditions of mediatization research co-exist, they have come closer to each other in recent years. One important step in this regard was shared publication activities – continued with the present special issue of *Communication Theory* –, especially the book *Mediatization: Concepts, Changes, Consequences*, edited by Knut Lundby (2009).

The idea of this volume was born at a breakfast meeting during the ICA conference 2008 in Montreal (Lundby, 2009, p. xiii-xiv). The merit of that book was to present internationally up-to-date reflections on mediatization across various research fields. Other publication activities followed, especially in the form of special issues of various academic journals. For example, there was a special issue of *Communications: European Journal for Communication Research* (2010, 35, 3) focused on empirical perspectives on mediatization, an issue of *Culture and Religion* (2011, 12, 2) on the mediatization of religion debate; and the journal *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* (2013, 3, 2) addressed mediatization as part of more general 'media processes'. In addition, a comprehensive handbook on mediatization is under preparation, again edited by Lundby.

Through this intensified discussion across different traditions of doing mediatization research the contours of a shared, basic understanding of the term has emerged. On that fundamental level the term 'mediatization' does not refer to a single theory but to a more general approach within media and communications research. Generally speaking, *mediatization is a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other*. At this general level, mediatization has quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions. With regard to quantitative aspects, mediatization refers to the increasing temporal, spatial and social spread of mediated communication. Over time we have become more and more used to communicate via media in various contexts. With regard to qualitative aspects, mediatization refers to the specificity of certain media within socio-cultural change: It matters what kind of media is used for what kind of communication. Several researchers understand this process of mediatization as a long-term process that has more or less accompanied the whole history of humankind (Krotz, 2009; Hepp, 2012, pp. 46-54). Seen from such a perspective, human history is, among other things, a process of an intensifying mediatization. By contrast, other researchers use the term 'mediatization' to describe media's increasing social and cultural relevance since the emergence of mass media' (print, cinema, radio, television) (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby, 2013b; Couldry, 2012, pp. 136-137).

That said, the difference between 'mediation' and 'mediatization' is quite obvious: While 'mediation' refers to the process of communication in general - that is, how communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction, 'mediatization' is a category designed to describe change. It then becomes possible to link both concepts in the following way: mediatization reflects how the overall consequences of multiple processes of mediation have changed with the emergence of different kinds of media. Even so, the concept of 'mediation' continues to describe a fundamental moment in the development of communication as symbolic interaction: its passing through technologically-based infrastructures of transmission and distribution ('media'). By contrast, 'mediatization' refers more specifically to the role of particular media in emergent processes of socio-cultural change.

However, beyond such basic definitional matters, there are clear differences in how different scholars conceptualize mediatization. While some still find useful the term 'media logic' (understood, perhaps, as a shorthand for *any* account of media's regular causal consequences in the world), others ask what role the concept of 'media logic' can still have if we have the increasing variety of different media in mind? Even if it remains a useful concept, what is its relation to other kinds of 'logic'? Might other ways of theorizing 'media specificity' be more appropriate for mediatization research? On what level can we locate mediatization theory? Is

it a 'middle range' theory or do its implications go wider, opening up new 'meta' questions about how the transformations of societies and cultures should now be understood? How can we relate the concept of mediatization in more detail to wider theory within the social sciences? These are the questions that emerge from the starting points of this special issue on *conceptualizing* mediatization.

### **3. The arguments in this issue**

The idea of this special issue is to represent a contemporary range of reflections on how to conceptualize mediatization. We have tried to give academics from various theoretical, cultural and generational backgrounds the space to develop their arguments. The special issue includes articles of scholars from both traditions of mediatization research (institutionalist and social-constructivist) – from various countries reflecting different media landscapes, and representing a range from the 'founding fathers' of mediatization research to a new generation of scholars whose empirical research has been stimulated by the concept of mediatization.

In the opening article and straddling the two traditions of mediatization research, Klaus Bruhn Jensen discusses the present state-of-play in 'conceptualizing mediatization', using Herbert Blumer's (1954, pp. 7-10) distinction between 'definitive' and 'sensitizing' concepts. While 'definitive concepts' refer to what is common to a class of objects, a sensitizing concept provides guidance in approaching empirical instances. Based on this distinction, we can find 'definitive conceptualizations' of mediatization (institutionalization, hegemony), as well as 'sensitizing conceptualizations' (social structuration, technological momentum, embedded communication). This neatly opens up a horizon for comparing different conceptualizations of mediatization.

David Altheide revisits in his article the original idea of 'media logic,' which became the main reference point for the institutionalist tradition of mediatization research. His core argument is that the existing current confusion in relation to this term has partly to do with the inattention to its later development as part of an 'ecology of communication,' reflecting the power of emerging 'communication formats' that accompanied 'new technologies.' The importance of this article is on the one hand to clarify those original ideas and on the other hand to open up possibilities for rethinking the link between the ideas of 'media logic', 'mediation' and 'mediatization' when analyzing media's role in processes of social control.

The third article was written by Nino Landerer, a political communications specialist. He also starts from the idea of 'media logic' but comes to a different understanding within the context of contemporary mediatization research. Landerer critically discusses the ideas of 'media logic' and 'political logic' and argues that 'normative logic' and 'market logic' are more appropriate concepts for theorizing and empirically analyzing mass-media and political actors. While Landerer stands by the idea that social and cultural 'logics' is a useful term for mediatization research, his article can be read as a plea for using the term 'logic' in a more differentiated way.

Building on contextualized empirical research on media hegemony in Chávez's Venezuela, Elena Block moves more into the social-constructivist tradition of mediatization research and outlines a 'culturalist approach' to the mediatization of politics. By this she criticizes the idea of conceptualizing mediatization in terms of the increasing influence of a '(media) logic' and links 'mediatization' more to the symbolic and hegemonic qualities of media communication.

For Block, the mediatization of politics refers to a symbolically interactive, co-articulated situation whereby politics, culture and media communication have merged. That said, mediatized politics becomes theorized as the forms of politics that rely on particular forms of media, a process that goes beyond media influence and is better understood as new forms of articulation.

Yet another emphasis is made by André Jansson. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's triadic model of social space, Jansson brings socio-spatial regimes into the foreground of his concept of mediatization. He argues that mediatization is best understood as a concept that can help us think of media-enhanced social-spatial transformations in complex ways. In this view, mediatization refers to 'how other social processes in a broad variety of domains and at different levels become inseparable from and dependent on technological processes and resources of mediation'. The characteristic of this social-constructivist understanding of mediatization is that it tries to encompass the everyday struggles involved in the contemporary social and cultural transformations to which media-related processes contribute.

The concluding article by Hubert Knoblauch discusses more generally the conceptual bridge between mediatization and social constructivism. His argument is that communication is the main link between both: It is communication which changes through mediatization, and communication also that is the main means by which culture and society is constructed. 'Communicative constructivism' therefore becomes a theoretical framework for conceptualizing mediatization. While 'communicative constructivism' is still a developing approach, it has the potential to link media and communication research to more fundamental questions about the nature of social knowledge and social order.

Taken together, these articles represent in their variety both the commonalities and the differences within today's fast-growing debate on 'mediatization.' One thing they have *in common* is the argument that we need a new term to rethink the interrelations between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other. Such a term has to reflect both the specifics of different media *and* the irreducible involvement of many interacting media in today's transformations, not just single media acting in isolation. Where they *differ* is in the particular conceptual language they use to capture these 'multiple entanglements' (Thomas, 1991) of media in cultural and social change: as 'logics', 'forms', 'objectivations', 'institutionalizations' or 'moulding forces' (just to name some of the concepts employed in this special issue).

We hope that this journal's readers will find the resulting conceptual diversity stimulating, and a provocation to develop alternative theorizations of media's contributions to the huge transformations of social and cultural 'texture' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 6; Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p. 527) in which all of us are now implicated.



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<sup>i</sup> Silverstone was not aware of Martin-Barbero's book until 2004 or 2005, as one of us (Nick Couldry) recalls from a conversation with him.