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Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept

■ Winfried Schulz

ABSTRACT

■ Mediatization relates to changes associated with communication media and their development. A basic assumption of mediatization is that the technological, semiotic and economic characteristics of mass media result in problematic dependencies, constraints and exaggerations. These are closely associated with three basic functions of the media in communication processes: (1) the relay function, grounded in the media's technological capacities, serving to bridge spatial and temporal distances; (2) the semiotic function, making messages suitable for human information processing through encoding and formatting; and (3) the economic function, highlighting the standardization of media products as an outcome of mass production processes. The article looks at the analytical functions of mediatization and, finally, discusses three possible answers to the question whether the advent of new media might bring an end to mediatization. ■

Key Words mediation, mediatization, media logic, new media, social change

Introduction

Mediatization and other 'izations', such as globalization, commercialization and individualization, have a critical and expressive function. Most often, they are instrumental in critical assessments of social change with

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the latent function of expressing a certain attitudinal or political position. For scientific analysis, they have only limited value unless it is possible to clarify their meaning and to specify their analytical usability.

In this article I intend to reconstruct the mediatization concept in order to probe its implicit suppositions and its heuristic value. I start with exploring the significance of the term. What does mediatization mean? To what kind of changes does it relate? In the section that follows, I examine the analytical functions of mediatization. Finally, I ask whether more recent developments affect the meaning of mediatization.

Media in social change

Clearly, mediatization relates to changes associated with communication media and their development. The processes of social change in which the media play a key role may be defined as extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation.

Extension

Media technologies extend the natural limits of human communication capacities. Human communication is limited in terms of space, time and expressiveness; the media serve to bridge spatial and temporal distances. In addition, the media help to surmount limitations of encoding. Hence, the phylogeny of the media has to be understood as a continuous effort to extend these limits. Advances usually increase the transmission capacity and/or enhance the encoding quality by improving the fidelity, vividness, sensory complexity and aesthetic appeal of messages. As they extend the natural communication capacities of human beings, the media express cultural techniques in an anthropological sense (Sombart, 1927: 113) – or, in the words of McLuhan: media are ‘the extensions of man’ [*sic*] (McLuhan, 1967).

Substitution

The media partly or completely substitute social activities and social institutions and thus change their character. Recent examples for this are the many video and computer games substituting human playmates or material toys, or home banking via Internet substituting interactions with tellers at the bank counter (Hjarvard, in press). One could easily compose a long list of further examples demonstrating how in the process of mediatization not only non-media activities have assumed media form,

but also new media have substituted traditional forms of communication. For example, 'media events' like televised Olympics, coronations or visits of the Pope take on and substitute ceremonial and commemorative functions of national or religious holidays (Dayan and Katz, 1992); telephone, email and SMS communication substitute conversation and writing letters; television viewing replaces family interaction. These examples, at the same time, illustrate that substitution and extension can go hand in hand. 'Media events' often enhance the symbolic relevance of ceremonies; phoning and emailing accelerate private communication; television provides topics and thus stimulates family talk.

Amalgamation

Media activities not only extend and (partly) substitute non-media activities; they also merge and mingle with one another. Krotz speaks of a dissolution of boundaries (*Entgrenzung*) between mediated and non-media activities (Krotz, 2001). Media use is woven into the fabric of everyday life; the media pervade the professional sphere, the economy, culture, politics and the public sphere. Media activities and non-media activities amalgamate. For example, we listen to the radio while driving, read the newspaper in the metro, watch television during dinner, and have a date at the movies. As media use becomes an integral part of private and social life, the media's definition of reality amalgamates with the social definition of reality.

Accommodation

The mere fact that communication media exist induces social change. Quite clearly, the media industry contributes a considerable part to the gross national product. The media provide jobs and income for a large number of people. As advertising channels, the media are an important catalyst of business activities. It is self-evident that the various economic actors have to accommodate to the way the media operate. This applies also to actors (including organizations) of politics, sports, entertainment and other social domains as well. As, for instance, politicians and political parties take into account the 'media logic' of television, i.e. its production routines and presentation formats, the modes of political action and of political processes change (see, for example, Nimmo and Combs, 1983; Mazzoleni, 1987; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Political actors adapt to the rules of the media system trying to increase their publicity and at the same time accepting a loss of autonomy. On the other hand, the media

also benefit from such transactions since they make politics more newsworthy and conveniently formatted.

Apparently, these latter aspects carry critical overtones, as is the case with terms like 'media democracy' and 'media society' relating to the end state rather than the process of mediatization. Although the mediatization concept may be useful for critical analysis, its meaning does not necessarily entail an evaluative component. Hjarvard is right when he points out that a non-normative definition of the concept may be heuristically more productive (Hjarvard, in press).

In this sense, the four processes of change I have listed are, in the first place, a description of mediatization. Obviously, they are not mutually exclusive, but rather components of a complex process of transition. As the concept emphasizes interaction and transaction processes in a dynamic perspective, mediatization goes beyond a simple causal logic dividing the world into dependent and independent variables. Thus, mediatization as a concept both transcends and includes media effects.

Media functions

Changes due to mediatization are closely associated with the basic functions of the medium in communication processes. All media perform three functions: a relay function, a semiotic function and an economic function. These are the preconditions for communication to succeed. By definition (and apparent from the etymology of the term), communication succeeds only if some kind of commonness arises between sender and recipient. Commonness is the result of transferring meaning through signs.

The technological, semiotic and economic characteristics of mass communication result in dependencies, constraints and exaggerations that constitute the core meaning of mediatization. I elaborate on this in the following sections.

The relay function

One of the specific functions of the media is to transfer messages over spatial and/or temporal distances according to their channel and/or storage capacities. The term 'mediation' and a number of 'mediating metaphors' usually refer to the relay or transfer function of the media (McQuail, 2001: 64–6). Paraphrasing the media, for example, as a 'window' to the world or as a 'mirror' of reality should express that the

media provide contact with social reality and give people access particularly to those events which they cannot watch with their own eyes, first hand.

A second mediation function is the bridging of spatial, social and cultural distances between different (individual and collective) actors. Once again, one can distinguish two aspects: direct mediation by technical means of telecommunication and indirect mediation by the production of a public sphere. The metaphor of a 'forum' paraphrases the latter function and indicates that mass media offer to the various social actors a space where they can articulate their opinions and interests.

This forum is a public sphere in the sense that it is accessible, at least in principle, for everyone. Terms like 'media public' or 'media-constructed public' capture this meaning (Schulz, 2001). A media public, as the most important precondition of a public discourse in modern democracies, contributes to the mediation of different social interests. Mediation in this sense carries the meaning of 'conciliation'. Furthermore, the media's publishing capacity enables citizens to observe the political discourse and thus contributes to the mediation of politics. Mediation in this sense is conceptually close to participation.

These aspects of mediation play a central role in analyses of political communication (see, for example, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 97). The notion of a 'media society' used in this context hints at consequences of political transformations, as do neologisms like 'media democracy', 'electronic democracy' or 'videocracy' (see, for example, Mazzoleni 1995).

Due to limitations in the capacity of transmission and storage, mass communication is, like face-to-face communication, always highly selective. The relay function of the media is therefore closely associated with filtering and gate-keeping processes that impose specific constraints on mass communication. Moreover, media selection primarily follows relevance criteria inherent in the media system rather than criteria of societal or political relevance. For example, media selection rules derive from assumptions about message acceptance by the largest possible audience, professional news value criteria, presentation requirements of specific media genres and the economic conditions of standardized message production.

As the media extend the communicative and perceptive capabilities of humans, they impose media-specific constraints on the messages shaping the communication process in a way that the users can hardly control. The specific limitations of the media's channel and storage capacities result in particular dependencies and losses of autonomy.

Dependency and heteronomy from mass media are central aspects of mediatization.

The semiotic function

Communication can only succeed if the messages are encoded and formatted in a way suitable for human perception and information processing. The modalities and sign qualities of encoding – e.g. visual, audio, audiovisual – are the attributes most commonly referred to in characterizing different media (Eveland, 2003). Encoding inevitably imposes on messages the specific formats and constraints of particular sign systems and media genres: for example, story type, genre, narrative or hypertextuality. Media formats carry – in the abstract terms of information theory – redundancy or structure (Garner, 1962).

Encoding as well as decoding always entails an act of interpretation – and often, evaluation – of messages. The interpretation of meaning is inherent in the relation of media codes and formats – like language codes, non-verbal sign systems or media-specific genres – to the semantic system of the respective culture or society. This applies not only to fictional but also to non-fictional messages, i.e. to content that is considered to represent reality.

The assumption that all codes carry ‘inbuilt’ interpretation rules is at the centre of so-called ‘medium theories’. According to authors like Innis and McLuhan, every medium has a ‘bias’ affecting the reception of its messages and transforming the recipients’ modes of consciousness (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1967; similarly Meyrowitz, 1985; see also McQuail, 1999). Other authors have elaborated these ideas to what they call a ‘mediation theory’ (Altheide and Snow, 1988; Gumpert and Cathcart, 1990; Meyer, 1988). In their view it is a characteristic of all media, including modern news media, to shape their messages according to a specific ‘media logic’ originating from the requirements of production routines and presentation genres. The category of format is the core element of ‘mediation theory’.

The economic function

The mediatization concept focuses particularly on mass communication. A key feature of mass communication is that it makes use of technology: from Gutenberg’s technology of printing in the 15th century to the digital and multimedia technologies determining contemporary media development. In addition, industrialized mass production by large-scale

organizations is a distinctive characteristic of mass communication (Turow, 1992).

Ever since Gutenberg, the mass production of the media has applied two basic economic principles: standardization and division of labour. Due to these principles, it is possible to produce a huge output at low unit cost, making the messages accessible and affordable for 'the masses'. The economies of scale inherent in these principles are the formula of success of mass communication and an impetus for achieving higher stages of media development. Normally, the scale effects attainable in media production exceed those of producing material goods. This results from the comparatively low variable costs of mass media production, i.e. costs for multiplying and distributing messages. Low distribution costs are a special advantage of broadcasting and Internet channels.

Standardized production makes mass media messages almost ubiquitously available at relatively low costs. A clever financing model promotes this. The costs of media products are hidden in the prices of goods and services for which the mass media carry advertising (Kleinstauber, 1997). In addition to this, the cross-media exploitation of content makes media production profitable. Both low costs and cross-media proliferation contribute to the pervasiveness and a high comparative utility of media products. The mass media became an omnipresent symbolic environment creating an essential part of the societal definitions of reality.

Technological and economic evolution continually produces new information resources because, paradoxically, the production and consumption of media messages proliferates rather than uses up information resources. The fact that communication stimulates follow-up communications contributes to this phenomenon. Media messages provoke reactions, which, in turn, give rise to further media messages. Communication arouses interest and increases the demand for messages. (Discussion of the so-called 'activation effect' can be found in Lazarsfeld et al., 1944.) To a considerable degree, the media themselves satisfy this demand. At the same time, they stimulate further demand through messages originating from the media system, e.g. through fictional and non-fictional entertainment produced by the media, through 'media events' and 'pseudo-events' especially tailored for the mass media. All this results in a continuous self-reinforcement of the media system and in 'feedback loops' from the media coverage to the events covered (Kepplinger, 2002).

Due to their omnipresence, the mass media are increasingly pervading all communication processes in society, while, at the same time, the universal dependence upon mass media functions is growing. Communication research has explained these aspects of mediatization via

general media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976) and, more specifically, through hypotheses such as agenda-setting, priming, cultivation, or spiral of silence. There is a common assumption that a growth in mass media dependency leads to perceptual distortions and a loss of reality for both individual media users and the society as a whole.

The end of mediatization?

Mediatization, media dependency and related hypotheses are products of the television era. When studying these phenomena, scholars primarily refer to the medium of television and its specific conditions of message production (e.g. Altheide, 1991; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Meyrowitz, 1985). It would therefore be more appropriate to use the label 'televsualization' for recent sociopolitical changes, as Daremas and Terzis (2000) do. However, with the advent of the new media at the transition to the 21st century the television era seems at an end. The question then arises whether, as essential prerequisites of the mediatization concept disappear, this results in a loss of its analytical value. There are at least three answers to this question.

An optimistic answer

Observers heralding a 'media revolution' (van Dijk, 1999), or considering 'the end of mass communication' (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001), expect as an essential consequence of contemporary media change the characteristic constraints of mediated communication to disappear. In their analyses, they emphasize that new media increasingly demassify and individualize communication. This is a capacity particularly attributed to the Internet (Castells, 1996).

New media technologies offer their users a high degree of self-selection and self-determination. While old media function as distribution channels disseminating standardized content to an anonymous audience ('allocation pattern', see van Dijk, 1999: 12–13), the new media allow their users a directed retrieval of messages according to individual needs and interests ('consultation pattern'). Broadcasting transforms into narrowcasting. The typical 'mass audience' of the television era dissolves into progressively fragmented audience groups making use of the new media's net structure for building up 'virtual communities'. Furthermore, the interactivity of the new media turns recipients into communicators ('conversation pattern').

The evolving new media seem to reduce or even remove the constraints which traditional media impose on communication processes:

- In the new media environment, because of the enormous increase of volume and diversity of content, the recipients can choose according to their individual needs among an excessive variety of ready-made media products, and they can select more freely in terms of time and location.
- Rather than consuming centrally produced standardized contents and formats, the users produce their own messages and communicate interactively. The new media enhance sociability both at a distance and in the local community.
- As the capacities of transmission and storage expand almost without limits, the media lose most of their gate-keeping and filtering functions.
- Political actors, rather than having to adapt to the media logics, can bypass the mass media and use their own channels for directly communicating to the public or to specific target groups.
- Even private individuals who appeared in the traditional media – if at all – mostly as victims or delinquents, are empowered to participate directly and easily in public discourses.

An expanding media system reduces the scarcity of transmission and storage capacities. As the selectivity and interpretation implicit in standardized media messages diminish, the media lose their constraints and media dependency ceases. The new media may bring with them the end of mediatization.

A sceptical answer

In contrast to this, sceptical observers suspect that the new media may give rise to new modes of mediatization originating from their specific relay functions, semiotics and economics. Here are a few arguments supporting this scepticism:

- The use of new media requires special technological devices, like transmission lines and terminal equipment. Yet, there is an uneven distribution of economic and cognitive capacities (for infrastructure investments, purchasing equipment, for operating hardware and software), both globally and within national

societies. Consequently, not all segments of the society (and not all nations) equally benefit from the development of the new media. They bring about new social cleavages frequently referred to as the 'digital divide'.

- Although the new networks and storage technologies allow a more individualized and decentralized media use, they are nevertheless subject to central controls restraining choices and modes of application. A number of barely visible filtering mechanisms select the content of the new media: for example, the suppliers of databases, the cable television companies (or authorities deciding on cable system access), the content providers of the Internet and of mobile phone systems, the Internet search engines, the web masters, or the moderators of Usenet groups.
- Private individuals who seem to act autonomously as producers and communicators are actually subject to constraints built into the ergonomics of the media hardware and software they are using, i.e. in computers, player consoles, input/output devices, operating systems and applications.
- The new media bring about new languages and interaction rules shaping and, to a certain degree, standardizing communication in the new media environment. Examples are the conventions that have emerged for language use in electronic mail, for SMS messages via mobile phones, in Internet news groups and chat rooms. The argument applies similarly to the emergence of English as universal lingua franca of the computer-based world.

As new media extend or substitute non-mediated activities and traditional modes of communication, they give rise to new phenomena of mediatization. Like the old media, the new media amalgamate with various social activities. Individuals and organizations have to accommodate to the logic of new media. The specific constraints new media impose on communication processes lead to new forms of dependency and heteronomy.

A moderate answer

Portrayals of contemporary media developments usually emphasize two trends, first the integration of different conventional media technologies into multimedia applications, and second the digitalization of media signals and equipment. These trends bring forth the convergence of different media making old and new media increasingly similar in their characteristics.

This suggests that the new media are not actually all that new. Moreover, the strange fact that the 'new media' are referred to only with a vague category name or with labels pointing to single technological features may raise some scepticism about the novelty of new media. A definition capturing the characteristics of the new media in a single term has not emerged so far. Labels like computer-mediated communication (CMC) or multimedia suggest the interpretation that the new media are nothing but hybrid versions or reconfigurations of conventional media (Rice, 1999; Morris and Ogan, 1996).

Looked at more closely, while there are some changes, many continuities can be seen. Like in previous periods of media evolution, the new media do not entirely displace the old. Instead, according to Riepl's law, old media usually survive when and because they adapt their functions (Riepl, 1913: 4–5). The contemporary media evolution seems to reinforce some of the trends of the television era:

- The new media are substantially expanding the supply of information: more specifically, the supply of news (in the sense of non-fictional content). They are particularly easing access to information for everyday use and to databases for professional purposes. However, these advantages primarily serve the information-rich who were always able to find the information they needed.
- Entertainment content still dominates the media environment. Due to the new media, the supply of entertainment has expanded much more than the supply of information. Entertainment has become more diverse, more easily accessible, more vivid and more exciting thanks to the Internet, digital television, computer games and new audiovisual storage devices.
- Media consumption is still increasing, though disproportionately compared to the expansion of media supply. Consumption data show that up to now the conventional media have hardly lost any importance. Moreover, people transfer their habitual media use patterns to the new media (Flanagan and Metzger, 2001). In most countries, even television has not suffered substantial losses.
- Although private individuals contribute to the content of the new media (e.g. with personal web sites, messages in chat rooms and news groups), this is an insignificant part compared to the overall volume of media content. Most of the content still comes in a standardized fashion, and quite often from those media conglomerates who have always dominated the business. Using new media

merely as additional platforms, they provide old wine in new bottles.

- Various groups and organizations use new media to supplement the old media as channels and platforms for internal and external communication. In particular, political organizations have already successfully adapted their communication activities to the new media environment (see, for example, Klotz, 2001).

The evidence so far supports an overall pattern of reinforcement, as Norris concludes from empirical research of Internet use for civic engagement (Norris, 1999). This applies to new media in general and to their various uses. Some consequences of media change give rise to optimism; others evoke scepticism. Due to the rise of the new media, some of the constraints originating from the conventional media may disappear. However, the new media bring along new constraints and new risks, their potential is 'vulnerable' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001). At the same time, since the new media do not displace the old media, the mediatization effects of the latter endure in the new media environment.

Summary and conclusion

The concept of mediatization has heuristic value if it precisely defines the role of mass media in a transforming society and if it stimulates an adequate analysis of the transformation processes. This is attainable by exposing the implicit suppositions of the concept, as I have proposed.

Four processes of change represent different aspects of mediatization. First, the media extend the natural limits of human communication capacities; second, the media substitute social activities and social institutions; third, media amalgamate with various non-media activities in social life; and fourth, the actors and organizations of all sectors of society accommodate to the media logic.

Three basic functions of media communication shape the nature of the changes resulting from these processes. The relay function, grounded in the media's technological capacities, serves to bridge spatial and temporal distances. Due to their semiotic function, the media encode and format messages in a way suitable for human perception and information processing. The economic function highlights the standardization of mass media products as an outcome of mass production processes based on division of labour.

Explicating mediatization with reference to basic performances and functions of the medium in communication processes, as I have

suggested, makes the concept applicable to all kinds of media, old and new. This presumes continuity in the evolution of media systems so that a single approach may be appropriate to analyse different stages of media development. Moreover, this comprehensive view allows the integration of different theoretical and empirical research approaches: for example, media effects research focusing on limited aspects of change related to mass communication.

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