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On the mediation of everything: ICA presidential address 2008

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On the mediation of everything:

ICA Presidential address 2008

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Abstract

As our field moves beyond the traditional dualism of mass and interpersonal forms of communication to encompass new, interactive, networked forms of communication whose influence may be traced across multiple spheres of modern life, it is commonly claimed that 'everything is mediated' and that this represents a historically significant change. This article inquires into these rhetorically grand claims, first noting the parallels with other processes of mediation (e.g. language, money, myths), second raising questions of value since, unlike for other forms of mediation, the media's role is typically construed as negative than positive and, third observing that the difficulties of translating 'mediation' into a range of languages reveals some conceptual confusions. As a step towards clarification, I contrast the terms 'mediation' and 'mediatization', these roughly, mapping onto situational and historical influences, conceived primarily at micro and macro levels of analysis respectively. I then argue for a broad conception of mediation that encompasses those processes variously referred to as mediatization, mediazation or medialization. The analysis is illustrated by unpacking the claim that 'childhood is mediated', before concluding that distinct aspects of the concept of mediation invite communication scholars to attend to the specific empirical, historical and political implications of the claim that 'everything is mediated'.

Introduction

“No part of the world, no human activity, is untouched by the new media. Societies worldwide are being reshaped, for better or for worse, by changes in the global media and information environment. So too are the everyday lives of their citizens. National and subnational forms of social, political and economic inclusion and exclusion are reconfigured by the increasing reliance on information and communication technologies in mediating almost every dimension of social life.”

This is how Leah Lievrouw and I (2009) open our recent volume, *Major Works in New Media*. Many in the field of media and communication have written such paragraphs. In this article, I wish to halt the confident flow and ask, what do we mean by claiming that information and communication technologies now mediate every dimension of society? Is this paragraph merely introductory verbiage? Is it primarily rhetorical, designed to persuade the doubters? Or does the focus on mediation mark a new theoretical direction?

Such a paragraph is grander, I suggest, than the kind of paragraph we used to write perhaps 20 or 30 years ago. So what’s changed – both in the world, and in our conception of it? Should the title of this article have a question mark at the end? In unpacking claims about the supposed mediation of everything, I have an additional purpose – to note how our field is changing, adapting to encompass international and multilingual dialogue, an expanding array of media forms and institutions, and a repositioning of the scope for critique.

A changing field

Consider the changes in book titles. Several decades ago, typical book titles included *Mass Communication and Society*, *Mass Communication and Public Health*, *Television and the Child*, *Television and the Public Sphere*, *Television and the Public*, and so forth.¹ The form was that of ‘Mass Communication and...’ or ‘Television and...’. Now we examine ‘Mediated ...’, with the focus on the verb – as in *Mediated Politics*, *The Mediation of Power*, *Mediating the Nation*, *Mediating the Family*, *Mediating Culture*, *Mediated Sex*.² It seems that we have moved from a social analysis in which the mass media comprise one among many influential but independent institutions whose relations with the media can be usefully analyzed, to a social analysis in which everything is mediated, the consequence being that all influential institutions in society have themselves been transformed, reconstituted, by contemporary processes of mediation. Castells (2000: 24) puts the case forcefully when he argues that, in the network society, ‘political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of instrumental flows, and cultural codes, embedded in networks.’

According to the earlier model, media and communication studies would analyze the relation between media and politics, say, while in other disciplines they analyze the relation between politics and the environment, or society and the family. But in a heavily mediated world, one cannot analyze the relation between politics and the environment, or society and the family without also recognizing the importance of the media – all these spheres and their intersections have become mediated. Thus, it has become commonplace to inquire, with Thompson, into “the nature of self, experience and everyday life in a mediated world” (1995: 207).³ Or, noting what he called the “media’s intrusive ubiquity”, Silverstone claimed that “politics, like experience, can no longer even be thought outside a media frame” (2005: 190-1). Or again, as Scannell (1988: 28) said grandly of national broadcasting systems, “their primary task is the mediation of modernity”.

These are indeed grand claims we are making. And we make them in the face of some apathy or even contradiction by others: society at large and university administrations in particular do not always consider our field to be of such importance, and colleagues in departments of politics, sociology, psychology and economics seem to conduct their business without knocking on our doors too often or referring to our field. Hence the rhetorical intent of my opening paragraph, for we appear to have ambitions in media and communication not

only to defend our terrain but also to expand it into those traditionally held by other disciplines.

Lost in translation

Book titles are not enough to establish that our field is changing. Consider, further, a growing confusion over familiar terms along with a tendency to invent new ones – surely indications that ideas are changing. Some years ago, our associations, journals and departments renamed themselves – taking out ‘mass communication’ and rebranding themselves ‘media and communication’, or similar. Moreover, new concepts are emerging: ‘mediation’, ‘mediatization’, ‘medialisation’, ‘mediation’, ‘remediation’, the ‘mediatic turn’, and so forth.

These terminological issues have several sources. For some, they reflect an attempt to rethink questions of media power in terms of richly contextualized processes that reject narrowly linear assumptions about media effects or impacts (for a critique of the ‘transmission model’ of communication, see Carey, 1989). For others, what’s changing is not so much theory as technology – the advent of new media and the remediation of old media and, indeed, of face-to-face communication. Thus in their classic article on ‘mediated interpersonal communication’, Cathcart and Gumpert (1983: 271) use ‘mediation’ to refer to the increasingly pervasive technological intermediaries that have ‘been interposed to transcend the limitations of time and space’. Not only does ‘mediation’ allow us to avoid tying down the focus to specific media (radio, press, television, etc), useful in convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), but more fundamentally it recognizes that social and technological changes are transforming the dual centerpiece of the communication field – mass communication and interpersonal (or face-to-face) communication – resulting in diversifying and hybridizing processes of mediated communication (see Anderson & Meyer, 1988, for an influential early statement, and Cardoso, 2008, for a contemporary analysis).

But new terms are also emerging because communication studies are increasingly engaged in a global – and therefore multilingual – dialogue.⁴ In English, ‘mediation’ has been ‘repurposed’, away from the old meaning of conciliation towards an emphasis on the media, as enabled by the fortunate coincidence in the terms for linking disparate elements and for the media of communication. Though this is not a coincidence, of course, it is nonetheless a coincidence that does not occur in all languages. For example, my Slovenian colleague reports that it is difficult to translate the concept of mediation: it translates literally as the verb, *posredovanje*, *posredovati* (to mediate, to intervene) but this bears no relation to media and communication. My Polish colleague agrees – it’s a judicial term, no more, no less. Or, as a Tibetan student pointed out in my lecture recently, the mediator is the matchmaker in his village. Meanwhile, to my Icelandic colleague, mediation translates as *midlun*, meaning to convey or share information with others, but as he reminded me, it is related to *midill* (medium), used both for mass media and for a person who can communicate with the dead.

In Portuguese, *mediação* is used as an academic term for the negotiation of media meanings between producers and consumers; although this is not an everyday usage, nor is our use of the term in English. Further, while my Bulgarian colleague regards mediation as a legal term for dispute resolution, she also recognises the term for mediatization as publicizing or representing an issue in the media. Yet my Estonian colleague noted with some asperity, that for a non-English speaker, mediation or mediatization makes little difference. My French colleague had the least to say on the subject – in French, mediation is *médiation*. But my German colleagues had much to say on the subject, and their debates are influencing those in Scandinavian countries also. Indeed, in the Germanic languages, while mediation (*Vermittlung*) ordinarily references the legal/regulatory term for seeking discursive solutions to disputes, *Mediatisierung* (mediatization) and *Medialisierung* (medialisation) refer to the meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are increasingly shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations.

Beyond semantic confusion

I am no linguist, but I discern three patterns here. First, in some languages, conceptual terms used in English are puzzling or incomprehensible. To be sure, the concepts have their equivalents, but we must take care when promoting international dialogue to attend to matters of translation in both directions, or else we shall become ‘lost in translation’. Working with colleagues internationally has taught me that subtle attempts to prescribe exactly what concepts should mean is a doomed effort, as ordinary language meanings will reassert themselves and confusion will result. Perhaps this is what led McQuail (2006: 115) to title his recent review article, ‘On the mediatization of war’. In this, he uses the term as a catch all for the multiple ways in which practices of media and war are becoming interlinked, noting what he sees as a failure to establish clearly theorized and empirically supported “chains of reasoning” regarding the influence of media on war and/or vice versa. His frustration hints at a common response to these terms, often shared by my students, namely that they obfuscate what, surely, should be clear arguments about relations of power.

Second, my brief linguistic review suggests that ordinary language prioritizes the notion of mediation as getting in between, negotiating or resolving disputes. Often this is meant positively – mediation means generating mutual understanding and agreement where before there was conflict. Whether the mediator creates marriages or alleviates the pain of divorce, society generally values this role. But, in our academic use in English language media and communication research, we generally reverse this valuation. Undoubtedly, there are times when we celebrate the ways in which individuals use media creatively, contra the expectations of major providers, and when we welcome the ways in which media connect individuals across the globe, transcending the parochial constraints of face-to-face communication; on such occasions, we see the media’s role in mediating as change for the better. But more often, we ask who controls these media institutions, whether global corporation or the state, and we critically observe how mediated communication is subordinated to, shaped by, the inexorable logic of global capitalism - commodification, standardization, privatization, co-option, surveillance, and the rest; on these occasions, we see the media’s role as instituting change for the worse. For example, Thompson (1995: 213) observes four negative consequences for the self of what he terms ‘mediatization’:

‘(1) the mediated intrusion of ideological messages; (2) the double-bind of mediated dependency; (3) the disorienting effect of symbolic overload; and (4) the absorption of the self in mediated quasi-interaction’.

At the heart of this claim about ‘getting in between’ is the Hegelian argument that there is no pure experience prior to mediation (for a contemporary statement, see Waite, 2003). Hence, yes, everything is mediated; my title needs no question mark. Gergen notes the long tradition of argument that ‘Language comes into being – into meaning – through coordinated relationships among persons. It is through language that persons acquire their ways of understanding the world and themselves’ (2002: 228). So, when Silverstone (2005: 188) observed that language is the paradigm case of mediation, as a precursor to making a case for how the media mediate, he deliberately drew a strong analogy. Paraphrasing Gergen, then, we can claim that, as for language, today’s media become meaningful because of coordinated human activity and, at the same time, people understand the world and their position in it through the media. Mediation works both ways.

On this view, we need media and communication research to understand how the media mediate, for the same reason that we need linguistics to understand how language mediates, economics to understand how money mediates, literature to understand how narratives and myths mediate, and consumption studies to understand material goods mediate. Like those disciplines too perhaps, we are interested in the processes of mediation primarily because they reveal the changing relations among social structures and agents rather than because they tell us about ‘the media’ *per se*. Indeed, contrary to the periodic misunderstandings of our colleagues in the ‘-Ology’ Faculty, who suppose us only interested in the *ad hoc* and transient collection of technologies that mediate these fundamental themes

(television, mobile, internet, games, networks, etc), in the rather broad Faculty of 'Mediation' that I have sketched here, the purpose of the Media and Communication Department is to understand the specific relation of modern media to questions of faculty-wide concern regarding democracy, culture, society, communication, identity, inequality and power.

Mediation and mediatization

The third conclusion I draw from the linguistic muddle noted earlier is signaled by the fact that media and communication departments are, generally, the newest entrant in this faculty. The Germanic tradition favors 'mediatization' as a historical argument distinguishable from that which links media and mediation in everyday communicative situations (see Lundby, 2008). Krotz (2008) identifies mediatization as one of the four fundamental meta-processes that have shaped, and continue to shape, modernity - along with globalization, individualization and, especially, commercialization (for an overview of debates surrounding these meta-processes, see Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1995). Krotz explains:

'By mediatization we mean the historical developments that took and take place as a result of change in (communication) media and the consequences of those changes.' (2008: 23)

He adds carefully, so as not to imply a technological determinism (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999), that although mediatization changes human communication by offering new possibilities of communication to individuals, economies, societies, and cultures, this process 'is a man-made one' (p. 23).

I was somewhat puzzled by the term 'mediatization' - a clumsy neologism in English - until I learned of the German Laws of Mediatization in the early nineteenth century, when the states of the Holy Roman Empire were 'mediatized' by Napoleon.⁵ In brief, Napoleon interposed between the miscellany of independent cities, the princes and the archbishops who previously answered only to the Emperor an intermediate level of territorial authorities. As Wikipedia explains:

'Mediatization, defined broadly, is the subsumation of one monarchy into another monarchy in such a way that the ruler of the annexed state keeps his or her sovereign title and, sometimes, a measure of local power.'⁶

One may think this has nothing to do with the media, only with the notion of mediation as getting in between distinct and possibly conflictual participants. But today, the media not only get between any and all participants in society but also, crucially, annex a sizeable part of their power by mediatizing - subordinating - the previously-powerful authorities of government, education, the church, the family, etc. History, including the history of media, assumes a development from non-mediated to mediated. Consider Hjarvard's (2008: 13) definition of mediatization:

'In earlier societies, social institutions like family, school and church were the most important providers of information, tradition and moral orientation for the individual member of society. Today, these institutions have lost some of their former authority, and the media have to some extent taken over their role as providers of information and moral orientation, at the same time as the media have become society's most important storyteller about society itself.'

The parallels between the two notions of mediatization are convincing - it seems we are telling a two hundred year history here, from Napoleon to Rupert Murdoch. However, notwithstanding the power of Murdoch and his fellow media moguls, it is the case that for mediatization theorists, the question mark should go back onto my title. The question of how far the power of traditional authorities has in fact been annexed by the media is an empirical one as yet unresolved. Writing on politics, Mazzoleni & Schulz (1999: 247) suggest that this is only partial, arguing that, 'the best description of the current situation is "mediatization", where political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media but

nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions' (see also Kepplinger, 2002). In short, establishing the degree, nature and consequences of the mediatization of anything or everything - politics, education, family, religion, self - is a task still largely ahead of us.⁷

While our understanding of mediatization is an incomplete and still unfolding historical project, mediation – as defined by Hjarvard, Krotz et al – is construed as of doubtful significance. In stressing that 'mediatization is not to be mistaken for the common phenomenon of mediation', Hjarvard (2008: 14) cautions that 'mediation in itself may not have any profound impact on social institutions'. Similarly, while Krotz (2008: 17) agrees with mediation theorists that 'humans are beings who exist in and depend on interaction, communication, and social relations', he evinces little conviction that the reverse occurs, namely that human actions transform communication, especially insofar as this may have consequences beyond the lifeworld. It seems, therefore, that mediatization theorists do not expect to have to look to daily processes of mediation to explain constraints on or unexpected findings regarding the process of mediatization.

However, rather than polarizing these or related terms (Couldry, 2008), I suggest that in this semantic seeking after new formulations, scholars are selecting different starting points to reach the assertion of not one but two grand claims are being made: first, the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society; and second, *as a result*, the media mediate, for better or for worse, more than ever before. Writing in English, I prefer to conceive both these claims as central to the theory of mediation⁸ for this permits us not only to examine the empirical support for each claim but, more especially, to recognize their mutual relations and interdependencies.

An illustration – the case of 'mediated childhood'

Let me illustrate these arguments and interconnections with some empirical research. Once, writing on the notion of 'mediated childhoods' (Livingstone, 1998b: 436), I began with an empirical observation as follows:

'Two eight year old boys play their favourite multimedia adventure game on the family PC. When they discover an Internet site where the same game could be played interactively with unknown others, this occasions great excitement in the household. The boys choose their fantasy personae, and try diverse strategies to play the game, both cooperative and competitive, simultaneously 'talking' on-line (i.e. writing) to the other participants. But when restricted in their access to the Internet, for reasons of cost, the game spins off into 'real life'. Now the boys, together with their younger sisters, choose a character, don their battle dress and play 'the game' all over the house, going downstairs to Hell, The Volcanoes and The Labyrinth, and upstairs to The Town, 'improving' the game in the process. This new game is called, confusingly for adult observers, "playing the Internet".'

What did I mean by mediation, in this context? First and most obviously, that the media have entered into the close relationship between children and their play. Contrary to the many sociologists and psychologists of childhood who leave media, television, internet etc. out of their book contents, even out of the index, childhood is mediated. Second, the parties to this interaction cannot be understood independently. Rather, there is a mutual re-negotiation of meaning – nonlinear, unpredictable - that alters the children, their play and the cultural meaning of the game itself. The media do not simply add a new element to the story, they transform it. Third, this process is both subtle and easily taken-for granted – the involvement of the media could easily be overlooked by a casual observer. The analysis of mediation, therefore, invites what Radway called a 'radical contextualism' to encompass 'the kaleidoscope of daily life' (1988: 366) and so recognize the horizontal and historical connections within and across the expanding array of mass and new media in people's

communication environments.

Focusing on mediatization as ‘the growing media presence in identity constructions’, since ‘culture is more and more dependent on communication media’, Fornas (1995: 210) similarly links the emerging digital hermetics of new media users with earlier analyses of mass media audiences by claiming that ‘our communication society is based on mediations between texts and people, in that people pass and meet each other through texts, just as texts pass and encounter each other through people’ (p. 104). Fornas is here, I think, influenced by the German reception theorist, Iser (1980: 106), who said, in a statement that influenced a generation of audience theorists,

‘The work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too.’

We must be quick-footed to grasp these processes, especially since, as Ang notes, radical contextualism points to ‘the impossibility of determining any social or textual meaning outside of the complex situation in which it is produced’, this making it ‘difficult to imagine where to begin and where to end the analysis’ (1996: 253).

Fourth, in pointing to the mediation of childhood I also meant to claim that, through such slight but ubiquitous moments of mediation, a historical shift in childhood is effected – towards individualization, commercialization, globalization and, if you will, mediatization (Krotz, 2008).⁹ To sustain this last, perhaps more tenuous claim, other kinds of evidence – especially the political economy of the game’s production, and the longer history of children’s play, must be considered. To illustrate this, consider the following.

Heller (2008) writes about how children’s board game *Monopoly* was popular in pre-Communist Hungary (called *Capital*) but then rejected for purveying capitalist propaganda and reinvented in a socialist form in the 1960s (as *Gazdalkodj okosan!* – Economize wisely!). Players visited good socialist institutions, free because of their pedagogic value (the national gallery, zoo, sports) or pay a lot for the places with negative morals (pub, tobacconist, nightclub) – the aim was to acquire a block flat with basic equipment while saving in the state bank. But mediation, as ever, worked both ways. The socialist version achieved some popularity, but *Capital* survived and was secretly circulated among friends and, in addition, handmade versions of *Monopoly* were created as *samizdat* toys. Meanwhile, in the West, critics of capitalism were promoting the opposite values (e.g. the French game, *Anti-Monopoly*). Clearly, values are mediated through all media, including children’s toys, and we need to pay attention to the often unstated processes by which struggles over power occur in everyday life.

A contemporary version of these struggles emerged also from my recent work on teenagers’ use of social networking sites. In this, I show both the creative ways in which teenagers express their developing identities, strongly shaped by social determinations (the peer group, life style expectations, gender norms, privacy from parents, etc) and how these dovetail with, are constrained by or even rendered problematic by the affordances of the sites themselves (Hutchby, 2001). In the case of social networking sites, these affordances (arguably framed by specific media logics) insist on highly standardized formats for identity expression, and their design features – for example, regarding privacy – appear somewhat ‘illegible’ to teenagers (Livingstone, 2008b). In short, the intersection of youthful literacies and technological affordances is resulting in the *mediation* of identity and social relationships. This is also a story of historical change – of the increasing mediation (i.e. the *mediatization*) of identity-related experiences once conducted, for free, in the bedroom or on the street corner. The commodification of routine daily interactions has been recently brought into sharp relief by the guerrilla action on the part of Facebook users to protect their privacy and data, along

with struggles over children's privacy between parent groups and sites such as MySpace.

The field of children, youth and media is just one case among many in which identifying the historical, value-laden shifts is becoming a crucial focus for scholars hitherto primarily attentive to the micro (perhaps overly universalized) processes of the here and now. Some ambitious projects are underway. For example, Buckingham, Scanlon & Sefton-Green (2001) links their analysis of how children learn in expected and unexpected ways using edutainment games to the marketing strategies of the games business in 'selling edutainment' to parents and teachers. Reid-Walsh (2008) explores how the commercial intent behind the production of *The Sims* translates into design features that are then reshaped by the playful practices of the children gleefully find new ways to murder their Sims. Jenkins (2003) seeks to disentangle where the power lies in the ongoing dynamic of co-option and evasion between Lucas Entertainment Ltd. and the writers of Star Wars fanzines.

Each of these and related projects can be framed as examining the mutual shaping of micro and macro processes so as to elaborate a dynamic, nonlinear circuit of meaning (Hall, 1999) - an approach to mediation being developed in relation to civic communication (Dahlgren, 2003), new media uses (e.g. du Gay, Hall, Janes & Mackay, 1997) and other domains of research. Thus Thompson (1995: 46) calls for an analysis of 'the overall cumulative impact on social life of the existence of media institutions and their involvement in the circulation of symbols', an analysis which Davis (2007) calls an 'inverted political economy'. The elements of the circuit may be more or less elaborated but, in a complex media and information environment, they require at the least a reformulation of the traditional mass communication model of producer/ text/ audience to include three elements of new media infrastructure:

'The *artefacts or devices* used to communicate or convey information; the *activities and practices* in which people engage to communicate or share information; and the *social arrangements or organizational forms* that develop around those devices and practices.' (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006: 2).¹⁰

Macro and micro

In part, the above debates can be understood heuristically in terms of the relation between macro and micro levels of analysis, a perennial theme in the field of communication as in the social sciences generally. At stake, it seems, is less whether or not everything is mediated (for this is an interesting but relatively uncontested empirical question) but rather, whether this matters - in other words, whether the mediation of micro processes of social interaction influences macro-historical shifts in institutional relations of power. Alexander & Giesen (1987: 14) outline five approaches to the macro-micro link:

'(1) rational, purposeful individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (2) interpretive individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (3) socialized individuals re-create society as a collective force through contingent acts of freedom; (4) socialized individuals reproduce society by translating existing social environment into the microrealm; and (5) rational, purposeful individuals acquiesce to society because they are forced to by external, social control.'

Although it may initially seem that mediation concerns the micro and mediatization the macro, most communication scholars eschew the extremes of the first and last approaches, centering debate instead on the differences among the middle three - roughly, social constructionism, structuration and socialization - approaches (Livingstone, 1998a). While mediation theorists can at times seem solely focused on what Tomlinson (1991: 61) terms 'a subtle *interplay of mediations* ... the constant mediation of one aspect of cultural experience by another' in their exploration of the texture of everyday life (a focus of little appeal to mediatization theorists concerned instead with the increasing power of media institutions¹¹), mediation theorists are ultimately also concerned with historical shifts in power.¹² This is most evident in the common but important claim that, through a mutual dialectic between the actions of the major

power players and the numerous tactical acts of interpretation and/or resistance among the wider public (Giddens, 1984), key cultural distinctions are becoming blurred or reconfigured precisely because they are increasingly mediated: these include ‘public’/ ‘private’ (Meyrowitz, 1985), ‘self’/ ‘other’ (Chouliaraki, 2008), ‘nature’/ ‘society’ (Haraway, 1991), ‘masculine’/ ‘feminine’ (Wajcman, 2004), ‘local’/ ‘global’ (Tomlinson, 1991).

These are very abstract claims, however, partly because the macro level of the analysis is often left undeveloped. Here the mediatization theorists are stronger. Schulz (2004) echoes Innis (1951) in arguing that developments in technology permit the media to bridge time-space distances in particular ways, that semiotic potentialities encode the world in particular ways, and that the economic underpinning of media systems then ensures the standardization (or commodification) of these bridging and encoding activities. He argues that four kinds of social/historical transformation follow, resulting in ‘problematic dependencies, constraints and exaggerations’ (p. 87):

‘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.’ (p. 98)

This reference to the notion of media logic takes us back to Altheide & Snow’s (1979: 16) examination of ‘entertainment, news, politics, religion, and sports as institutions in American society that have adopted a media logic and specific media formats as their own institutional strategies and thus have become part of the total media culture.’ Where Altheide & Snow thought of media logic in terms of the standardization of media grammars and content formats (in turn shaped by institutional, economic and regulatory factors), other logics have also been identified (e.g. tracing the media’s influence in reshaping politics, geography and religion: Corner & Pels, 2003; Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997; Hjarvard, 2008). As noted at the outset, rarely if ever are such logics, however plural and changing, regarded positively. In this, many scholars follow Habermas (1981/7), whose social theory holds that, as the system world and lifeworld become uncoupled over modernity, processes of mediation are no longer anchored in the lifeworld but are, rather, increasingly colonized by the system world.¹³ Thus, ‘the colonization of the lifeworld represents domination and control by instrumental rather than communicative rationality’ (Joseph, 2003: 159). Habermas explains, using the Germanic (i.e. Napoleonic rather than media studies) notion of mediatization, that:

‘[A] progressively rationalized lifeworld is both uncoupled from and made dependent upon increasingly complex, formally organized domains of action, like the economy and the state administration. This dependency [results] from the *mediatization* of the lifeworld by system imperatives.’ (1981/7: 305)

While even Habermas is not always so pessimistic (see Habermas, 1996), it is undoubtedly the case that mediation theorists more closely involved with the micro level of analysis evince more excitement and optimism regarding the growing importance of processes of mediation, as with the example of children’s mediated play, than a critical/macro approach implies. In this regard, different readers will prefer different standpoints.¹⁴

Conclusion - clarity through keywords

In conclusion, let me return to the critical ambitions of our work. Williams (1983: 204-7) traces ‘mediation’ back to the 14th century shift from pre-modern to modern society, noting three central meanings:

- ‘(i) acting as an intermediary (e.g. the political act of reconciling adversaries);
- ‘(ii) intermediate (indirect) agency between otherwise separated parties to a relationship; and
- ‘(iii) a formal way of directly expressing otherwise unexpressed relations.’

In short - reconciling two opponents, bridging over distance, stating the unstated. All

verbs, processes. Each meaning is already captured, it might be said, in the notion of ‘communication’ (Hjarvard, 2008; Silverstone, 2005) but ‘mediation’, as an alternative, usefully highlights the artefacts and practices used to communicate, it more readily invites analysis of the social and organizational arrangements through which mediation is instituted (i.e. the micro and macro conditions in which otherwise separated parties become interrelated in Williams’ quote), and it urges a critical focus on the expression of what is unexpressed or suppressed in those interrelations.

Some in the field of media and communication give mediation a strong theoretical frame, following the first sense and stressing the process of negotiation, especially among critical theorists who analyze how media enter the power struggles between dominant and subaltern groups in society. Martin-Barbero (2003) argues that scholars should attend to mediations (plural) as the cultural processes by which power is negotiated between dominant institutions and popular or resistant movements.

Others use mediation less strongly, in Williams’ second sense, to point to how the media overcome (or transform) distance, both physical and symbolic, time and space, and so connect otherwise separated parties – e.g. peoples separated by continents, politicians separated from their publics – an enterprise that has ethical as well as political significance (Chouliaraki, 2008). Relatedly, the term serves to bridge formerly distinct spheres of inquiry into mass and interpersonal communication so as to recognize emerging and hybrid forms of mediated communication.

Following the tradition of critical theory, Williams also argued that mediation works to disguise or deflect from social conflict, while making the work of mediation unnoticed, naturalized. Methodologically, this brings into play his third meaning of mediation, it being the critic’s task to reject the ‘persuasive physical metaphor’ that art (or media) simply reflects reality, and instead to reveal ‘the social and material character of artistic activity’ (Williams, 1977: 97), thus clarifying otherwise unexpressed relations of power.¹⁵ Whatever our politics regarding these relations of power and whether or not we seek to contest them, the enterprise of revealing the ways in which their operation is mediated indeed seems an appropriate ambition for those who believe media and communications to be ever more crucial in today’s world – in short, for those who seek to explore the possible and actual mediation of everything.

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¹ See, for example, Atkin & Wallack (1990), Bower (1973), Curran, Gurevitch, & Woollacott (1977), Dahlgren (1995), Himmelweit, Oppenheim & Vince (1958).

² See Anselmi & Gouliamos (1994), Bennett & Entman (2001), Davis (2007), McNair (1996), Madianou (2005), Tincknell (2005).

³ Note that Thompson uses the term 'mediatization' rather than mediation.

⁴ Forewarned by my previous experiences trying to translate 'audiences' and 'publics' even within Europe, I asked my colleagues how to translate mediation in their various languages: Thanks to Nico Carpentier, Carmelo Garitonandia, Ingunn Hagen, Uwe Hasebrink, Josiane Jouet, Lucyna Kirwil, Bojana Lobe, Jivka Marinova, Kjartan Ólafsson, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Cristina Ponte, Gitte Stald and Václav Štětka. See Livingstone (2005) for a parallel debate over the translation of 'audience' and 'public' and Livingstone (2008a) for difficulties in translating 'literacy' and 'media literacy'.

⁵ Thanks to Rodney Livingstone for drawing this to my attention.

⁶ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediatization>. Last accessed on 25 August 2008.

⁷ Note that this leaves open for future research the question of whether, for example, the spheres of politics, health, sociality or family are all being mediatized to a greater or lesser extent, and in similar or different ways.

⁸ Does it matter if we label the latter process, 'mediatization' or instead, simply, examine 'the growing power of the media' or the historical 'transformation' of the role of the media in mediating social processes or institutions of one kind or another?

⁹ Generally, it is my intention to position 'mediation' as the broader term, encompassing in ordinary language the historical/macro processes specifically intended by advocates of the term 'mediatization' but, in such a list of abstract processes (or -izations), 'mediatization' is useful.

¹⁰ In this formulation, we draw on Star & Bowker's (2002) concept of infrastructure. Note that such an interweaving of the cultural and the economic, the tactics of the everyday and the grand sweep of history, demands that we become collectively, if not individually, highly skilled in multiple approaches and methods (Meyrowitz, 2008).

¹¹ Which is not to say that mediatization theorists are wholly unconcerned with questions of experience and semiosis in the lifeworld (e.g. Krotz, 2008).

¹² It is true that, for example in Silverstone's (2005) otherwise convincing appeal to join the cultural, processual turn, he says little about institutions or matters of political economy, instead focusing on tactical acts of resistance, oppositional interpretations and unintended consequences. But it could hardly be claimed that mediation theorists are unconcerned with the power inequalities that differentially constrain or enable people's actions, including in relation to the media (e.g. Couldry, 2000).

¹³ Outhwaite (1996: 369) defines Habermas' notion of 'lifeworld' as encompassing 'relatively informal ways of life, contrasted with market and administrative systems.'

¹⁴ There are echoes, here, of the long-standing debate between political economy and cultural studies perspectives, among other defining dichotomies of our field.

¹⁵ Yet Williams (1977: 100) remained dissatisfied with the notion of mediation, noting that mediation, like reflection, still assumes a fundamental and problematic distinction between (rather than mutually constitutive relation between) the representation and that which is represented.