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Is 'mediatization' the new paradigm for our field? A commentary on Deacon and Stanyer (2014, 2015) and Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015)

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Is 'mediatization' the new paradigm for our field? A commentary on Deacon and Stanyer (2014, 2015) and Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015)

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Abstract

In responding to the debate about the theory of mediatization, we reject criticisms that foreclose prematurely on this set of new ideas potentially worthy of further exploration and we give more attention to the fundamental questions that critics have asked about mediatization. We note that controversy centres on the claim that mediatization is a societal metaprocess of the order of globalization, individualization and commercialization. Substantiating this claim would require an ambitious, evidenced account of socio-historical change over centuries, along with recognition of mediatization research as a valuable contribution to the analysis of modernity on which scholars in other supposedly-mediatized disciplines now draw. We invite sceptics of mediatization to articulate their critique by reference to the now sizeable body of writing on this concept. We call on proponents of mediatization – along with others keen to understand social and media change within modernity – to consider: (i) whether and how existing research on media's changing role within a variety of domains can be productively reinterpreted within a mediatization frame; (ii) the implications of such work for existing theories, including in those of other disciplines; and (iii) how to advance analysis of the relations between mediatization and the other metaprocesses of modernity.

Mediatization – a provocative neologism

Like many native English speakers, when we first heard the term 'mediatization' we were puzzled. Does media studies need this term? What does it mean? What does it replace? Where are its limits? So we have some sympathy with the efforts of David Deacon and James Stanyer (2014, 2015) to get answers to such questions from three of mediatization's key proponents – Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard and Knut Lundby (2015). Moreover, we, too, have been frustrated at some scholars' casual or even confusing use of the term. When we accepted Lundby's invitation to write the 'critical afterthought' in his sizeable handbook, *Mediatization of Communication* (Livingstone and Lunt, 2014), we found ourselves contending with work of variable commitment to the framework carefully developed by its original proponents. So it is as insiders/outsiders that we now try to mediate the debate recently published within this journal (hereafter, 'the debate').

We do so because we agree with Hepp et al. that new questions and insights are made visible by the very act of bringing together (as if under the hashtag '#mediatization', as we suggested in our critical afterthought). Hashtag mediatization brings under one umbrella diverse studies of the media *and*, or the *mediation of*, or arguably, the *mediatization of*, politics, education, family, religion, sports, law, work, etc., insofar as these are motivated not so much by a fascination with the media for their own sake as by their seemingly increasing effects within or influences on other domains. To

evaluate these effects demands cross-disciplinary work – with political science or pedagogy or the sociology of the family, for example – in ways too rarely attempted.

There is no question that many, even all, dimensions of society are now *mediated* by digital networked technologies in ways that matter and, many would concur, that matter *increasingly*. The question, however, is whether this situation has arisen as the result of a historical *metaprocess* that is analogous to, say, globalization, or individualization or commercialization (Krotz, 2009), and yet which has sufficient distinctiveness and coherence to define a significant phenomenon in its own right. If the answer is 'yes', then a second question arises – is this metaprocess of sufficient importance and interest that media studies should, now, bring together many of its diverse theories, topics and findings in a common endeavour that would reveal, through comparisons across domains and over time, how *mediatization* works?

We do not support Deacon and Stanyer's premature rejection of this potential, nor their reductionist reading of claims about 'effects' (for mediatization scholars do not thereby refer to decontextualized experimental demonstrations of media influence) or 'increasing' (which, similarly, does not refer to an inexorable, linear or decontextualized change); nor do we accept that, by advocating cross-disciplinary work, mediatization scholars presume or impose a *media-centric* analysis of social change in any particular domain. Indeed, Hepp et al., among others, have written extensively on the complexities and contingencies that routinely qualify any simple or linear claims about media and social/historical change.

Mediatization – a sensitizing concept

However, we are in sympathy with the fundamental concerns that drive Deacon and Stanyer's critique. We do not see a new paradigm in the making, although we do relish the potential for a new theory or research programme. Our own reference to Kuhn (1962) in our critical afterthought merely meant to reference the critical question Kuhn asks of new paradigms, specifically: does the concept of mediatization embrace a wider array of empirical phenomena in a more parsimonious manner than competing concepts or theories? If it does not, one would certainly hesitate to use it.

The question of what concepts mediatization competes with (or might displace) is a fair concern of Deacon and Stanyer. The most obvious is that of 'mediation' (Silverstone, 2005), for although mediatization's core proponents take care to establish that the concepts are both distinct and compatible, a growing number of scholars confuse the two, or even prefer mediatization as seemingly the more inclusive term. This reverses our own conviction that everything is, in one way or another, mediated, but that claims of mediatization must pass a much higher threshold in evidencing historical transformation of one or more domains of society (Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone and Lunt, 2014). Johan Fornäs puts it well when he says that:

> … media are socially organized technologies for communication … mediated communication is that kind of intercourse that makes use of such institutionalized tools that are primarily intended for communication [and] mediatization is … an historical process whereby communication media become in some respect more "important" in expanding areas of life and

society [and, specifically ...] how institutionalized technologies of communication expand in extension and power. (2014: 484)

It would be helpful to hear from mediatization researchers how they see the relation between mediatization and the other concepts or frameworks long-established in our field that it seems in competition with: consider media systems dependency, cultivation and framing theories, medium theory and media ecology theory. Consider, for instance, Winfried Schulz's (2004) specification of the four core dimensions of mediatization – as *extending* human capacities for communication through time and space, *substituting* prior or direct social activities or experiences with mediated ones, *amalgamating* primary and secondary (or interpersonal and mass-mediated) activities, and *accommodating* social activities and institutions to the media logic. In these dimensions one can read echoes of a host of long-established media theories. But it is not clear whether mediatization researchers mean deliberately to incorporate these into one grand framework, nor if these dimensions are indeed helpful in accounting for the growing importance of the media in domains other than that of politics, Schulz' own preoccupation. Answering these questions remains a project for the future, and until that is undertaken, it will be impossible to answer Kuhn's question regarding parsimony.

In the meantime, we find it more constructive to conceive of mediatization as a *sensitizing concept* that offers 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances', sensitizing the researcher about where to look rather than defining precisely what exists in advance of social scientific investigation (Blumer, 1954: 7). And what does it sensitize us to? We suggest that the concept of mediatization sensitizes media researchers to:

- a heightened historical awareness – pushing us to go beyond a simplistic polarization of 'now' and 'before', or 'old' and 'new' media, or twenty-first century and 'the past' (a challenge of particular importance as analysis of 'the digital age' threatens to eclipse or obscure nuanced analysis of earlier periods);

- whether and how research on societal transformations within or across a variety of domains (e.g. politics, education, family, religion, etc.) can be productively reinterpreted in terms of mediatization;

- the intersections among metaprocesses in the larger analysis of modernity – notably, how does mediatization intersect with or depend on or add to the analysis of globalization or individualization or commercialization or rationalization or democratization or urbanization, etc.?

This is surely an exciting agenda worth exploring more deeply, whether or not it is labelled 'mediatization' research – and it certainly should not be so labelled if to do so somehow presumes that the hard work has already been undertaken.

From social change to historical transformation

Undoubtedly, media studies face a challenge in understanding whether and how the media (defined inclusively) have become embedded in all domains of our media-saturated modern lives (Couldry, 2012). On the one hand, a complex combination of

social changes have served to consolidate the power of traditional media and communication industries, albeit admitting some crucial newcomers and allowing for some notable casualties along the way. On the other hand, more interestingly, they have served to disperse the power to mediate well beyond what we usually think of as 'the media' to encompass a host of new players through the growing importance of publicity. This can be seen concretely in the profusion of public relations, marketing and communications functions (and budgets) now attached to all institutions including those in the public and third sector. And it can be seen in the profound cultural shift brought about through the rise of branding, reputation management and the politics of visibility and accountability throughout society, and now engulfing even the most private experiences of individuals.

That media studies face this challenge seems to us uncontentious, and many researchers are busy theorizing and evidencing this 'complex combination of social changes.' What is unresolved is whether it is useful to frame this effort in terms of *mediatization*. But rather than reduce the debate between Deacon and Stanyer and Hepp et al. to one of academic branding or internecine power plays, let us unpack what really matters, irrespective of how the work is labelled.

In modernity, *change* is itself the norm, since 'everything is in a state of constant flux' (Hepp, Lunt and Hartmann, 2014: 183). *Transformation*, however, refers to more fundamental changes in the relationships among networks of individuals and societal structures. So there can be no simply mapping of mediation (or other theories of media influence) and mediatization on to stasis versus change, as the debate seems to imply. Theorizing the role of mediation in modernity, Roger Silverstone precisely stressed the importance of change (2005: 189):

> Mediation is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption.

As may be seen from the above, he also encompasses multiple levels (individuals and institutions) and analytic concerns (cultural, institutional, technological) within the frame of mediation theory (contra some efforts to claim these specifically for mediatization theory). What Silverstone does not encompass within *mediation*, however, is the claim of historical transformations through modernity, not because he considers these unimportant, but because for this he relies on established social theory regarding the metaprocesses of globalization, individualization, etc.). At stake, then, is the claim for a metaprocess driven by historical transformations in mediation – namely, mediatization. Hjarvard (2012: 30) puts this most clearly when he defines mediatization as the:

> … double-sided development in which media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time as they become integrated into the very

fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business, or family.

Explaining mediatization

As Silverstone's account above further shows, also contra Deacon and Stanyer, neither theories of mediation nor mediatization are concerned with the kinds of causal explanations of change that can be illustrated by David Hume's billiard table (just as references in this literature to *media effects* draw more on the perspectives of Carey or Foucault or Hall than on Bandura or Lasswell or Lazarsfeld). To put it another way, mediatization is conceived of as a high-level societal metaprocess concerned with the historical adjustment to or appropriation of media logics by institutions and cultural practices across diverse domains of society, not as a middle-range theory that proposes testable hypotheses about event-event causation or the direct exercise of power in particular contexts. Relatedly, we criticize those even within the mediatization camp who read the notion of *media logics* in a reductionist manner, a narrow reading that they surely would not apply either to parallel notions of social or cultural or institutional logics or to terms related to media logics such as affordances, codes, articulations or modalities.

After all, social scientists do not seek a simple test of the claims of globalization or individualization theories, although we do expect an evidence base to underpin them. For example, in relation to individualization, when Durkheim (1984) claimed that the cult of the individual forms part of the duality of modern identities alongside strategic thinking, this was not intended as a claim that picks out specific causal processes for testing, but a claim about the ways in which modern life constitutes human beings as individuals. Or, when Giddens (1992) writes about the transformation of intimacy, he explores a wide range of converging phenomena to argue that intimacy has become linked to the establishment of equal, discursively-negotiated, rights-based rather than traditional, role-based, hierarchical relationships (even while he recognizes that not all relationships will take this form, and that traditional forms will persist). At issue here is how to capture the broad trends that are constitutive of modernity.

Clearly, research has yet to deliver on the promise to undertake historical analysis of mediatization across domains at a similar level of abstraction and over a similar timescale (not merely decades, but centuries or even millennia!) to that of the other metaprocesses much discussed in social theory. This would mean interpolating media analysis into the larger story of modernity, something that media studies has sporadically attempted but not yet solidly achieved – even within a Western frame. As we argued in our critical afterthought, this will likely involve arguing on at least three timescales:

- centuries, for at the heart of mediatization theory is an argument about the changing contribution and growing importance to modernity of particular socio-technological mediations (both institutional and cultural);

- recent decades, for what has galvanized interest in mediatization is the recent intensification of mediation processes in an age of global connectivity and radical instability; and

- millennia, since periods of mediatization may come and go, taking different forms, with arguably no single linear directional narrative across human history to be uncovered.

As we further discussed in our critical afterthought, it is likely that mediatization will take rather different forms in different domains. One difference concerns the mode of operation (or form of power) instantiated in different domains and its relation to publicity (itself necessarily mediated). Domains such as law, science, art and business have long established highly rationalized systems of specialist expertise, along with respected institutions that protect their autonomy. So as high modernity (in the West, roughly from the late eighteenth century) came to prioritise public accountability to an increasingly literate and educated public, the media proved a controversial intrusion, with clashes of values to be strategically repelled in various ways. But in the domains of civil society, sport, politics, religion and education, each of which depends for its intrinsic operations on establishing a close relationship with the public, the door to mediatization and the potency of media logics could never be closed, however protective they might be of their professional norms, publicity being core to their success. Mediatization across domains, therefore, takes different forms, as the case studies in Lundby (2014) show, and as further research could usefully explore.

If it is held that mediatization is a societal metaprocess of the same order as globalization, individualization, etc., then one is bound to ask, what are the criteria for claiming something as a societal metaprocess (rather than, more mundanely, a social process)? One way, as discussed above, is to distinguish historical transformations from social change, implying that it takes a metaprocess to bring about a transformation. To claim mediatization is a metaprocess means, then, (1) *evidencing* the claim that media change has substantially contributed to societal transformations across several domains, and (2) countering the claim from *parsimony* that already well-established theories of societal metaprocesses are sufficient in explaining how this has occurred. Since a century of social science research has gone into identifying what Giddens (1991) calls the contours of modernity, it seems reasonable to set a high bar to admitting further members into the list of societal metaprocess. And if this bar is judged to have been attained, then a further challenge arises: (3) *explaining* the relation between mediatization and other metaprocesses in charting the transformations of modernity.

Finally

In our response to the debate about the theory of mediatization, we have weighed the arguments of its proponents and critics. We started by rejecting those criticisms that made a narrow or reductionist reading of claims about mediatization insofar as these foreclose prematurely on a set of new ideas that are potentially worthy of further exploration in media studies. We have given more attention to some of the fundamental questions that critics have asked about mediatization.

We noted in particular that controversy centres on the claim that mediatization is a societal metaprocess of the order of globalization, individualization and others. To substantiate this claim would require an ambitious and evidenced account of socio-historical change over centuries; one would also expect to see such an account recognized beyond media studies as a valuable contribution to the analysis of

modernity on which scholars in other disciplines draw when examining the diverse domains now supposedly mediatized.

Since media studies can only be said to be at the very start of such an ambitious task, it is worth pausing to consider whether we truly have the stomach for it. Understandably, most researchers will prefer not to relocate their ongoing research from an established to a new framework, while for others the absorbing task of studying 'the new' leaves little energy to locate this within a longer history. For ourselves, we are inclined towards cautious enthusiasm for the idea, for locating the history of media and mediation within the wider history of social change is an important task. And we recall the excitement surrounding the heyday of work on globalization in which there was just such a collective and cross-disciplinary effort to reinterpret and newly integrate existing work collated across time and place in order to understand globalization as a metaprocess of modernity.

In our 2014 critical afterthought we argued that mediatization is best understood, at least in its present formulation, as a *sensitizing concept* that guides empirical research and the interpretation of findings rather than as either (ambitiously) a new paradigm or (modestly) a middle-range theory in competition with others. Now, however, we sense the promise of mediatization as a *research programme*. As Imre Lakatos (1983: 6) put it:

> One must treat budding programmes leniently: programmes may take decades before they get off the ground and become empirically progressive. Criticism is not a Popperian quick kill, by refutation. Important criticism is always constructive: there is no refutation without a better theory.

Thus we position the claims about mediatization as opening up an enabling and flexible research framework, beginning with necessarily untested assumptions as the foundation of the research, to which can be attached a range of different theories with varying empirical commitments. Each theory could be examined, evidenced and, indeed, criticized in the way that Deacon and Stanyer (2014) do, but this does not simply lead one to accept or reject the overall research programme or its core assumptions. For a Lakatosian research programme, other kinds of evaluative criteria apply than testing hypotheses; for instance, parsimony of explanation, stimulation of new research questions and insights, integration of previously unrelated bodies of knowledge, and an adequate explanation of the relations among the parts.

Thus we end by inviting sceptics of mediatization to articulate their critique constructively and by reference to a careful reading of the now sizeable body of writing on this concept and the new possibilities it opens up. And we call on proponents of mediatization – along with others keen to understand social and media change within modernity – to consider:

- whether and how existing research on media's changing role within a variety of domains can be productively reinterpreted within a mediatization frame;

- the implications of such work for existing theories, including in those of other disciplines; and

- how to advance analysis of the relations between mediatization and the other metaprocesses of modernity.

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