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**‘Mediatization’:
Media Theory’s Word
of the Decade**

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Abstract

This short commentary looks at aspects of the debate about the term ‘mediatization’, paying particular attention to recent, cross-referring exchanges both in support of the concept and critical of it. In the context of its widespread use, it suggests that continuing questions need to be asked about the conceptual status of the term, the originality of the ideas it suggests and the kinds of empirical project to which it relates.

Keywords

mediatization, theory, politics, influence, institutional change

No term has received more extensive attention in recent media theory than ‘mediatization’. Often heralded as a route to exciting new insights into the study of the relationship between the growing importance of the media and shifts in a range of institutional and cultural structures, it has also been subject to varying queries as to its definition, application and relation to existing terms and perspectives. Here, Deacon and Stanyer (2014) have perhaps provided the most direct critical appraisal, generating in the process a range of responses, and I shall give attention to the terms of their continually valuable critique later. In a brief, clear overview of the notion in *Media Theory*, Terry Flew (Flew, 2017: 51), rightly stressing the political dimension, although not exclusively so, notes a core proposition that ‘changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are increasingly dependent upon media and

conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception' (following in part Mazzolini and Schulz, 1999). By no means would everyone using the notion agree to the terms employed here, but then finding agreement as to definitions and application presents quite a challenge.

Like many others, I have frequently encountered the term in reading across the field in the last decade, sometimes within research of substantive quality on various topics, sometimes in work less impressive. A number of uses have inclined towards the portentous, stunned by the new theoretical vistas opened up, while others have seen it as a fruitful basis upon which to conduct the kinds of exercise in 'refinement' which have a tendency to give the impression of conceptual progress while effectively circling around the same spot. As a journal editor, I have also often encountered it in what we might call 'token' mode – thrown into a sentence, an abstract or even a title, without definition or clear use, in the hope of indicating an attractive topicality, a sense of the theoretical 'cutting-edge', beyond that carried in the main body of a manuscript. Deacon and Stanyer (2014) note this kind of usage too, referencing it in their survey of journal articles using the term from 2002-2012. Across all these encounters, including those with work contributing to debate, I have yet to be convinced that the idea offers any significant new approach to analysis and understanding of media-societal relations beyond that which we had before the notion came into common usage. What can we now think about that was not possible before? That this is not a straight case of intellectual fraud or mass deception I can readily agree, since many advocates and users have shown their originality and perceptiveness in previous and concurrent work, including work in which the term is employed. However, just how this notion has become so central to discussion on media theory, in the process effectively hi-jacking some lines of research that had seemed to be getting along quite well without it, seems to me to deserve yet another note of comment, albeit quite a short one.

I want to develop my account by identifying a number of points around which key issues and questions gather. Given the size of the literature that has now grown around this topic, on the edge of requiring a monthly audit, my approach is necessarily a sharply selective one as well as one acutely aware of the modest levels of

originality now available to any general commentary on this theme. The selectivity extends to its citations, in which I pay particular attention to recent exchanges in the journal *Media, Culture and Society*, where a number of key advocates and critics of the idea have developed their views in close cross-referencing. So whatever value this note of comment may have, it is certainly not as a 'literature review', although many of the papers which I cite performed, in part, this function at their time of publication.

I. The distinction from 'mediation'

As Flew describes, a good deal of effort has been placed, certainly in the earlier phase of writing on the theme, into distinguishing 'mediation' from 'mediatization'. 'Mediation' can be viewed as essentially a loose, descriptive term, indicating the processes and modes through which the media extensively act as the means for a very wide range of perceptions, knowledge and feelings to be circulated in modern societies. Their *constructive* role in the business of effectively 'brokering' aspects of reality is often variously emphasised to avoid a simplistic notion of *relay*. Although there have been some attempts to give 'mediation' a tighter, more ambitious theorisation (as always, a move towards italicization indicating the higher goals!), the continually wide range of applications, connecting back to earlier usages (as in the sense of 'intermediary') has worked against this, acting as a kind of gravitational tug on a distinctive theoretical identity. However, what the word points to, across a diversity of uses, is an aspect of media activities completely different from the ideas of shifts in the *organisational order* of political and public life indicated by 'mediatization'. I believe that this is also a loose, descriptive term, the 'heading' for certain kinds of change – in need of immediate work at 'sub-heading' level to save it from a banal obviousness. However, its emphasis on shifts in structural media-social contexts and relations rather than on the processual character of media practices as constituents of perception and knowledge is such that it is difficult to imagine a serious confusion occurring except at the primary level of word identification. What a stress on the error of confusion is often used to suggest, however, is a relative neglect of questions about media-related shifts in the broader socio-political order compared with questions about media representation. How far has such neglect actually occurred?

2. Media and societal order

Certainly, within political communication studies, there has been for some time a substantial strand of work which, rather than taking a classic ‘effects and influence’ approach to media-society relations (tracking the consequences of *output*), has been concerned to examine the way in which the political system itself, and political practices, have changed as a result of the perceived need to accommodate/adapt to, and indeed, use and if possible pre-empt, the range of ‘media logics’. A classic text, one with a broader perspective than the directly political, is of course the widely referenced Altheide and Snow (1979), which sought to explore the implications of media centrality for the working structures and practices of social institutions some 30 years before the present ‘mediatization’ debate began. Indeed, the question of how politics may be changing as a result of increasing media centrality became perhaps one of the central questions of political communication studies internationally, with Mazzolini and Schultz (1999) giving close attention to the process in what is still the most cited publication on the topic. Questions about media-related shifts in other areas, including the military, healthcare and education, were also pursued. In a collection I co-edited in 2003 with the title *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (Corner and Pels, 2003) the question was explicitly engaged from a number of different perspectives alongside an attempt to track the changing styles of political publicity and political expression. In our introduction, we drew the distinction between ‘politicised media’, seen as an imbalance in the direction of a circumscribed media system, and ‘mediatised politics’, seen as a situation in which politics has ‘become colonised by media logics and imperatives’ (2003: 4). This was an indicative rather than theorised use of the term, of course, and it underplayed the growing significance of social media for political culture, but questions can be raised about just what degree of clear progress has been made beyond the earlier set of perceptions and arguments to which our book was just one (rather late and partly derivative) contribution. This is not to make the case for no progress at all, since both empirically and conceptually a development of previous understanding about the broader ‘adaptation’ of social institutions and practices to media systems has occurred. It has necessarily extended to the specificities of social media but has hardly brought about the Copernican shift that is sometimes implied by ‘mediatization’ enthusiasts (and it is still, largely, ‘previous understanding’). I shall

return to this central question of the new perspectives revealed through use of the concept in a later section.

3. The 'singularity' of -izations

Although there have been a number of attempts to pluralize a sense of the time-scales, specific sectors and kinds of consequence involved, mediatization has inevitably often become reduced, if only by implication rather than by argument, to a broad process of slow transformation, whatever the sub-level variations (such as those indicated by referring to different phases of change). Few notes how critics have pointed to the problem with a singularised 'media' at work here (and a consequently singular 'media logic'), a problem which has been recognised and responded to by at least some of those championing the idea. Clearly, adaptation to social media introduces a range of variables beyond those involved in relating to 'mass media'. He also identifies the risk of a conflation of very different dimensions of political and social life; some tightly institutionalized and some far more informal, some requiring to develop specific media polices regarding use of the media as a matter of strategy, some subject to a range of indirect, and often conflicting, shaping pressures. Of course, to give 'too much' recognition to variations across sectors and across timescales, as well as across media forms, would risk reducing the theoretical status of mediatization as a candidate 'paradigm', instead positioning it as a useful *descriptive* label for a range of very diverse shifts. This is a tension played out at points across a number of contributions to the debate, if sometimes implicitly. A related issue is that of scale, or of the degrees of 'mediatization' found (whatever the criteria that might be used to define these in relation to an idea of an end state).

4. The case for a new concept

Before examining in more detail recent exchanges about the definition and use of the term, I want to look more closely at the case put forward for its value. Here, Couldry and Hepp's (2013) editorial to a special issue of *Communication Theory* is excellent in its directness and clarity. On its first page it notes how the concept has:

...emerged as the most likely "winner" in a race between many terms, all cumbersome and ambiguous to varying degrees – mediatization, medialization, mediation – that have been coined to capture somehow

the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organisation
(social, political, cultural, economic) of media...(191)

There is a nice frankness both in the suggestion that an international competition has been going on (although one might think ‘medialization’ was handicapped right from the start!) and recognition of the ‘cumbersome and ambiguous’ nature of all the competitors. But why is new ‘coinage’ required? Here, the authors identify a deficit in existing media research. This is a failure to attend to general contexts and to concentrate instead on ‘accumulating more and more specific studies’ (191) within which particularity displaces any sense of general process. I have indicated that this deficit does not seem to exist in anything like the degree suggested, with particular reference to political communication, although I think the argument could be made across most areas of media research, certainly over the last 20 years. In response to this drift into particularity, the authors argue, ‘mediatization’ will offer an ‘integrative concept’ for a newly ‘internationalized’ field (192). That the term should be seen as part of a broader shift, involving expansion and international self-consciousness, in media research more generally is interesting, suggesting a term whose benefits are not simply conceptual but *institutional*, helping to connect previously divergent groupings, to provide a productive heading for boundary-spanning research initiatives. This is made explicit in the later remark that there is an ‘increasing institutionalization’ of research which seeks to capture ‘the wider consequences of media’s embedding in everyday life’ (195) and which needs a new concept in order to break decisively away from the ‘influence’ paradigm in the kind of attention it gives to the relation between ‘changes in media and communications’ and ‘changes in culture and society’ (197). What I find notable here is the very general, indeed gestural level, at which the case for ‘mediatization’ as a notion indicating a broad re-framing of research priorities and approaches is made. At times, it seems almost as if a strenuous case is being developed by rhetorical force alone, an impression compounded by the wide variations of usage to which Couldry and Hepp themselves helpfully point.

This problem of generality is perhaps the key problem identified by Deacon and Stanyer (2014), who see the success of the concept as owing extensively to its very lack of discriminatory power, its function as a ‘container in which different things

can be placed' (1039). They go so far as to describe the term as a 'pseudo-universal', indicating that it is a concept 'without boundaries' which performs an 'allusive function' only (1040). They see a 'solution' to present circumstances as lying in the taking of either of two actions – the move of the idea downwards so that it is a 'middle level' concept with more defined indicators for the purposes of analytic differentiation, or (less neatly) the development of 'connected concepts' at lower levels of abstraction, the better to support analysis and conceptual refinement. A second area of problems they identify are those concerning the historical and historiographic aspect of mediatization as a proposed research perspective: in what ways does mediatization have to be researched historically and across what time-spans are its shifts to be plotted?

In what is generally a measured response, Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015) defend the notion as indicating a 'paradigm shift' in media research, noting nevertheless that 'we are still at the early stages of this theoretical endeavour' and that 'empirical work firmly rooted in the mediatization concept is still relatively scarce' (315). They reject the accusation that media-centricity must follow, stressing the connections that must be made with other domains and disciplines (this essentially being placed as an imperative for the future rather than anything achieved to date). They argue for a more subtle and complex set of relations between media and social change than, they feel, Deacon and Stanyer suggest is presumed in mediatization research and, on the question of historicity, agree with the central importance of this dimension, noting a present division in mediatization studies between those which essentially focus on relatively recent media developments and those which see the importance of going back, perhaps to the 'beginning of humanity' (319). Finally, they dispute the perceived problem of conceptual status, seeing no general difficulties with operating the idea at both 'context sensitive' levels as well as at the level of a 'general analytic frame' (320). They finish, in part echoing an argument in Couldry and Hepp (2013), by noting the way in which 'fundamental questions' have been neglected as a result of the 'ongoing specialization of the research field' (321). Overall, this is a response which mixes attempts at rebuttal with part-concessions but which, even in some of the terms of its defence, not only leaves in position many of the question marks placed by Deacon and Stanyer but serves to generate new ones, including about the proposed working relationship with other strands of media inquiry and with other

disciplines (a point brought out in the brief note of reply by Deacon and Stanyer, 2015). It is clearly the case that continuing uncertainties about conceptual level and historical frame figure centrally in later exchanges, as I shall show in the next section.

5. Societal metaprocess, paradigm or sensitizing concept?

Perhaps one of the most crisp and productive of recent contributions comes from Lunt and Livingstone (2016), connecting both with the Deacon and Stanyer critique (2014, 2015) and the response by Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015), as well as with other writings. Their commentary starts as a qualified defence of the notion (an idea ‘worthy of further exploration’, 462) but becomes, if indirectly, a very cogent questioning of large parts of the claims-making offered in support of the concept. At the centre of their argument is a concern with the need for cross-disciplinary research, not just research from a base in media studies, ‘in ways too rarely attempted’ (463). This sense of an idea which cannot develop properly within the empirical and theoretical boundaries of media research alone, is developed alongside a recognition that a good deal of what is being indicated under ‘mediatization’ has strong linkage with a ‘host of long-established media theories’ (464), connections not always clarified or even recognised. Perhaps their key question concerns the mooted status of the idea as indicating a ‘metaprocess’ within the larger analysis of modernity, alongside ‘globalization’ for instance (a position which a number but by no means all proponents have suggested). They note that it seems reasonable to ‘set a high bar’ for adding to the list of societal metaprocesses, with an added challenge being that of ‘explaining the relation between mediatization and other metaprocesses in charting the transformations of modernity’ (468). In their strongest concluding comment, they observe that to secure the ‘metaprocess’ idea ‘would require an ambitious and evidenced account of socio-historical change over centuries’, an account which would be recognised ‘beyond media studies’ and applied in other disciplines (468).

This seems to me to place the further development of the notion in a very useful context, somewhat cooling down the excited sense of breakthrough which has frequently been expressed and making firm claims about the need not just for more empirical work (including historical work) but for work that not only travels and is validated across the disciplinary boundaries but is developed across those boundaries.

Perhaps the validation of its ideas across such boundaries is not such an unfamiliar challenge for media studies, which has often imported ideas from other fields but has a rather less impressive track record when it comes to the export business (and this at a time when many disciplines are increasing the attention they pay to media and communication in developing their research agendas). In a coda which I find less convincing than the main line of argument, the authors refer back to an earlier paper (Livingstone and Lunt, 2014) in which they noted that 'mediatization' could be considered a 'sensitizing concept', guiding empirical research and interpretation (here drawing on Blumer, 1954 and its use by Jensen, 2013) This seemed a quiet move in the direction of a more modest status for the idea. In their 2016 paper, having discussed the 'sensitizing' idea again, they continue this vector of travel when they say they would now rather choose to see it as a 'research programme', one which opens up 'an enabling and flexible research framework' (468) to which different theories and empirical projects could be attached. This is a collegially positive way to invite both further discussion and research as to the idea's 'promise' across contested terrain but the accommodating looseness of the terms contrasts a little with the firm line on conceptual status taken in the main section of their piece. Perhaps, though, the unfussy directness of the framework/enabling role is preferable to deploying the delimited category of 'sensitizing function'.

The route ahead?

One of the things that those taking diverse positions might agree on is that further serious application of the term, including in historical work, will be valuable in showing the originality of the theorisations it allows when engaging with diverse data. Continuing dispute at the conceptual level will continue, of course, and here I think Lunt and Livingstone offer a useful marker as to the issues which it should address as well as the tone in which it should address them.

I will conclude by reference to one of the latest contributions to the debate (Ekstrom et al., 2016), published after Lunt and Livingstone's assessment. This also works with the sense of a more 'open agenda' being desirable, noting the foreclosures which have sometimes appeared. For instance, the authors pursue a theme I raised earlier, of how writers arguing for the distinctiveness of the mediatization approach can offer 'a caricature of mainstream research' as displaying a commitment to

particularity which displaces attention to general social contexts (1094). They note that an examination of current work internationally shows this charge (one made in Couldry and Hepp, 2013, as well as by others) not to be substantiated, going on to comment that:

...if agreed that the concept of mediatization refers to the various ways in which media shape social and cultural transformations, it has to be *recognised that a large group of scholars do research on mediatization without making use of the concept* (1094, emphasis added).

Ekstrom and his colleagues set ‘three tasks’ for future studies, all connected with empirical inquiry – historicity, specificity and measurability. The first of these strongly connects with the recommendations of Lunt and Livingstone, the second seeks to examine more closely media specificities and context specificities, and the third engages with questions about the kinds of qualitative and quantitative data that might be variously applied in research. All the points relate back to the earlier discussion of Deacon and Stanyer (2014). Despite their several reservations as to the current situation, however, they finish by noting how the promise of a ‘vital research field’ can be realized with further development. It seems to me that they offer no grounds whatsoever for situating the term as central to a distinctive ‘field’; indeed most of their commentary undercuts such a notion. What perhaps is at work here, at the end of a paper with shrewd and clear recommendations, is the sheer pull of the ‘legitimacy’ of the idea as this has now been established in parts of the research community (revealingly, and connecting with the earlier point on this issue, they note positively its ‘institutionalization’ through such measures as it becoming a permanent section within the activities of the European research network, ECREA).

In conclusion, I want to make it clear that I have no problems with the use of the term ‘mediatization’ to indicate a dimension of media-social-historical change that needs further direct attention. This dimension concerns the deeper social penetration of modes of ‘media awareness’ and ‘media relatedness’, following recognition that we now ‘live in’ the media rather than ‘live with’ them, to follow Deuze (2012). As it engages with the shifting diversity of social media, it will certainly need to recognise

not only the immense variety but also the often contradictory character of the directions which institutional 'adaptations' take. The attention can be given using a variety of theoretical and methodological tools, some of which are suggested by those seeing themselves as conducting mediatization research, and some by those preferring other categories for indicating the identity of their inquiries. Certainly, recent research on UK governmental archives which attempts to track media-related shifts at the level of 'deep' institutional rather than 'front-of-stage' politics (Garland, Tambini and Couldry, 2018) is original and productive by any measure, although the boldness of its title ('Is the government mediatized?') suggests some of the problems of 'degree' referred to earlier. Similarly, Stig Hjarvard's attempts to explore media-related shifts in religion (among many papers see, for instance, Hjarvard, 2011) opens up original and important sociological perspectives, even if the primary evidence relates more directly to cultural than to institutional shifts as such (tracking institutional change raises questions of access as well as of method, the challenge of which all researchers recognise).

Useful as a broad descriptor as it might be, however, what the term does *not* satisfactorily indicate is any kind of theory, meta-theory, paradigm or even research framework with a clear, independent identity. That such an intensive literature should have surrounded it, in its abstract wrangles at points resembling the character of a dispute in medieval theology, is quite astonishing. What does it say about the current state of media theory that this has happened? Is the explanation, or part of it, that we are looking at a research field in significant parts of which there is a longing for a new 'ization', one capable of 'working at altitude' so to speak, and particularly one that is self-generated rather than adopted from elsewhere in social theory?

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