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**On the Medialization of the World  
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Explorations between the Poles of  
Conceptual Politics in Medial  
Infrastructures and Concept-analytical  
Differentiations**

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**Abstract**

Descriptions and analyses in both media studies and communication studies correspond to a broad spectrum of terms, descriptive modalities, and ways of thematization. These terminologies and perspectives are partly overlapping but also distinct as regards histories and preferences in various academic contexts. Some expressions also serve as guiding metaphors, generic terms or catchwords with programmatic or paradigmatic claims. Medialization and mediatization are among these expressions that have achieved a high degree of popularity especially in German scholarly discourse. In this paper, we first examine some aspects of the politics of concepts of corresponding discourses in German media and communication studies. In contrast to synonymous or all-inclusive uses of the terms, we argue for a conceptual differentiation and constructive coexistence that can prove fruitful for both theoretical and empirical research.

**Keywords**

medialization, mediatization, medial change, media theory, communications, politics of concepts, conceptual analysis

**I. On the medial impregnation of cultural studies and social sciences**

In recent years, references to the media, their cultural and technological dynamics and the communicative infrastructure provided by them have gained enormous

importance in discursive contexts of social and human sciences. ‘Mediality’ or ‘media’ are grounding even the most conventional worldview and impregnating most socio-theoretical diagnoses of the present. Discourses in the humanities and social sciences are almost automatically interspersed with textual fragments from the field of media studies, which seem to be part of the rhetorical inventory by now.

The terms ‘medialization’ and ‘mediatization’ are part of this inventory, especially in German scholarly discourse on which we are focusing in this article. However, there are diverse and often synonymous uses of the terms and to our knowledge there is no commonly accepted distinction. In this situation, demands of clarification beyond rhetorical gestures can most likely be satisfied in specialized discourse communities. But they are hard to accomplish in interdisciplinary contexts.

The following examination of the terms ‘medialization’ and ‘mediatization’ does not aim at a comprehensive historical semantic analysis that takes into account aspects of factual history, problem history, or the history of ideas, metaphors or disciplines. A differentiated “history of words, meanings, terms, consciousness, ideas, mind, motifs, reception, intellect, society, culture, media, discourse, mentality or fascination” (sensu Müller & Schmieder, 2016: 20) that includes “research on *figurae*, historical epistemology, political language analysis, history of cultural memory and *memoria* research” (ibid.) is beyond the scope of this essay. The same applies to a comparative, inter- or transnationally oriented investigation of the two terms against the background of disciplinary institutionalization dynamics of media and communication studies in different countries.<sup>1</sup>

We will first focus on aspects of the politics of concepts which have been neglected in previous debates of German-speaking scholars. While the literature on the medialization and mediatization of politics (cf. for example Bösch & Frei, 2006; Donges, 2008; Schulz, 2011: 19-41; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014)<sup>2</sup> can barely be surveyed, concept-political considerations of the terms ‘medialization’ and ‘mediatization’ are a desideratum. Also in relevant studies on science and research politics, the corresponding basic concepts are not reflected critically in terms of conceptual or discourse politics (cf. Weingart, 2005; Peters et al., 2008; Schäfer, 2008; Scheu et al., 2014).

From a metatheoretical point of view, though, it seems appropriate not only to analyze conceptual aspects of the medial saturation of lifeworlds, various sectors of society, or cultural studies and social sciences, for instance, but also to understand such examinations as a concept-political endeavor.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the fact that, like it or not, every use of a term has a political dimension as well, we want to show that a differentiation of the concepts ‘medialization’ and ‘mediatization’ makes perfect sense and opens up perspectives for developing the subject.

## **2. The alienness of technics and the mediatization of humans**

In his encyclopedia article, Patrick Donges treats medialization and mediatization synonymously with reference to general changes “that are induced or fostered by media and their logics in other social spheres or cultural lifeworlds” (Donges, 2013: 200). He considers micro-, meso- and macro-levels of mediatization and media logics that penetrate into other spheres. In doing so, he distinguishes between processes of mediatization of parts of institutional structures of sub-systems and mediatized sub-systems as possible results. No matter if agents of sub-systems who are facing pressure to adapt to media logics, agents who are initiating processes of mediatization in the hope of a benefit, or conceptualizations of interacting agents without clear cause-effect assumptions are taken as starting point, in all cases the question of “primal scenes” or archetypes remains.

Often, face-to-face communication is referred to as “primal scene” or original form when it comes to dealing with issues of media entering life both in biographical histories of humans and in human history from prehistoric cave paintings to the mass media of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and recent media developments in digital capitalism. Among others, Friedrich Krotz (2012) argues that face-to-face communication constitutes the general basis for all kinds of verbal communication and that gesture, facial expression and posture serve as primeval forms for a possible understanding of pictures (ibid.: 44). In his broad take on mediatization of communication and communicative action as ongoing meta-process, media are relevant in the sense of an interplay of (a) situative aspects of media as experiential spaces and staging devices and (b) structural dimensions of media as techniques and institutions. Against this background, media

“enable and modify communication. They do this in transformed texts in relation to, but also in competition with, face-to-face communication” (ibid.: 44).<sup>4</sup>

Don Ihde argues similarly. In 1979, he begins his reflections on *Technics and Praxis* and the thereby evoked man-machine relationships with the following concept of mediatization through technics:

The universe revealed only through the the (sic!) telescope and microscope retains the ‘near-distance’ of machine mediated experience” (Ihde, 1979: 10).

Without a doubt, it is no coincidence that Ihde, the phenomenologist, illustrates the man-machine relationship by means of optical media, of all examples, and it is only consistent that on this basis he comes to the following conclusion:

Scientific investigation is embodied by technology. However, it is equally important to note that such embodiment is different from the world of the naked perceptions of earthbound man” (Ihde, 1979: 10).

Ihde’s implicit incorporation of the Hegelian concept of objectification and the Marxian motif of alienation without explicitly addressing it just goes to clearly show the enormous gap between subjugation and empowerment, between technologies as subject or technologies as object, that characterizes the man-machine relationship.

And even though Niklas Luhmann was to follow this idea seventeen years later in a prominent and rhetorically quite influential manner – “What we know about our society and indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (Luhmann, 1996: 9) – the characteristic tension remained, namely in that dialectic between “suspected manipulation” (Luhmann, 1996: 9) and the contribution of the mass media to the modernization of societies. That “machine mediated experience” (Ihde, 1979: 11) has been ambiguous practically from the beginning since it changes – like most disruptive or paradigmatic innovations – between apocalypse and salvation.<sup>5</sup> No matter which perspective is preferred on an individual basis, the decisive factor is that it is always inhered by a distinctive impulse for power, and it is currently more uncertain than ever who will hold the position of power – humans or technology.

At the same time, using the notion of the “difference between mediated and unmediated types of experience” (Ihde, 1979: 11) reveals the implicit assumption that technologies and thus also media were reversible historical interventions, since otherwise the expression ‘unmediated experience’ would be a redundant as well as irredeemably kitschy recourse to a romanticized idyll. The presumption of a normatively connoted natural state which is supposed to be distinguished as against a medial and technical reality that is either inhospitable or paradisaal, depending on the perspective, invariably leads to the conclusion that the intervention of technics and media is the reason why the power issue comes up in the first place. Thus, if technology may be factored out historically retroactively, as it were, then its power effect is always a subject of choice too: in that case, subjugation or personal sovereignty may be regulated through the collective handling of technologies and media. And media studies have put precisely this openness of choice at the basis of their considerations.

[...] I may distinguish direct or ‘in the flesh’ relations as those which are simply non-technological:

Human -- World

but those which are mediated, at least in the first instance, will include in the correlation in some way [...] an instrument. And as the term, ‘mediation’, suggests, the first instance is one which places the instrument in mediational position:

Human -- instrument -- World (Ihde 1979: 18).

But Ihde’s definition, which comes along somewhat innocently and emphasizes the medial and also mediating position of (media) technics, has to be conceived from a pre-technical status quo, and at that moment mediatization also brings up a power issue which would not even exist without technology. Yet in the context of the philosophy of technics, the power issue belongs to the standard repertory of reflection, and what is more, the response to it is almost a requirement that makes the philosophy of technics possible. In this respect, the abolition of technical alienation in human self-awareness (*Selbsterkenntnis*) represents the subcutaneous agenda of the philosophy of technics. The “non-neutrality of instrument mediation” (Ihde, 1979: 26), though, –

which, by the way, the philosophy of technics shares with the constitutive assumption of media studies, namely the non-neutrality of media – can be interpreted quite ambivalently in connection with the power issue, precisely as alienation or as facilitation, or rather as disempowerment or as empowerment.

This basic ambivalence of the power vector, which is constitutive of the philosophy of technics, represents the horizon against which mediatization and medialization each establish themselves. In the case of mediatization, the orientation of the power vector is not in question anymore; it withdraws, as it were, to Ihde's romanticizing starting position of a non-mediated natural state and then conceives of mediatization as a story of alienation, analogously to Habermas' colonization of the lifeworld. Medialization, on the other hand, foregoes defining such an orientation of the power vector and has always taken into account the irreversibility of the media-historical process, given that one cannot simply quit what Ihde calls the 'technosphere'.<sup>6</sup> And also the presumed natural state necessarily remains a mere reconstruction, a regulatory principle constructed *ex post*, whose qualities continue to be contested no matter what. However, medialization can do without such backward projections and retroactive determinations. The medialized world is a world which, although it knows innumerable differences, does not need that natural state free from media and technics. Therefore, the medialized world can claim validity for all those worlds, ever since the beginning of media – in other words, language, sounds and images – and that is nothing less than everything with cultural relevance. In contrast, the mediatized world inevitably also knows that status quo ante which must have coped without media. Nevertheless, this speculative place has no other function but to point the way for the power vector – for it would be very difficult to find another plausible explanation for the deflection of the power vector which the mediatized world necessarily assumes.

### **3. Conceptual politics and the added value of semantic migration**

Terms which are used outside of their original theoretical field inescapably have transitory characteristics. Far from their initial academic context, they can find their way into new theoretical settings quite effortlessly at first. There, they usually lose their original connections and references but at the same time gain a host of new

connections and linkages, though they are not related anymore to the concept as such but essentially leave it alone. Thus, through transfer and decontextualization, the term is cut off from its initial conceptual dynamics and thereby communicatively stabilized in a new way. At the same time, the simultaneous de- and recontextualization opens the term up, meaning it can be charged with new references and connections any time. In other words, the transferred term becomes reactive again in the new contexts. But as soon as terms continue their migration further and leave scientific contexts altogether, entering for instance everyday contexts or political distinctions, the sealing-off against conceptual dynamics intensifies even more. This does not mean that the term remains static, but in this setting it now functions as a metaphor and political tool, not as a term anymore. However, metaphors do no longer owe their compatibility to theoretical references, but solely to their potential for analogy. Thus, the dynamics shift from term and theory to analogy and matching, and not until then do terms unfold political potential and become significant beyond their initial constructive context.

The migration and gradual decontextualization of a term have a sustained impact on its horizon of meaning: terms lose their original theoretical meaning in the course of the migration process and gain legitimacy and political significance. The interest of science in legitimacy and political significance is far from low, although this goal comes at no insignificant theoretical costs. Social recognition and access to resources in fields surrounding cultural studies and social sciences are largely dependent on the political purport of their concepts and symbolic constructs. The competition between terms, which may seem rather inconsequential in theoretical contexts, is all but innocent for transitory terms. That is why the formation of scientific terms is never just about scientific function but about gaining added value.

Such speculations become particularly clear when the scientific benefit of a term is fairly slim because perfectly appropriate terms are already available. In other words, when semantic surplus is generated, there is no other conceivable consideration than precisely this speculation for added political or legitimacy value and hence the access to resources and social recognition. And this is exactly the case with the terms mediation, mediatization and medialization, although it is a different case for each of



the three formations, and the differences are primarily related to the implicit power vector.

Ihde's mediation, that means, his concept of the "tool as mediator" (Ihde, 1979: 28ff.), inheres something like a fundamental reconciliatory impulse. This notion of reconciliation with the technical reality is no big surprise as it represents a kind of standard motif in the philosophy of technics: the theoretical compensation of technology-induced alienation. But the endlessly recurring model of technology-mediating self-knowledge, on the other hand, is more than just an indicator of compensatory reflection. That in turn points to the legitimatory function which this concept itself is based on. And this concept of legitimatory reconciliation corresponds quite well to the chosen term, so that at least no semantic confusions are to be expected. The fact that this idealistic as well as affirmative model of mediation could win little acceptance in media studies can be explained by the media-critical origin of media studies, which had quite a struggle learning how to reconcile with their subject itself.

The construction of the concept of 'mediatization' reveals the intensity of the speculative impulse not least in the semantic effort which goes into the generation of this concept: not only does it produce terminological surplus, but it also operates with a term which already has its definition in the disciplines of history as well as sociology and which therefore must first of all be redefined. From a strategic viewpoint, such meaning shifts by way of redefinition represent a relatively risky process, and most of the time such risk-taking is known to happen for a reason.

The term 'medialization,' on the other hand, operates on the comparatively simple strategy of forming a neologism which is not burdened with any semantic legacy, but can work with a *tabula rasa*. For such semantic burdens always constitute a problem, no matter if they can be employed affirmatively, as in the case of mediation, or if they first and foremost have to be erased, as in the case of mediatization. But the difficulty which is the price for the freedom to define neologisms is that, first of all, they have to secure their position in the semantic market because they may raise a claim to a certain plausibility at best, but not to currency.

The fact that as many as three terms were developed for one phenomenon, albeit one that is fairly vague, depending as it does on divergent descriptions, suggests a science-political or strategic dimension of the different science-semantic approaches: on the one hand, pointed descriptions of cultural, social and technological developments can contribute to a better understanding of complex phenomena and – precisely because of their pronounced differences – provide important impulses for future research. On the other hand, they can also contribute to ignoring relevant contexts and spreading, in a largely automatized process, abridged accounts which may correspond more to power-political claims – that is, the assertion of particular interests – than to differentiated forms of debate in and with more or less autonomous scientific ‘fields’.

In media and communication studies we can currently make the converse observation, however; namely the establishment of synonyms without any discernible added conceptual value, albeit with the assurance of a legitimatory or political gain. Uncertainties and unclear overlaps frequently take the place of pointed differences, which is unlikely to contribute much to an understanding of the matter in question, but rather complicates a clarification of the term, if not defeating it altogether. This is how conceptual politics ensure that terms become artificially dysfunctional. In view of the currently observable enormous dynamics within the media system and media culture, such a conceptual strategy initially seems rather counterproductive, creating the need to explain the strategy itself.

#### **4. Difference without differentiation. Science-political motivation of an artificial conceptual difference**

The focus here is on a synonym construction that seems striking from the perspective of the politics of science. The terms in question, medialization and mediatization, mark the current conceptual conflict since Ihde’s concept of mediation passed into oblivion. The central protagonists in this semantic game about the formation of and sovereignty over concepts are media studies and communications. Journalism studies (*Publizistik*) and later communications were inclined from the outset to place media<sup>7</sup> in their own area of competence, and for a long time they barely noticed that cultural studies and media theorists with various disciplinary backgrounds were encroaching upon their territory. But at the end of the 1990s, at the latest, they were suddenly facing

proliferated and, if not self-confident, then at least cheeky media studies in the German speaking area, which boldly and with considerable emphasis raised a claim to a territory thought to be securely theirs, and more, which had even occupied this territory to a large extent. And it is at this point at the latest, namely when subject-specific competences are at stake, that, even before any conceptual transition, the matter becomes serious and therefore politically significant.

Thus, the issues at the center of this terminological rivalry are the marking of claims, recognition and the distribution of resources – and this is where things are getting serious fast and every maximum demand comes in handy. To overstate the case somewhat: it seems that communication studies wants to restore the status quo ante through a kind of semantic counter-reformation, and media studies fail to see why they should recede behind their evidently quite successful reformation and retire back to their traditional areas of the art system. Communication studies often ignores the theoretical findings of media studies, and, conversely, empirical research results of communications are generally the last thing that media studies will notice. At best, some students with an incomplete orientation will dare to do somersaults and mix things which obviously should not belong together at all.

Thus, as soon as hard facts are involved, namely resources, competences and the power of definition, the matter is political, which means it is a power issue. This also means that the levers of the politics of discourse and concepts need to shift into action, and who would know better how to do that than media studies, having sufficiently analyzed the politics of diverse discourses with the help of Foucault. Communication studies is trying to win a territory, driving in linguistic posts which are intended to make forget that the entire field was plowed long ago – even though in a quite different way, and this seems to be the truly interesting point.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, language policy is supposed to erase the time difference and make forget about the backlog.

Not that anything was actually neglected or forgotten, one just remained in his or her terrain. All of this only becomes a problem when either side claims to represent the whole. Both, media and communication studies, were intrusive on surprisingly few occasions, which means they were aware of and respected the authority on the level of the object and its method, but they regard their own particular object and the method committed to it as substantially more important. Thus, at its core, the matter is about

attributions of meaning and their conceptual exposition. Such presumptions and attributions of meaning have a tendency towards absolutization. The only problem of accordingly finalized debates is that at least a part remains undone, and thereby both are on the losing side: The mediatized worlds do not even suspect yet what they might be missing about the medialized world, and it does not look much different vice versa.

This complementary ‘hermeticism’ or sealing off, which is necessary for conceptual politics to become effective in the first place, ultimately has a metatheoretical origin. The academic triad of cultural studies, social sciences and natural sciences is set and as such largely immovable. The various attempts to pursue the dissolution of the triad by establishing a unified science (see for example Neurath, 1936; McGuinness, 1987; Schlosser, 1993) can essentially be assumed to have failed, so that in the end there is no hope for any changes in regard to the schism in the foreseeable future. And in principle, that is not at all necessary, as long as certain rules of coexistence are observed.

Of course, the media are definitely not the only field in which such a metatheoretical disagreement opens up, but in most other cases it is obviously dealt with in a distinctly more relaxed way, which is to say, in the interest of coexistence, or the frictions date so far back that they have virtually lost their divisive force, like in the case of the positivist dispute in sociology.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in regard to social sciences, for example, the conflict occurred in one discipline – in which case there can by definition be no winners – and not between different disciplines, a situation which may create expectations of a possible gain.

In addition, the difference is initially a relatively minor issue: after all, as far as the subject area or the referent are concerned, medialization and mediatization are synonyms, and that means the metatheoretical difference cannot develop primarily in regard to the object. At best, significant differences may be observable as to the methodology. Consequently, the conceptual difference remains artificial, at least as far as the research area<sup>10</sup> is concerned, and even awkward and unfavorable when the focus is on the formation of concepts itself.

It is known that metatheoretical dissent and categorical distinctions are usually accompanied by conceptual politics. A large part of the positivist dispute in German

sociology operated with such “fetish concepts,” as Eco (1994: 19) used to call them, which were then underlaid with a metatheoretical concept. The terms that had thus been upgraded to combat terms subsequently nomadized through the lecture halls and recruited, if not believers, then at least followers. This debate is by no means over for good but at best calmed through a moratorium, and it still has maybe slightly aged, but nevertheless sworn and surprisingly self-assured followers. In some regards it still represents the background of the current debates between phenomenology and critical systems theory, life sciences and post-structuralist gender studies, philosophy of the mind and physiological cognitive science, postcolonial and post-anthropocentric ways of thinking, and between media studies and communications. The latter dispute is relevant all the more since both sides succeeded in inserting their respective essentials in this discourse into the constitutive documents of their disciplines. The indispensable quality of empiricism and the absurdity of speculative thought and any meaning-positing operations (*Sinnsetzungsoperationen*), on the one hand, are as much a matter of course as the contempt for the empirical small-mindedness and the appreciation for socio-cultural constructions of meaning, on the other.

And yet, in the end it is the disagreement which keeps both alive and at the same time keeps them from the need for metatheoretical self-reflection. Both disciplines operate, in striking agreement, almost exclusively affirmatively, in the negative sense of the word. This also has the interesting result that the conflict remains invisible; it peters out, as it were, in a cordon sanitaire that seems to have been drawn around the disciplines. They have settled down within these bounds and hardly ever go beyond them. Some of the few places where this fence has holes and the conflict becomes visible are those fetish concepts. That is because they are to be politicized and used to acquire resources for the discipline and, if possible, move the boundaries and win territories. This is the reason that makes the dispute about concepts so interesting and something completely different from an academic glass bead game.

## **5. Medialization or mediatization?**

The contrast between medialization and mediatization ultimately follows such a combat logic: the term ‘medialization’, as it was coined in cultural and media studies in the German speaking world, referred to the constitutive relevance of mediality and changing medial constellations, particularly to describe the transition of the media

system from a sector of entertainment to an infrastructure constitutive of postmodern societies (Hubig, 1999; Tholen, 1999: 15ff.; Tholen, 2002; Mersch, 2004: 75ff.; Kirchmann, 1998: 45ff. u. 149ff.; Krämer, 2004: 13ff.; Krämer, 2008; Schröter, 2004). Moreover, technical-medial dispositifs and their impact have been considered as well as changing medialities as related to changing media constellations that constitute basic relations of reality, cognition, culture and action. Medialization as a process-oriented take on changing medialities can be elucidated, for example, by explication of the “medial pregnancy” of a specific mediality, a term coined by Reinhard Margreiter (2018: 79) in analogy to Cassirer’s concept of “symbolic pregnancy” (*symbolische Prägung*). Medial pregnancies – such as mimetic-gestural, oral-auditive, typographic, telematic or scopic pregnancies – each “constitute a paradigm of world orientation, a system of several media interacting side by side, with each other and against each other, dominated by a respective leading medium” (Margreiter, 2018: 79).

Even though there is no specific and generally authoritative definition of medialization in the discourses of media theory, the process-oriented reflection on fundamental epistemological, ontological and ethical relevances of changing media constellations and corresponding medialities can be described as the least common denominator. The open concept was reasonably established and widespread, and anthropological, cultural, epistemological and historical dimensions played an important role in respective discourses. In a sense, it represented the ultimate reaction of media studies to the traditional media-forgottenness of cultural studies. However, in the complementary discipline, communication studies, it was not noticed precisely because of the durability of that cordon sanitaire. The debates about a medialization of culture were translated into a fairly mechanically conceived media convergence, which was believed to help gain control of the reorganization of the media system that started at the end of the 1990s (cf. Füssel, 2012).

The convergence hypothesis is a comparatively cautious and circumspect description of a process whose structural socio-cultural consequences began to show more and more clearly. That is why a terminological construct became necessary which could measure up to the scope of the emerging change and at the same time could not coincide with one of the key terms of the neighboring discipline. Otherwise the peaceful coexistence of the disciplines owing to mutual non-cognizance would be

disturbed and the precarious balance would shift in favor of media studies. This science-political constellation gave birth to the term mediatization, and it is precisely its terminological irritation – a term fairly well-known from other contexts is picked up and provided with new content – which uncovers the political rationale and the need behind it.

From the beginning, the act of “making something mediate” (*Mittelbarmachen*) has been encoded as a power issue, and consequently the influence of the media is encoded as a question of power as well. Drawing on Habermas’ variation of the term<sup>11</sup> quickly brings out his critical aspirations. Habermas relates mediatization to institutionalization dynamics and the use of symbolically generalized media (money, power) as well as to the corresponding restrictions on freedoms of action of the members of society. These restrictions become a problem especially when processes of mediatization change into a colonialization of the lifeworld through the systems world (Habermas, 1988: 471).<sup>12</sup> Even if one is not ready to follow Habermas’ diagnostics, it can still be ascertained that the term is rather clearly defined. And the Habermasian background noise, which seems to be remembered even more distinctly in media studies than in communication studies, might have been the reason why media studies did not launch themselves on this term from the beginning. The expression is simply quite easily misunderstood, provided that one is familiar with the relevant contexts, and thus at best conditionally useful and negotiable in scientific contexts. Keeping alive unfortunate, if not counterproductive, constructions requires an external legitimation and it can be found in the imperative: it is meant to be different and therefore a term is imposed upon a system at the cost of much effort.

The fact that, in spite of this, the term is emphatically used by communication studies and empirical social sciences indicates above all the supposed need of science policy. Couldry and Hepp, for instance, point out with reference to the long history of the expression ‘mediatization’ in the German language area and the lecture given by ICA president Sonia Livingstone (2009) at the conference in Montreal in 2008:

More important, it has emerged as the most likely ‘winner’ in a race between many terms, all cumbersome or ambiguous to varying degrees—mediatization, medialization, mediation—that have been coined to capture somehow the broad consequences for everyday life and practical

organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice (Couldry & Hepp, 2013: 191).

The belief – without special consideration of contexts in regard to the classification and history of science – that winners and losers in terminological races can be identified speaks for itself and confirms the interest in conceptual politics.

Thus, what we have here is a constellation characterized by enormous dynamics in the media system and the resulting need for explanation, on the one hand, and the competition between disciplines, on the other. The first flush of excitement may lead to a reaction similar to Hepp and Couldry's and the temptation to let mediatization be followed by majorization, to stay in the terminological tradition. But this would ignore the comparatively firmly established cordon sanitaire between the two disciplines: the proponents of the term medialization will simply not take note of the alleged hegemony of mediatization, and victories acknowledged by no one are not really convincing. That is why both sides are probably waiting in vain for the capitulation of the opposite side, and what is left is first and foremost the stale aftertaste of a terminological fuzziness which ultimately benefits nobody and actually threatens to compromise the scientific reputation of both disciplines.

## **6. Mediatized thinking**

It is well-known that concepts do not only arise from thinking but can occasionally also give it a helping hand, which makes it likely that the newly established term 'mediatization' could be based at least in its approach and to some extent on something like a program.

This is investigated by Knut Hickethier (2010) when he surprisingly unemotionally adopts the term mediatization as an experiment and makes an effort to enrich it, albeit rudimentarily, with content from cultural studies and especially media history: he tries to supplement the communications impulse at least with the media and program history of television. His main concern is to present the enculturation of the medium of television as mediatization, trying to accommodate especially processes of the incorporation and mutual reference of medial forms<sup>13</sup> in this media history of



television. Thus, the enculturation<sup>14</sup> with the characteristic debate between the protagonists that determine it – the apocalyptic and the integrated intellectuals and their hardly less distinctive dynamics of form – adds the cultural studies memory, so to speak, and hence simple basics to the mediatization concept in communication studies. As a consequence, in Hickethier's culture-historical approach, mediatization emerges as a medial processing (*Verarbeitung*) of a however pre-medial reality or, rather, the processing of 'precursor' media. In the course of this, the media system itself does not come into view, but it always faces the threat of being merged into the relation of single media (*Einzelmedien*) or into one medium's potential for processing reality, and this becomes effective no later than in the analysis of the so-called digitalization, or, in other words, the last significant transformation process of the media system for the time being. Thus, Hickethier has had only very limited success at the separation from the cultural event:

Mediatization as a cultural phenomenon thus means a consistently occurring (in historical boosts), improved *fixing of cultural events*, means – through the fixing and the associated replication – a quantitative dissemination of medialized culture, means a *restructuring of cultures in ever new medial forms* (Hickethier, 2010: 92f.; italics in orig.).

To say nothing of the terminological mingling, which is an indication that Hickethier, by and large, uses mediatization and medialization synonymously here and that he wants to add cultural substance to the communications perspective on mediatization, Hickethier speculates on a kind of substance change of culture, with media still having to be thought of as an alterity to the cultural sector.

Mediatization of culture means that alongside the original cultural products we have their mediatized versions, and together they form a new *cultural ensemble* of medially differing products with the same or at least similar content: the novel is then accompanied by the film adaptation – or by now several movie versions in the case of prominent works (Hickethier, 2010: 93; italics in orig.).

Obviously, it seems to escape Hickethier that a novel is a media product as well and a differentiation between cultural and medial products rather futile as these cannot be

separated and 'media-free' cultural products have become quite rare in the course of the past two millennia. Hackett's media-historical correction in itself is therefore a proper subject for fairly extensive and fundamental follow-up research.

## **7. Constructive terminological coexistence**

It makes little sense to start a new positivism dispute, the more so as already the first version failed to a large extent because it operated primarily with misattributions<sup>15</sup>, and large parts of communication studies seem to have settled down unquestioningly in their limited cognitive horizon. On the other hand, there are quite a few arguments for the superiority of a cultural studies concept, which probably would not impress the self-image of communication studies in the least. If therefore the race cannot have a definite outcome as neither of the involved terms is likely to disappear from the debate, and the terminological uncertainty threatens to fall back on the involved disciplines in one crucial aspect, namely media dynamics, then it makes perfect sense to semantically sharpen the terminological difference by appropriately dividing the territory and thus defusing the conflict.

Regarding the use of these semantics in the German discourse there are several clarifying efforts of varying quality and reach available. In his concept of mediatization, Krotz (2009), for instance, referring to underlying concepts of communication, differentiates between a "behaviouristic or functional approach" and a "societally or culturally related perspective" (ibid.: 28f.; see also Krotz & Hepp, 2011; Hepp, 2013). Couldry & Hepp (2013) point out a difference between an "institution-theoretical" and a "social-constructivist tradition" in mediatization research (ibid.: 196), while Ampuja et al. (2014) distinguish "strong" from "weak forms" of mediatization theory. The former focus on studying the logics of media and their increasing relevance to institutional developments (cf. Altheide, 2013; Hjarvard, 2008), the latter variety "emphasizes the key role of the media in social change and singles out mediatization as a central 'meta-process' today" (Ampuja et al., 2014: 111).<sup>16</sup> They may find criticism of the idea of "media logics" convincing, but they also consider "weak" concepts of mediatization challenging: "However, the weaker version of mediatization is itself problematic, as its advocates have failed to produce a clear explanatory framework around the concept" (Ampuja et al., 2014: 111; see also Corner, 2018). In their

conclusion, Ampuja et al. (2014: 122) refer to Billig, who in his book *Learn to Write Badly. How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* (2013) gives a skeptical assessment of the discourse on mediatization, among other things (ibid.: 111-114). He especially criticizes the differentiations by Schulz (2004) and, with a view to Lundby (2009), highlights the significance of marketing aspects: “‘Mediatization’ here is more than a word that denotes, rather loosely, large-scale social processes. It is an academic term that functions as a brand label for an approach” (Billig, 2013: 114).

Lundby (2014) has meanwhile published a new structuring suggestion. In his introduction to the comprehensive volume on mediatization research, he distinguishes cultural, material and institutional perspectives which are each further differentiated in regard to the levels of time, technology and theory (see Fig. 1).

Issue of contention	Perspective		
	Cultural	Material	Institutional
Time	Basic practices back to origin of human history	Several historical epochs or recent digital decades	Media-saturated in high/late modernity
Technology	Media as tools in communication	Characteristics of various media	Media logic in institutions
Theory	Social-constructivist, symbolic-interactionist	Medium theory, theories of materiality and space	Structuration, new institutionalism

**Fig. 1: Perspectives and topics of mediatization research according to Lundby (2014: 5)**

Based on conceptual and discipline-political considerations, Meyen (2009) makes the case for the concept of medialization. With a view to empirical investigation possibilities, he argues for:

dispensing with the term mediatization and defining medialization as such reactions in other societal areas which relate to either the structural change of the media system or the general increased significance of mass media communication (Meyen, 2009: 23).

Neuberger (2013) makes a similar argument, and he also distinguishes between two versions, namely:

a broad, medial version of the medialization thesis addressing the technical potential of media, which focuses on the shaping of a message through an

individual medium, and a narrow, systemic version, which considers only the publicist mass media [*publizistischen Massenmedien*], foregrounds the content and inquires about structural effects of journalism in other societal subsystems (Neuberger, 2013: 222).

The goal of his contribution is a socio-theoretically motivated concretization of the concept of medialization “in the systemic version as a one-sided handling of the relation between hetero- and self-reference in favor of the journalistic obstinacy [*Eigensinns*]” (ibid.: 222; italics in orig.).

In contrast, Adolf (2013) argues for a broad understanding of mediatization research, taking into account various approaches to studying the change of communicative practices, forms and formats, processes of adaptation and, in a media-ecological sense, a mediatic turn. He uses the term mediatization, arguing elsewhere – following Schmidt’s (2000) compact concept of media – for the distinction between three research perspectives:

**Social-instrumental notion of the media as communication**

First, mediatization may refer to the extension of human communicative action by ever more functional means of communication. [...]

**Modern-institutional notion of the media as cultural producers**

Second, mediatization is used to put an emphasis on the expansion of people’s increasingly ‘mediated’ access to reality/or their social and natural environment, implying the growing historical importance of the media which become the main interfaces of human experience and knowledge. [...]

**Philosophical notion of the media**

And third, (3) mediatization may take the form of another perspective on the unavoidable and involuntary ‘mediated-ness’ of any human relation with reality representing an old philosophical topic in a new, contemporary guise, namely that ‘real’ (i.e. unmediated) reality is unavailable to human knowing, and that thus all the perceptions of the mind may never be

corroborated against the unsullied factuality of what exists (Adolf, 2017: 23-25; emphases in orig.).

This distinction is plausible in that it also considers philosophical aspects, apart from views from social sciences and cultural studies, and on the whole refers to an integrated overall concept in which symbolic, media-materialistic, organizational, institutional, content-related, communicative and interactional dimensions are thought together in a differentiating manner. The question remains whether and to what extent appropriately differentiated approaches and ways of argumentation can assert themselves in the future when one and the same expression is used for different perspectivalizations, phenomenal domains and dimensions.

We agree with Krotz (2009: 25) and many others in that improved intra-, inter- and transdisciplinary communication possibilities require as coordinated a use of language as possible and clear terminologies for the study of complex media worlds and media cultures. Therefore, we on our part argue for a distinction between processes of medialization and mediatization in due consideration of subject-specific traditions, thematic priorities and task allocations as well as the diverse interdependences and transformation dynamics. Ideally, the thematic or topic priorities correspond to research perspectives (cf. Fig. 2) and not to sectors of society and functional systems such as politics, economy, science, law, learning, education or religion. In this respect, medial dynamics and processes may be entangled and interlaced in quite a few ways with other perspectives on change. That applies, for example, to the medialization of pedagogic processes and the pedagogization of media, the economization of medial developments and the mediatization of economic processes, or the medialization of politics and the politicization of the media.

Thus, while the analysts of medialization want to create awareness of the cultural effects of media and media systems, the power-theoretical view of mediatization is fundamentally different. Today, there is a particular emphasis on “involuntary mediatization” (Adolf, 2014) in the sense of transforming the public and the private and the socio-technical potentials of probability-based regulation. In this regard, the level of informatization of the lifeworld and the consequences for the individual private sphere are not necessarily determined by one’s own forms or styles of (not) using medial communications and information technologies. The probabilistic analysis

of large available quantities of occasionally imperfect data for economic, political or social purposes may correspond to forms of individual concern which could not be experienced without the extensive processing of big data.<sup>17</sup>

	<i>medialization</i>	<i>mediatization</i>
microlevel	medial dimensions of cultural objects and practices, scopes and development potentials of individual actors in medial contexts, change of individual media use and relevance structures, citizens' possibilities for media participation and room for action	relation of individual actors to mass media products, individual strategies of media use and medial adaptability, rationales and peer pressure in social media contexts, media action as an educational means, willingness for submission to media
mesolevel	change of media forms and their relevance to knowledge organization and communication structures, institutional scope of action in the context of media cultural and media technological dynamics of change, media dynamics in institutionalized processes of learning, socialization and education	depiction of media systems as institutional and organizational contexts, forms of institutionalized mediation as <i>Mittelbarmachung</i> , routines of medial surveillance and control, assertion of "media logics" and establishment of structural constraints, loss of data autonomy, submissive expectations of the media industry, authoritarian habitus
macrolevel	change of historical-medial constellations, medial enabling conditions in cultural and social systems, media-epistemological dimensions, autonomy potentials	comparison of power shifts in media societies, medial colonization of parts of the lifeworld and society, hegemonic shifts in media systems

**Fig. 2: Medialization and mediatization – thematic priorities on the micro-, meso- and macrolevel**

Questions on media systems and globalization, or of media cultures and globalization, of media dynamics and social change may generally be cast from the perspectives of mediatization as well as medialization. Questions on digital cultures, the theory and design of medial forms, the epistemology of images and visual culture, media art and digital transformation, media knowledge and media epistemology, collectivity and medial change, connectivism and social media, media literacy and educational robotics, media ethics or the critique of digital reason etc. can only be conceived from the perspective of medialization.

In principle, numerous sectors of society such as politics, sports, education, journalism, economy or science are not exclusively reserved to either mediatization or medialization research. It essentially depends on the chosen research perspective and the thematic priorities. According to our suggestion, mediatization *grosso modo* focuses on those processes and issues which relate to different forms of the institutionalized mediation as *Mittelbarmachung*, the power-based assertion of “media logics” and the establishment of new dependencies. When it comes to media logics themselves, however, it is a question of medialization. Examples of cases of mediatization in institutionalized education are when only or mainly proprietary software packages are supported, or when a specific learning platform is made compulsory for teachers and students of all subjects as the centerpiece of a campus-wide e-learning strategy. Medialization research, on the other hand, deals with the cultural effects of such strategies and their impact on what is viewed as education. At the same time, research operating with a medialization perspective explores media-cultural practices at the interface of formal and informal learning processes in different historical media constellations. It could also refer to medial ‘potential spaces’ for processes of growing up, learning and education which open up beyond industrial strategies of making contingencies invisible.

## **8. Conclusion**

If all changes in processes, phenomena or events which somehow have to do with the diffusion and use of media technologies were considered exclusively from a mediatization perspective, this selective view would lead to a systematic reduction of research perspectives. This fundamental impoverishment of research questions and

perspectives does not necessarily have to go hand in hand with a loss of object areas of research, but it means above all a loss of dimension. The medial world of mediatization is inevitably flat. The same holds true by the way for the world of medialization as well. To make the matter round, so to speak, one is bound to connect the two dimensions. The idea that mediatization leaves nothing to be said does not only require a fairly one-dimensional view of the world and especially the media, it also ignores an entire academic discipline, namely media studies, whose origins, as is known, lie in precisely this ignorance.<sup>18</sup> From a concept-political view, a notorious historical mistake would thus be further prolonged.

In contrast, we suggest distinguishing between medialization and mediatization, especially in view of media-cultural practices, knowledge structures and historic-medial constellations. The proposal for a complementary use of the terms as suggested above can be further elaborated. It enables overcoming artificially isolated dimensions and putting them in appropriate relations as well as making media research a discipline all 'round,' by allowing both holistic and particularistic perceptions of the research area.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Of course, our argument could be further developed in view of the wide range of international work in relevant fields: this would be a challenging task for an edited collection or reference work for a couple of reasons. Firstly, pertinent reference works generally do not attach any particular importance to the distinction between conceptual-analytical and conceptual-political dimensions. Secondly, even comparatively diverse contributions to the history of communication study such as *The International History of Communication Study* (Simonson & Park, 2016) or comprehensive introductions to theories in the field of media and communication studies (cf. Winter et al. 2008) do not expound the problems of conceptual distinctions between medialization and mediatization by considering different discourse communities or paradigmatic backgrounds. In addition, not only medialization and mediatization, but also terms like mediality, mediation, intermediality, cross-mediality, or transmedialization are sometimes used very differently in different academic cultures and language areas.
- <sup>2</sup> For a synopsis of conceptualizations of medialization, mediatization and mediation in communication studies see Steinmaurer (2016: 11-30) and Birkner (2017).
- <sup>3</sup> The same applies for example to narrow and broad notions of 'digitalization' and the corresponding uses with a view to discourse politics and funding policies. However, current funding programs and policies quickly reveal that there is little reason to expect substantial support for reflexively oriented projects that carry out a differentiated evaluation of discourse consequences. This is true regardless of whether the project favors qualitative or quantitative methods of empirical science studies and research strategies of single case analysis, survey, meta-analysis, experiment, evaluation research, field research or practice research. In addition to that, most research institutions as well as researchers do not really like to be the actual subject-matter of study.
- <sup>4</sup> From a media philosophical perspective, this concept of mediatization rather refers to communication and communicative changes than to changes of media and mediality. Accordingly, Krotz (2012: 51-53) advocates for a communicative turn and not for a medial turn in view of the epistemological relevance of changing medial constellations (cf. Margreiter, 1999) and the emergence of transversal media systems (cf. Leschke, 2003). In contrast to Krotz, Siegfried Schmidt (2008) advocates for a description of the fundamental changes "*of our relation to the world and our modes of communication*" in modern media-culture societies in terms of a "*transition from communicativity to mediality*" (ibid.: 95; italics in orig.).
- <sup>5</sup> See also Eco's "Apokalyptiker und Integrierte" (Eco, 1964) in which he describes a process which applies to the enculturation of media in social systems and may probably translate without difficulty to the enculturation of technologies as addressed by Ihde.
- <sup>6</sup> However, Ihde's notion of technologies assuming a "mediational position" (Ihde, 1979: 71) implodes in the very moment that this position claims unexceptional validity and constitutes a new form of technical totality, the "technosphere" (Ihde, 1979: 15): "Clearly, the 'technosphere' contains a presumption towards totality, towards technocracy. It encompasses all dimensions of our relations" (Ihde 1979: 15).
- <sup>7</sup> In contrast to Karmasin (2016) who claims that media culture has "arguably not yet found 'its' science - and vice versa" (ibid.: 18) and that "in any case, it is not media studies" (ibid.), we argue that claims of the priority or exclusive domiciling of the media in empirically oriented communication sciences are a questionable undertaking, not least in view of the history of the discipline. In German speaking countries, this history culminated in the attempt to add to the many instances of renaming the discipline – science of journalism (*Zeitungswissenschaft*), journalism studies (*Publizistik*), communication science (*Kommunikationswissenschaft*) and more recently communication and media studies – a list which in itself is as unique as it is striking. Seeing that we are not dealing with interdisciplinarily oriented

forms of an integrated science that are argued in a differentiated way, this – as in the case of mediatization – is another attempt to redefine a term that is already in place.

- <sup>8</sup> For another example of discourse politics, see Meyen, 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> This dispute, by the way, consisted in little more than inflated inanities, since Popper was hardly the impeccable positivist Adorno thought him to be. For Adorno as well as Popper had more in common than was actually beneficial for such a symbolically charged debate, given that both were determined by a thorough mistrust towards inductive research methods and the primacy of deductive theory construction. The factual differences in sociology as represented by the opposition between empirical and qualitative methods were positioned considerably differently, and they correspond fairly accurately to the methodological opposition between communication and media studies. In this respect, the conceptual conflict between medialization and mediatization represents a problem similar to the positivist dispute in sociology, except that these differences do not become explicit.
- <sup>10</sup> The methodical differences are usually marked by appropriate attributes by way of a secondary differentiation. They do not even affect the process of medialization as such, but maybe the strategies of its description.
- <sup>11</sup> Hepp also traces back the meaning of mediatization to this variation of the term (Hepp, 2014).
- <sup>12</sup> Asp (2014), for example, draws explicitly on this notion when he says: “All in all, what the development implies is a situation where the lifeworld is increasingly colonized by imperatives stemming from the systems world” (ibid.: 369). Consequently, his conceptualization of mediatization puts an emphasis on following key elements: “(1) adaptation to a changing media environment, (2) media as constraints, (3) increased media power and media dependency as causes of mediatization, (4) shifts of power as effect, and (5) societal change as a consequence of mediatization” (Asp, 2014: 351).
- <sup>13</sup> In this context, Hickethier refers among other things to the relationship between television and theater as well as television and literature (cf. Hickethier, 2010: 88f.). Regarding the logic of the reference to forms see also Leschke (2008; 2010).
- <sup>14</sup> Its description as a ‘cultural war’ (Hickethier, 2010: 91) needlessly dramatizes a process which is as ordinary as it is media- and culture-morphologically necessary, since it can be found whenever a new medium emerges. What seems much more interesting is that processes of enculturation seem to have remained fundamentally alien to the mediatization concept in communication studies, so that there appears to be a need for a supplement like Hickethier’s. Thus, the particularly interesting aspect is how the mediatization concept held by communication studies is systematically blanked out.
- <sup>15</sup> For example, it is difficult to stigmatize Popper as a positivist. In this context, Popper receives the beatings intended for the Vienna Circle, from which he tried to break away all his life.
- <sup>16</sup> In a similar way, Corner (2018) questions the conceptual status of the term ‘mediatization’ and manners of use of the term in a “‘token’ mode” (ibid.: 80) as well as aspirations of ‘mediatization’ enthusiasts.
- <sup>17</sup> As far as current developments in digitization and datafication are concerned, these can be examined both in the context of processes of medialization and mediatization. The former can be exemplified by basic theoretical considerations on transclassical machines in the context of transmedialization processes (cf. Leidlmair, 2019). The latter can be illustrated by the notion of “deep mediatization” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020) and applications of this metaphor that put an emphasis on the relevance of commercialized media platforms and ecologies of measurement which suggests a “move from a political economy of media content to a political economy of digital infrastructures which as a global phenomenon needs contextualizing locally, regionally and nationally” (Hepp, 2020: 23).
- <sup>18</sup> As regards academic organization, a Society for Media Studies (<https://gfmedienwissenschaft.de/>) has been established in Germany besides The German Communication Association (DGPK), “the scientific and professional association of researchers, educators, and professionals in the areas of communication and media research” (<https://www.dgpuk.de/en/overview.html-1>).

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