

# Mediatization – Empirical perspectives: An introduction to a special issue

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## Introduction

In general, the concept of mediatization tries to capture long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other. As institutionalized and technological means of communication, media have become integral to very different contexts of human life. The media are not just neutral instances of mediation: Media like television, radio, newspaper, the web or the mobile phone are in themselves mediators of social and cultural change.

Within media and communication studies two strands of research, medium theory and effect research, have in very different ways addressed this ‘influence’ of media on processes of social and cultural change. Medium theory describes socio-cultural change as deeply structured by the advent of a new leading medium, and constructs human history as the succession of oral, scribal, print and electronic cultures (cf. for example, Meyrowitz, 1995). Approaches of media effect research analyze the rather short-term impact of certain media content on the social world (cf. for example, Rosengren, 1994). Both kinds of approaches have contributed to the understanding of the relationship between media, culture and society, but they clearly have some shortcomings. Medium theory conceptualizes the relation between one medium and its socio-cultural influence too directly and neglects questions of media content. Effect research theorizes the influence of certain media contents too directly and neglects questions of media specificity and cultural context. Furthermore, these approaches have not been able to conceptualize a key feature of contemporary culture and society: Media are no longer ‘outside’ society exerting a specific influence or effect on culture and therefore on individuals. In our present media-saturated society media are inside society, part of the very fabric of culture; they have become ‘the cultural air

we breathe' in an even more profound way than Richard Hoggart (1976) suggested by this phrase, and the conceptual framework to consider media's present influence must be able to reflect this new social condition.

Mediatization theory is an attempt to consider this new situation and to address some of the shortcomings of previous research in a constructive manner (cf. Jansson, 2002; Kepplinger, 2002; Hjarvard, 2004; Schulz, 2004; Krotz, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2008). Across the various ways of theorizing mediatization we can see the shared trajectory of thinking about the influence of media in a more complex manner that reflects both the (institutionalized as well as technologically composed) specificity of different media *and* their contents as moments of influence on other 'fields' or 'systems' of culture and society. The metaphor mostly used to describe this is that of the 'media logic(s)', pervading other socio-cultural 'fields' or 'systems'.

### **How to capture mediatization?**

From such an initial starting point there has recently been an intensified discussion about how to capture mediatization (see Lundby, 2009b for an overview for this). A number of important arguments have been made. Sonia Livingstone (2009), for example, emphasized that we should contextualize mediatization research by reflecting that as a result of digitalization media increasingly transgress the whole culture and society: everything gets mediated. Friedrich Krotz (2009) contextualized mediatization further, arguing that mediatization should be seen as a 'meta process' in a long-term historical perspective related to how technical based media spread across different social and cultural spheres. Nick Couldry (2008) asked whether there might be one – singular – logic of the media. We proposed theorizing the institutional dimension of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008), for grounding mediatization research in social interaction analyses (Lundby, 2009a) or for reflecting the 'moulding forces' of the media in various cultural fields in a dialectic and contextualized way (Hepp, 2009).

This special issue on "Mediatization – Empirical perspectives" takes the discussion on the concept of mediatization outlined above as a starting point to examine the present up-to-date empirical investigations of mediatization. The contributions offer empirically based critical answers on the dynamics of media change within the concept of mediatization. Which new insights may this particular volume of empirical studies produce concerning existing mediatization studies? From our perspective the different articles highlight three points, in particular.

*Mediatization and globalization*

The process of mediatization is in various areas closely connected to – and intertwined with – processes of globalization, and this holds true for both traditional mass media (fiction, news) as well as newer media such as online news and blogs. Rawolle and Lingard's study reports how the growing importance of global fields of both journalism and policy come to influence national reporting and policy making with respect to the discourse on the knowledge economy in Australia. Petersen's reception study of mediatized religion shows that American television series with supernatural narratives are competent and salient informers of Danish teenagers' religious imaginations. Michailidou and Trenz demonstrate that despite the general tendency of media reporting on the European Union to stay within a national perspective, online forums play an important role during debates about EU legitimacy during election campaigns and not only provide a new source of news, but also views on the EU from otherwise silent actors, the citizens. As such, mediatization and globalization are in many contexts mutually constitutive in terms of how and in what ways they enable social and cultural change.

*Empirical studies play back into theory*

Mediatization as a social process is not least about the reciprocal influences between media and other social fields. Thus, by necessity the study of mediatization involves cross-disciplinary work, to go beyond the safe boundaries of a particular academic field and engage in the interrelationships between e. g. media and politics or media and religion. Doing this, the particular empirical studies of mediatization draw upon a range of theoretical traditions, including theories of the public sphere (Michailidou and Trenz). The empirically based requests for interdisciplinary theorization demonstrate the need for an open theory of mediatization. Some of the empirical studies in this issue address explicitly the possible contribution to mediatization theory from related theoretical conceptualizations.

Driessens et al. suggest that practice theory may provide a fruitful path for mediatization studies. Through the lenses of practice theory they reformulate the traditional question concerning the mediatization of politics – “how and to what extent politics is changed by and through media?” – into the question: “how and to what extent do media anchor, control, and/or organize political practices?”. The influence of media, they argue, may lie in the ability of media to anchor social practices through their symbolic powers in different social fields.

Rawolle and Lingard present an empirical account of mediatization from the perspective of Bourdieu's theory of social fields. Hence, they

relate mediatization to sets of practices and interrelationships by agents in media and other social fields. They suggest that mediatization can be understood in relation to the “cross-field effects” of journalism on other fields of social activity.

*Mediatization as it varies within and between socio-cultural fields*

Mediatization does not affect different social fields to the same extent. Also, within a specific field the degree and character of mediatization may vary. Rödder and Schäfer conclude that mediatization in the realm of science is much less pronounced than in other parts of society like sports or politics. However, certain scientific topics and controversies – particularly those research areas that may be linked to everyday life – may become mediatized, at least during specific periods, and this may influence the media orientation of scientific actors. As Driessens et al report, the degree and form of personalization that political actors find acceptable in the present media saturated political public sphere are also variable, and may relate to power status and gender, for instance. Furthermore, national and cultural context plays an important role in the ways that processes of mediatization come to influence a particular field. Reunanen et al. demonstrate how the Finnish political tradition of a small, cohesive elite and a consensus driven culture of decision-making shapes mediatization. Similarly, as Petersen’s analysis shows, the perception and negotiation of religious meanings among Danish teenagers is clearly molded by the existing secular youth culture even when the youngsters enthusiastically embrace American fiction as devoted fans.

## **Conclusion**

Based on these three main arguments articulated by the articles within this special issue, we can conclude that it is becoming more and more important to capture the diversity of mediatization in a theoretically appropriate way instead of suggesting a singular line of development, as was the case in early stages of mediatization research. Generally speaking, our theorizing of mediatization should acknowledge that the saturation of media in and their related influence on other socio-cultural fields does not entail that there is a common developmental path across social fields or for society as a whole. As Michailidou and Trenz conclude when referring to Hjarvard (2008) “mediatization simultaneously facilitates centrifugal, centripetal, homogenizing and differentiating processes”. Just as the concepts of globalization and individualization suggest some overall processes at work, but do not entail a common or particular outcome of these processes in particular social and cultural contexts,

neither does mediatization as a concept suggest a singular line of development. Mediatization implies the increased importance and in some cases even dominance of media in late modern societies, but the ways this importance and dominance are spelled out in the muddy realities of different social fields are up to empirical analysis to investigate, as this collection of articles demonstrates.

### Bionotes

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