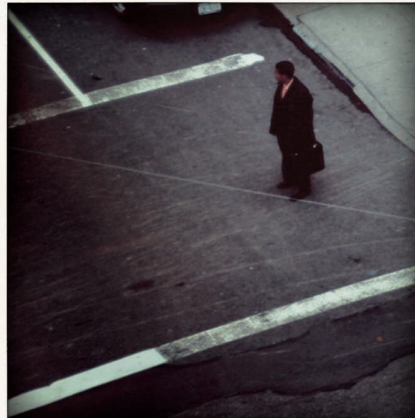


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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Media as a societal structure and a situational frame for communicative action: A definition of concepts¹

Friedrich Krotz

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a historical phase of ongoing, ever-accelerating development. Globalisation, individualisation, commercialisation, mediatization and other concepts are used to describe specific aspects of this development. These all are concepts which can be called metaprocesses (Krotz 2007:25ff). With this label we describe long-term developments that take place in different cultures and geographic areas at different speeds, and maybe even different goals, at least at the same time. In social sciences a process is usually defined as a development that can be measured: a development that has a reason or cause, that takes place in a clearly defined geographic area and that can be described by changing values of one or more variables. In communication studies, a typical example is the diffusion of innovations as described by Rogers (1996).

But not all developments can be understood in this way. Modernisation, globalisation, enlightenment or industrialisation – each one of these long-term developments happens everywhere, but takes place in different cultural contexts and geographical areas in specific non-simultaneous ways and forms (but, of course, in the long run, in a similar way). In addition, they do not have a clear beginning or a clearly defined end. For example, the invention of science was part of the metaprocess of enlightenment that aimed to make people independent of the direct influence of gods, ghosts and devils, as science creates rational explanations for what happens. But when the idea of “science” was created, there was, as we know, no dif-

¹ A portion of this chapter formed part of a virtual panel at the 2011 ICA annual conference in Boston, together with papers from Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp and Jost van Loon. I would recommend reading the other texts as well.

ference between astrology and astronomy, and thus, at the beginning of the idea of science, astrology may have been part of enlightenment. In the centuries that followed, however, astrology and astronomy became separated, and later astronomy remained a science, while astrology, as the explanation of human fates by the movement of the stars, lost the status of science. And today, the reconstruction of a science called astrology would serve to de-enlighten the people. Thus, there are long-term developments that are more complex than processes, and these we call metaproceses: a process consisting of processes.

In communication, media and cultural studies, as a consequence, we should understand the development of communication and media and its consequences for culture and society as a mediatization metaproces. With the invention and use of signs and symbols that may transport meaning, as well as with the invention of language, a specific group of apes started to become human beings: they used language to coordinate their work and their forms of living together, and for them communication was different from the automatic reaction of most animals to signals. Today, in this world, it is we who are able to use highly complex forms of communication and, at the same time, depend on these forms of communication. In addition, we can assume that, with the invention of communication, people began to create media, as they could serve, for example, to store information or to present information even if no person was present: this is what media can do. People did so by producing aesthetic works, painting pictures and posting signs into the ground, as they did, for example, at Stonehenge. Thus, we should assume that media are as old as human communication and as humans.

Today, we live in a historical phase in which more and more media are coming into existence and the media environment surrounding us is becoming more and more complex. This was the reason for creating concepts of mediatization, for studying the history of mediatization, for describing the metaproces of mediatization and for developing a theory about it. Thus, we can speak of an emerging topic in communication studies, as the concept of mediatization tries to grasp the implications of media development for democracy and civil society, for work and leisure, for culture and sense-making processes and for identity and social relations (Lundby 2009, Hepp, Hjavard, Lundby 2010, Krotz 2001; 2007).

This chapter will present the concept of mediatization and will develop a semiotically oriented concept of media in order to be able to study how mediatization is proceeding.

2. DEFINING MEDIA AS A TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND AS A SITUATIONAL SPACE OF EXPERIENCES

In this chapter we intend to define the concept of media. We do this by taking books as an example and generalising what we can learn from these earlier forms of media that can be applied to more recently constructed types of media, such as TV, radio, mobile phones and computer games. However, we do not call books books here: instead we call them media that visually present complex texts. Thus, we try to avoid the word "book". The concept of "book" is an ideologically highly loaded one, as is the case with related concepts like "reading" or "libraries". These concepts generally refer to the accumulated knowledge of human beings, to the core of human culture, and thus reading and writing are frequently seen as basic human technologies which appear to be almost as important as language. From this perspective, all other media are frequently seen as deranging or even destroying culture. We want to avoid this sort of ideology, and are therefore referring to the concept of Friedrich Kittler (1985), who spoke of "Aufschreibsysteme" (systems of noting) and, in the case of printed matter, of typographical systems of noting, which is a much more functional view. We prefer the expression "visual medium of text and image representation" - we often use both descriptions and sometimes also the word book.

With "book" or "visual medium of text and image representation", two things can be addressed: (1) a specific visual medium of this type, or (2) the whole class of these media, that together represent what a "book" is as a medium. Both cases must be discussed separately.

First: such a medium contains a specific text and specific images; it can be read by a person and it is produced on a specific material base, today usually on paper or on a screen, connected via a network with other machines. We are able to buy many of these things at online stores such as Amazon.com, provided we own a credit card, or book stores, if we only have cash. To produce them, an alphabet or any other system of symbols that is shared by writer and reader must exist. Additionally, you need a technology to produce such a visual medium of text and image representation: it may be photocopied, it may be printed, as conceived by Gutenberg, it may be written by hand and it may even be presented in another medium, like TV or the internet. Further, we should differentiate between the person or group of persons that produced that specific media, those who handle distribution and storage and others that read or more generally use this specific medium.

In an implicit way, we also assume that there are *people who buy such media and even read them* and that there are institutions that buy them so that they can be read by people. We further assume that these people are able to interpret the texts and understand the relationship between the images and the texts. We even assume that many people are interested and highly motivated to do so again and again and that they enjoy and learn a great deal by doing so. We are also sure that, in doing so, they support and further develop our culture. In other words, we assume that there are people who use such a medium as a space for experiences and think about these experiences – that is, they assimilate the content of such a medium so that they can give it meaning.

If we use the concept of media of text and image representation in this concrete sense, we call this *the situational or pragmatic dimension* of such a visual medium of text and image representation, or a book. This dimension refers to the fact that such a medium is produced by a person or a group of persons, and that it is read by a person or a great number of people, who use that media as a space for experience. For example, a book is written by one or more authors and is read by the readers. If one uses the medium of the telephone, one person is speaking in a situation, the other is listening, and this changes while the phone is in use, in contrast to reading or writing a book, where the author and the reader have fixed roles – but writing, reading, speaking and listening are still the relevant situational activities required in order to use a medium. This is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: The situational dimension of a book: a visual media for representation of text and images that can be read



Secondly: if we speak of a book or a visual medium for texts and images, we can also address the whole class of such objects – all books that exist in a culture, for example. Thus, we do not speak of a specific medium, but of a type of medium; by this we mean all texts that can be summarised under this label. It is evident that in this case we speak of a cultural structure and a societal institution that is called a book: we address *the specific technologies by which these texts are produced and which make them usable*: books are a technology to preserve and present texts such that they can be read by people. In addition, we assume that there are social institutions, like enterprises or other organisations, which produce and distribute these types of media. We also take into account that there are institutions like Amazon, or traditional bookstores with their distribution systems, that make these media part of the economic system. Further, we assume that there are libraries and similar places where books are stored and can be used. We also address the fact that there are other institutions, for instance legal institutions, that may forbid the buying and selling of such media. This view of books as a technology and a social form as a set of social and cultural institutions, as Raymond Williams' put it, is independent of the single book.

But there is even a word to describe people who are able to read and understand such media: we call them *readers*, who are also known as *literate*. In principle, we assume that most people in our society are literate. We think it is a relevant task of the government to ensure that everyone becomes literate, and we even accept that parents and educational institutions should force children to learn these cultural practices.

If we use the concept of media of text and image representation in this general sense, as technology and social institutions, if we thus include in our thinking and our social action the technical base and the societal form of these media, we then see a book or such a visual media in its *structural dimension*, as shown in the following figure.

Figure 2: The structural dimension of a book or a medium: technology and social institutions:

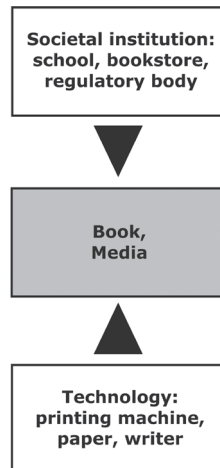
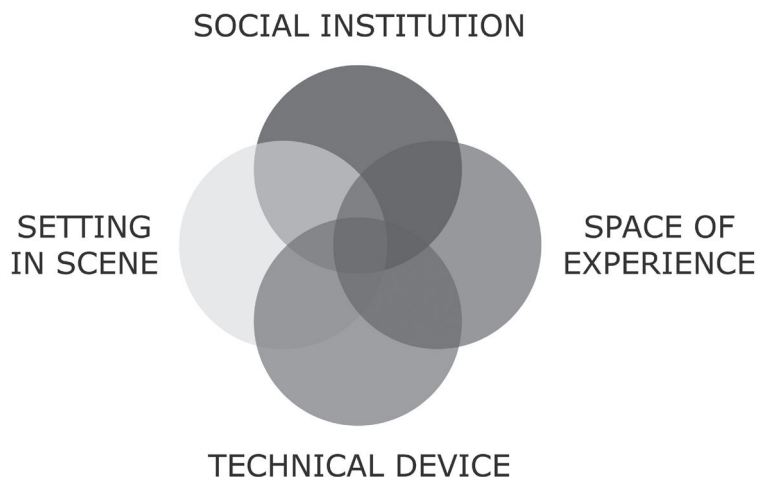


Figure 3 serves to show both dimensions with the four ways of using the concept of a medium, and thus may serve as a definition: a medium is a complex object that serves to transform and modify communication. In the sense outlined above, it consists of a structural (or societal) and a situational (or pragmatic) dimension.

Figure 3: Media in its structural and situational dimension



Now, let us close this chapter with some additional remarks that should help to understand what is meant here.

First, it is important to understand that no technology is a medium by “nature”. Instead, a medium is constructed by people in the frame of a culture. It may start with a technology, but this technology only becomes a medium if it is used by people for communication. If people do so, they modify it for their own goals and interests, and if a great number of people do so, fixed experiences in the respective culture and social institutions come into existence around this technology and its use. The users are then labelled as readers, TV users, internet users and so on –through them, technology becomes a medium.

Second, it is evident that the above description of what a medium is does not hold only for books or media of visual presentation, but also for any other communicative media of similar type. These are media that were formerly known as mass media, and what should today be called *media of standardised content*, which is addressed to everybody. This includes TV, radio, internet sites, the cinema, all printed media and others. They all present content in a given way and a user can only select which content he or she wants to receive. His or her activities are then called media reception.

However, there also exists another type of media, those of *mediated interpersonal communication*, e.g. phones, letters or a chat: within these types of media, a socially guaranteed structure and technology evidently also exist. They depend on technologically given hardware and software, and, as an institution, a medium consists of those enterprises and institutions which organise the networks or distribution, access rights and so on: telephone enterprises, social software owners like Facebook, regulatory bodies that supervise the right to use a telephone within the framework of the law and so on. Of course, the situational dimension is rather different, as the participants themselves must look after content and interpretation, and may change the roles of the producer and the alter ego who watches or listens and so on. But this does not make a relevant difference, as there is still a situational dimension in which the medium is used, a structural dimension as a technological service is necessary, and social institutions supervise what happens. Thus, this type of media also fits the definition given above.

And finally, there is a third type of media, those of *interactive communication*. Let us define “interactive” in the same sense as McMillan (2004): she speaks of interactive media if the media is a full hardware-software system, that “answers” in an individual manner given by its software to any action of the user. Typical cases here are computer games, GPS systems, or communication with computers or robots. Only this version of interactivity is truly interactive and responds to the person’s actions in an individual way (Krotz 2007). This type of communication also fits the above model as, here again, there is a situational dimension of use, and a structural dimension of a specific technology, and social institutions such as regulatory bodies, game publishers and so on. We thus conclude that the above media definition is adequate for all communicative media as they are analysed in the frame of communication studies.

Third, as noted above, media are transforming and modifying communication. Media then have, as we have argued above, a situational dimension of production and experiencing, and a structural dimension that catches media as technology and social form, together with social and cultural institutions.

In this view then, media have a similar form, as is the case with language: if we follow Ferdinand de Saussure, then language is, on the one hand, a structure; on the other hand, it is a situational practice. Language vs. parole was Saussure’s concept of this duality (Saussure 1998). Because media, following the definition above, have a structural and a situational dimension, we can say that we have a semiotic concept of media here. Nevertheless, it should be clear that, in this view, language is not a medium. This is because media are seen as transforming and modifying communication, but language does not modify or transform communication. Language is instead the basic form in which human communication is possible: through language, humans become humans. A language is thus a requirement for a medium and is thus much more than a medium. In addition, a language is a special defining quality unique to human beings: only they have and need a language. We may thus define humans as beings who have the ability to speak, but, at the same time, are confronted with the necessity to communicate in a highly differentiated way – language is therefore much more than a medium; it is at the same time a condition and a requirement for media.

To sum up, we see that a medium is a rather complex cultural and societal entity that consists of a technology, has a societal and cultural structure

and is the object of situational communicative actions among people *for whom this social structure and technology can be understood as a frame*. Thus, in some ways, communication is always reduced but also extended, if one compares mediated and face-to-face communication.

Now we shall go on to use the above definition of a medium and its connection to communication to define mediatization in a sense-making way.

3. THE MEDIATIZATION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

With these concepts, we can now approach the concept of mediatization in a specific but basic sense. We shall do this on the basis of a report on other definitions of mediatization which regard as not so helpful.

Until now, most writers have been using the word 'mediatization' in a rather general way and have begun with the fact that media are currently of growing importance in culture and society. An example of this is the use of the concept 'mediatization' in some branches of political communication research. There this concept is understood in the following way: mediatization means that the media are becoming more influential actors in the political arena, and, if media, political parties and institutions have learned that, one can speak of "after mediatization" (cf. e.g. the European consortium of political communication²).

This approach thus understands mediatization as a process in which media become new political actors. This of course happens, but it is only a small part of what may be meant by mediatization. For example, the internet or Twitter are frequently used to organise forms of political protest. This does not, of course, mean that media have become opponents of a government or that there must be institutions that organise this protest; it is also possible that people are just coordinating what they want to do. Further, there are computer games like "Civilization" that can be understood as introduction sets into the politics of today. These examples show that the above definition of mediatization as 'media becoming political actors' is much too narrow; we should look for a broader definition.

Another way of defining mediatization could be to define it as the influence of a logic of a medium or as directly given by the development of media, as done by Harold Innis (1950, 1951) or Marshall McLuhan (1992).

² http://www.ecprnet.eu/joint_sessions/st_gallen/workshop_details.asp?workshopID=19

Both are perspectives that argue against a technical bias. As far as we understand things, there is no media logic: for example, TV 50 years ago was rather different from TV today, and TV in the US is rather different from TV in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the idea of media logic or, in more general terms, the definition of mediatization depending on technological features, seems inadequate, as it ignores the ways in which they are used in a culture, and the role of social institutions related to the media.

We will at this point argue against the relational character of mediatization, as mediatization is already in its semantic definition a mediatization of something. With this we exclude all the aforementioned definitions, as they are unclear and superficial: if, with mediatization, we refer to the use of communicational media as defined in the last chapter, *then mediatization should be defined as the mediatization of communication or of communicative actions, and in addition as the mediatization of whatever is a consequence of communicative action. With these consequences, we of course mean whatever is communicatively constructed by people – following Berger/Luckmann (1973), this is our social reality. To say this in an even more differentiated way:*

Mediatization means a long-term process that, on a first level, consists of a growing number of media and a growing number of functions that media are performing for people. On a second level, we must take into account the fact that media are technologies that are used by people to communicate, and thus mediatization consists of the mediatization of communication and communicative actions. On a third level, we should bear in mind that communication is a basic human activity by which human beings construct the social world in which they live, and their own identity. Mediatization thus includes a process in which this communicative construction of the social and cultural world will change the more we use media. In sum, mediatization must be seen as a long-term metaprocess that includes all three of these levels.

Before moving on to use examples, we will first make some additional remarks in order to make clear that such an approach has many advantages for systematic and academic science and theory. In the last chapter we explained that communication becomes differentiated by the mediatization metaprocess. From non-verbal communication and language communication that takes place face-to-face in a common situation, we find three new forms of mediated communication: mediated interpersonal communication, interactive communication and communication with standardised and generally addressed content and form. Today we have a fourth form of communication that can be called passive communication

– it takes place if we are communicated, e.g. if a camera observes us or if Facebook or Google analyse our data. This last form can be differentiated between intended passive and unintended passive communication.³ And if we speak about mediatization, we must take a fifth consideration into account: today even the old face-to-face-communication will change with the existence of media, as there is hardly any place without any media and there is no speech between two people which is not in any way influenced by knowledge or comparison processes with media – it is our consciousness that refers us in an intense way to the media.⁴

We conclude this text with some additional remarks on the outcome of this text and some ideas about further research.

First, we have defined mediatization as a concept that refers to communication with symbols as a basic and special characteristic of humans, through which they construct their world and themselves. We thus have a starting point from which to analyse mediatization empirically. This is done, for example, in the priority programme “Mediatized Worlds” (www.mediatizedWorlds.net).

Second, with the aforementioned definition, we have also defined a mechanism for *how* the upcoming media and the functions they assume may change the social world: it is not the differentiation of media that changes conditions of communication, it is the fact that people use the different existing technologies as media and thus communicate differently and construct different realities. We can thus define empirical approaches to analysing different forms of mediatization (for an outline see also Krotz 2007).

And third, in recent decades, with the surge in digital media, media have become accessible to people at all times and in all places. Additionally, the media cover more or less all the existing topics and everything we know. We therefore increasingly refer to the media and the content and activities that we have used them for, which means that media have become increasingly powerful and influential, e.g. in politics. We could call this a doubling of reality, as reality here is reconstructed by the media. However, there are some questions which remain open: what is forgotten by this doubling process and what is reproduced in a way that does not exist in the “first reality”?

3 We could define even more forms of communication if we drop the assumption that at least one human being must be part of data exchange in order to speak of communication.

4 This is explained in more detail and with reference to uses and gratification in Krotz 2009.

Fourth, we can speak of a process of dismantling by mediatization that is crucial to every critical analysis: media take apart what was formerly together. For example, political decisions in Athens 3,000 years ago were taken in encounters at the market place. Today, there are still political encounters in politics, but the unity of discuss and decide has mainly disappeared: mass media and journalism report about political positions and arguments, they are between the different political actors and between the people: they do not participate in the encounter, instead it is reported and commented on and this then forms the basis to think and to decide. Similar developments may be observed in other fields: in former times, for instance, factory workers worked with material, for example a hammer, to give a piece of metal a specific form. Today, this is done by a machine that is controlled by a person who may be far away. We understand this as a *dismantling process that separates information control as a communicative activity from what happens with the "real" material* – in earlier times, this was a unit of action, today the communicative act and the material act are separated. A similar argument holds with the control of a rocket in war: you do not kill yourself as a social action, but the killing process is separated from the control over killing. Finally, a further example for this is pornography, or so called cyber-sex: traditionally, having sex is a social activity and demands interaction, as it includes touching. In the case of pornography or cyber-sex, the communicative acts only take place within the user's mind and body, with reference to sound, pictures or texts. This dismantling occurs not only in terms of instrumental activities, but also with regards to interactions or communication in common face-to-face-situations.

Finally, a remark about the use of the mediatization approach: further interdisciplinary research is necessary, as we are doing with the priority programme "Mediatized Worlds" (www.mediatizedWorlds.net).

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