

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone up to take a picture of a small, patterned object on a table. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's arms and hands are visible, and a watch is on their left wrist. The background shows a table and some other objects, but they are out of focus.

# Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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# Mediatization: What Is It?

*Nick Couldry*

In this short paper, I want to broaden out from the discussions so far in this summer school to take in the question of what is at stake in doing mediatization research, as opposed to the many other ways in which can research contemporary media. Why does mediatization research matter, and to which types of media and communications researchers in particular?

## 1. Mediatization research and its alternatives

There are after all alternatives to researching mediatization. One alternative would be focus one's research about media at the level of media themselves, studying the phenomenology of direct uses of media; or pursuing one of the two options that dominated the early decades of media research, the political economy of media production and distribution, or textual analysis (the analysis of media texts and, as was emphasised from the 1980s, their reception). But mediatization research does not do any of those things, not at least as its principal focus.

Another alternative would be to turn one's research towards the wider transformations beyond media in which media are somehow involved. There are also many varieties of this approach. There is a so-called 'medium' approach, and here too there are variants of which the most fashionable today is perhaps 'media archaeology': this approach is explicitly not interested in social dynamics, a position most trenchantly represented by the late Friedrich Kittler. Here is Kittler in a passage quoted by a current advocate of media archaeology, the Finnish media theorist Jussi Parikka : '[I am interested in] not meaning, not representation, not any imaginary of media that is conditioned by the social but [in] the act of communication in its physical distributing and effective channelling of signals (Parikka, 2012: 68-69). Elsewhere, Friedrich Kittler (1999: 44) wrote of 'forgetting humans, language and sense' in the conduct of communications research: this is approach which relishes the comparison to engineering, and rejects other interpretivist approaches to media entirely.

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One could also consider the wider transformations in which media are involved by pursuing a non-representational theory, for example by following questions of ‘affect’. This has been advocated by the geographer and social theorist Nigel Thrift (2008). In effect this suggests a radicalization of medium theory which insists that ‘there is no stable “human” experience’ and the human ‘sensorium’ is continually being extended (2008: 2), so researchers must turn instead to affect. However, it does not abandon an account of the subject of media, in the way Kittler appears to. There is also a third alternative, also newly fashionable, which is software-based research interested in the shift to ‘computationalism’ (Berry, 2011: 27). This approach draws its obvious strength and importance from what one advocate calls the ‘double mediation’ via software (at the level of both input and output) of every process (2011: 16). But the advocates of this position can also at times sound rather more strident than they perhaps need to, claiming that to pursue this approach is to celebrate the ‘radical decentring’ of ‘the Humboldtian subject filled with culture’ and its replacement with ‘a just-in-time cultural subject’ (22). Luckily there are alternative formulations of the serious study of software which still allow for interpretative agency (McKenzie, 2006).

There then a number of different ways on offer of doing media research which we have inherited today, or which have newly emerged. Set against them, mediatization research is clearly distinctive. It follows a different path. How would we define that different path? I would propose it has three distinctive features. First, it is interested in media contents (ie representations), or at least their consequences when circulated, rather than prioritizing the non-representational. Second, it is primarily interested in the social (both as input to media and as a domain affected by media), not relegating this, as Kittler does and implicitly computationalism does, to the explanatory sidelines. Third, it is interested in the possibility of interpreting media’s relation to the social; in this sense it is explicitly a hermeneutic approach, and so in sharp contrast with the technology-based anti-hermeneutic of a writer such as Kittler.

Indeed, we could go further. Mediatization research, through its concern for how the social unfolds – and how its unfolding may be affected by the deep weaving within it of media technologies, their contents and their uses, implicitly has a view of human development and education (*Bildung*) that is based in the continuous (materially grounded) human practice of interpreting the world, rather than just ‘programming’ it (as Parikka puts it 2012: 71). So ‘Mediatization’ is a distinctive type of approach to contemporary Transformations.

This remains true, notwithstanding the differences between mediatization researchers, which are well-known. Differences about what sort of concept mediatization is: is it a ‘meta-process’ (Krotz, 2009: 24-25) that refers to how ‘media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society and culture as a whole’, what elsewhere I have called

the ‘changed dimensionality of the social world’ (Couldry, 2012: 137), or is it a specific form of logic, derived from me, that is let loose in the world? There are of course differences over how to name the concept, whatever it means: whereas ‘mediatization’ is now generally the preferred term in international comparative research, the term ‘mediation’ for a long time had its followers in the UK, Latin America, and early on the USA. and of course mediatization researchers differ in what field they want to apply the concept to: is it politics (as in much early mediatization research), or other, perhaps more remote fields such as education, religion, art, government?

Exploring these differences within, but also fundamental commonality across, approaches to mediatization research implies a further question: can we draw any principle(s) from the type(s) of approach that mediatization is/are, that might or should shape how we would want to conduct mediatization research in the future? Is there in other words an implicit methodology of mediatization research? Let me try to explore this further question by thinking about the differences that emerge between how accounts of mediatization play out in different domains. I will talk briefly about three areas (popular culture, religion and art), and then in a little more detail about the case of politics.

## 2. What doing Mediatization research means: Some field-based examples

If, as I prefer to argue, following Friedrich Krotz (see above), mediatization is a meta-concept for the way social order now works, not an account of a specific ordering principle based in media, then it is compatible with many different accounts of transformation. We would also expect it to encompass widely varied accounts of how media are involved in the transformation of different fields of action and competition. I do not have time to develop here my argument made elsewhere that Bourdieu’s field theory is perhaps the most productive area of social theory with which mediatization research can interface in order to develop its core ideas.

Let me explore this in a few areas, so that you get a sense of how differently things can play out within mediatization research, depending on which area one chooses.

If we start with general popular culture, imagine an attempt within mediatization research to explain the significance of something like the Pop Idol/American Idol format. Its significance must involve more than people copying the Pop Idol format and its rhythms and styles in everyday life (a ‘media logic’ approach). What form of influence might this be? First, we could look at how the authority within the show of Simon Cowell (the judge of X-Factor, American Idol and Britain’s Got Talent, one of the best paid performers in



global television) is based in his capital within the broad media and creative industries field. But we can't stop there; the very idea that a television show is a plausible way of judging singing talent derives from media's growing meta-capital, that is, the growing influence of media institutions over what counts as symbolic capital in many specific areas of competition. Also the culture of support and legitimacy around the format derives from media representations and categories that circulate generally in social space. Media institutions' ability to consecrate value in a field such as popular music is naturalised through ritual formats such as *American Idol*. But the key causal mechanism in all of this is not the format itself but the conferring and confirming of authority and category membership enacted within the format.

What are the implications of this example for how we understand mediatisation? It shows that mediatisation can work in a very tight, almost 'logic'-like way if, as in the popular music industry, the interdependencies with the broader media production field are intense. But even in such a case the explanation of how the influence works depends on detailed understanding of the dynamics of the social processes involved, and dynamics of the particular field of which they are part. Which implies that when we turn to other fields, other less 'logic'-like outcomes remain possible. In many fields other than popular music, where interdependencies with the media field are less direct, more subtle forms of mutual influence are possible.

To pursue this, let's take the case of religion. An increasing number of researchers see media as a key dynamic in shaping not merely how religion is represented, but the very practices and beliefs that today count as 'religious' (Hoover, 2006). Both religious and media institutions draw on a very general form of symbolic power to represent the world: that is why many scholars, but surely too simply, have claimed that media in the 20th century became the 'new religion'. In principle we could see religion's ability to describe the world and consecrate important types of authority as a distinctive type of meta-capital to set alongside that of the state and the media, but the plausibility of this varies between which countries. In some countries with very strong and authoritative religious institutions - Iran, the Philippines, perhaps the USA - this is plausible: while in a few countries religious authority (Tibet) is in direct conflict over the constitution of the state. But even in Iran, religious institutions are themselves increasingly reliant on media to represent their actions and aims, and increasingly vulnerable to media-based scandal, while the Catholic church with all its global reach and power showed itself both vulnerable to media scandal and capable of taking control of the media agenda before and during the Pope's visit to UK in 2010.

Religious institutions' ability to use media to enhance attention to, and awareness of, ritual events is well documented and flows directly from media's general reserves of symbolic power. It is unclear yet whether prestige in the

religious field routinely intersects with media capital so that the latter automatically increases the former, but there are clear cases of charismatic religious leaders whose symbolic capital encompasses both media prowess and spiritual qualities, from US televangelists (Billy Graham) to Islamic preachers (Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Sharif Ousmane Haidera). Indeed, building one's own media channel or media distribution facility is a critical tool in building alternative religious authority. Blogging, for example, is increasingly a general tool for reflecting publicly on one's spirituality. Indeed religion and entertainment's shared occupation of many of the same media is a key factor in transforming religious discourse. As a result the sources of religious authority are now contested and, possibly, misrecognized (Thomas, 2008: 95). Quite clearly there is no magic formula which could summarised how religion in general is mediatized.

The art field is in one respect more straightforward in that, although there is no inherent reason why art field should have close relation to media (after art can use anything object or process as its material, not necessarily 'media'), there have been movements in modern art, where the relationship between art production and media production has been very close. I am thinking for example here of the Young British Artists (YBA) for whom in the 1990s media exposure and media-related capital became very important, even central, to art process and art production. While some would like to claim that this was a universal phenomenon deriving from the art field's changed relation to market communications and advertising, (Lash/Lury, 2007), I am sceptical that this captures the variety of relations and non-relations that artistic practice has to media.

Turning, finally and in a little more detail, to the political field, this is the area where the arguments for media logic transforming a domain in a singular direction have been strongest. No one would doubt that 'the media' are decisive in political process, in shaping 'public opinion and decision-making' (Meyer, 2003). Certainly politics today cannot be conducted without media. But when we look, is there a single mechanism (even process) of transformation here?

Media-related capital and skills are now always instrumental in politics, but how this works out depends on complex and varied feedback-loops. Think on the one hand of how the space of political values has been reshaped, or flattened by the necessity of keeping media coverage at all times (has this limited the range of topics that can emerge as topics of political debate?). Think of politicians' constant exposure to media pressures, every minute of the day, changes the Sorts of people they are able to be, and the ways they are able to reflect. Here is a senior UK civil servant reflecting on his timing working closely with UK former Prime Minister Tony Blair: 'We no longer had ... the time ... to explain to ourselves, to Parliament and the public just what we were attempting.' (Foster, 2005: 1-2). More work in fact is needed on mediatiza-

tion of government at every level: not just speech-writing and direct political communication, but also processes of policy formation, implementation, adjustment.

Media's saturation of the political field in other words goes far beyond politics' adoption of 'media format'. The transformations under way are not reducible to single mechanism/logic. But this is not to say that the pressure of media, in the way it weights down on political actors, particularly less powerful ones, does not sometimes feel like a 'logic', a fixed necessity. This can happen then actors' strategies (for example actors who are engaged in a struggle with government over the development of particular legislation or a change of policy) are continuously motivated by what Dutch political sociologists Justus Uitermark and Anne-Jolie Gielen call 'their actual or anticipated representations in the media' (1340). In such cases a feedback loop – between political actors and media actors – can acquire a momentum which makes it logic-like, in certain respects at least. But this cannot be assumed, and it is open to resistance and challenge, as well as complex variations and unevenness.

### 3. Conclusion: challenges and opportunities

Let me conclude by reflecting on where this leaves mediatization research as it moves from being a minority pursuit to being a major dimension of contemporary research at the interface of media and social theory.

First, it is important to keep open mind on how mediatization operates in different fields/domains and to avoid adopting any mid-range descriptive language that would suggest it happens in one single way across all fields/domains. Mediatization is not that kind of process: in fact it is not a single process at all, but the word we can use to point to an open set of transformations in the nature of contemporary social order linked to the affordances and uses of media.

Second, and to mention a theme that I have implied but not had a chance to develop in detail, it is useful in thinking about the future of mediatization research . to draw critically on, while also helping to reconfigure for the digital age, the tradition of social theory. If you are interested in that, then possible reference-points for consideration might include: Bourdieu on fields; Boltanski and Thévenot on regimes of evaluation; Durkheim and Bowker/Star on classification; Elias on interdependence and figurations. Your list of social theory references might however, quite legitimately, be different from mine.

Thirdly, in developing that deeper engagement by mediatization research with social theory it will be important to develop mid-range theoretical concepts for grasping the types of 'ordering' that may be at work in mediatization. Here are a few that you might want to consider that I have found useful in my own work (see Couldry, 2012): media-related capital and media 'meta-capital'

(from field theory); norms that are embedded in media forms, such as ‘make-over media’ or reality TV more generally; categories (as developed in work on media rituals); and figurations (that is, embodied ‘solutions’ to material problems of interdependence). All that can be developed to the benefit of mediatization research if we make our priority the development of open theoretical debate within a distinctive and fully international field of research. That, at least, is the type of mediatization research that I have proposed to you all of us need to be focussed upon.

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