

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 they are wearing a watch 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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édition lumière

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Lessons of the Lament: Footnotes on the Mediatization Discourse

Risto Kunelius

Socrates: Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very much like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.

Phaedrus: You are quite right about that, too. (Plato, Phaedrus, 275d-e)

The trouble about the changing media landscape is not new, as Plato's Socrates from Phaedrus reminds us. In it, the philosopher of dialogue and irony scorns the appearance of the written word for destroying the authentic, contextually anchored face-to-face encounters of communication. For Socrates, writing spells potential trouble for philosophy, teaching and distribution of knowledge. Words, once written down, become a bit like orphans with "no power to protect or help" themselves. As John Durham Peters (1999, 6) points out, in Phaedrus communication becomes defined both as an ideal (the true dialogic relationship) and as a perversion (manipulation, rhetoric and technologically biased by writing): "Miscommunication is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place".

Theoretizations about mediatization most often think about mediatization as a modern phenomenon related to historically more recent changes in institutional relations. This is mostly a useful and practical view that helps us to develop a more coherent view what we mean by mediatization. Starting from Plato here, however, serves to underline a particular feature about social commentary on changing media landscape. I will call it here the *mediatization*

Kunelius, R. (2014) 'Lessons of the Lament. Footnotes on the Mediatization Discourse', pp. 101-113 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe*. Bremen: edition lumière.

lament. In Plato we can see the first well recorded formulations of this genre of criticism where new tools, forms and techniques of communication often provoke conservative cultural resistance. The history of innovations in communication is saturated with this trope. It can be told as a long narrative of (elite) attempts to complain and control the social change potentials of emerging “new media”. The story of suspicious innovations can be told through technology (writing, printing, broadcasting, television, internet) or through emerging practices of communication (pamphleteering, shorthand political reporting from parliaments, newspapering for masses, the invention interviewing, invention of tabloids, blogging, etc.).

Such concerns are often articulated as a worry about what the new forms of communication will do to the public. This is also a major part of Plato’s concern: he was, after all, a philosopher who famously thought that poets and playwrights should be politely evicted from the ideal state. But Socrates’ lament is also an example of a worry about the changing rules of entry: the expected skills needed to belong to a particular field of proper practice (of philosophy). For Socrates, and mostly for Plato too, philosophy was about dialogue and talk, about lessons, about encounters between people. This aspect of mediatization lament shows us how people in particular positions and groups (a domain, an institution, a field) see their old values, ways and routines threatened by changing media landscape, usually because the entry to their field becomes re-defined. Writing, for instance, may help almost anyone (for a while, in front of a crowd) perform as if he or she was in charge of an idea or argument. Thus, the basic form of mediatization lament pits the inner valuable logic of a domain against an emerging, “alien” forces and logics.

In this essay, I will take the lament as my starting point and ask: What can we learn from this aspect of lament in mediatization discourse? Without any claims to conduct coherent theory building here, I follow a trail of four themes. They are (i) the idea and value of differentiation, (ii) the question of the base of that differentiation and the “medium” of the media, (iii) the notion of networks and translations between domains and (iv) the question of rationalization. These overlapping remarks also link the debate about mediatization to various strands of some recent social theory.

1. Mediatization and the tacit value of differentiation

In a preface to the English version of his controversial attack on French media, *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) writes about the reaction of the press to his initial criticism of journalism. First, he quotes his original analysis.

It should go without saying that to reveal the hidden constraints of journalists, which they in turn bring to bear on all cultural producers, is not to denounce those in charge or to point a finger at the guilty parties. Rather, it is an attempt to offer to all sides a possibility of liberation, through a conscious effort, from the hold of these mechanisms, and to propose, perhaps, a program for concerted action by artists, writers, scholars, and journalists – that is, by the holders of the (quasi) monopoly of the instruments of diffusion. Only through such collaboration will it be possible to work effectively to share the most universal achievements of research and to begin, in practical terms, to universalize the conditions of access to the universal. (Bourdieu, 1998)

This is Bourdieu's basic call for arms to protect the production of knowledge in the realm of science and culture. A moment later, reflecting on the public reception of this diagnosis Bourdieu offers more concrete examples of his frustration.

.... After the publication of *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, the result and summing up of ten years of my research, I remember vividly a journalist who proposed a debate on the *Grandes Écoles*: the president of the alumni association would speak “for” and I would speak “against”. And he hadn't a clue as to why I refused. In just the same way, the journalistic “big guns” who went after my book [*On Television—RK*] simply bracketed my method (in particular the analysis of journalism as a field); without even being aware of what they were doing, they reduced the book to a series of utterly hackneyed positions punctuated by a smattering of polemical outbursts. (Bourdieu 1998, 2)

Bourdieu's criticism of journalism and his lament on the rise of the “heteronomous” journalistic field (see also Bourdieu, 2005) points to a basic category underneath the mediatization discourse, particularly in its institutionally focused variant: the value of differentiation. The talk about mediatization (whether use the word or not) comes with a taste of loss (of the rational, the authentic, the real, of healthy diversity, or – as for Bourdieu – the chance for a “universal” perspective). Guardians of different domains – parents, teachers, priests, politicians and so on – complain about mediatization when changes of communication cause problems to the border and order control of their differentiated domains, be it about politics, science, religion, family – or even “individuality”. At the root of such mediatization discourse (both academic and popular), then, is the imagination of a modern, functionalistic, institutionally differentiated society – and a tacit recognition of its value. Mediatization critique is based on an assumption that at a constitutive level, societies are and must be made of sub-systems (domains, fields, spheres, institutions) with their designated tasks, values systems, particular practices and certain level of autonomy.

This hints at a conservative twist in the whole mediatization discourse. The lament articulates (sometimes perhaps against the intention of those who lament) the threat to the existing order and the functionality of power in a given field and between fields. No wonder then that mediatization of politics has been a major theme. The abstract normative value invested in the notions

of differentiation and diversity, the associated de-centralization of power and the ideal of “balance” between different domains helps the lament to construct an opposition to the penetrating, “alien” force. No wonder then that in popular mediatization discourse, there is a strong tendency to “black box” the media, to speak of “the media” and its “logic” as a homogenous, monolith institution, as a pejorative shorthand standing for something alien penetrating these fundamental spheres of life and the categories we think by. Mediatization – sometimes with not much empirical evidence at all – spells loss of the diversity of the modern society.

As Bourdieu’s case shows, academics are not immune to this popular form of lament, even if Bourdieu perhaps was not at his sharpest as a sociologist in his analysis of the journalistic field. His narrative of the journalistic field suffers from the tendency to see mediatization only as the growing power of the economic field. The “weak” autonomy of the journalistic field, and the all-pervasive idea of the economy also resonates strongly with the strong positive value of the differentiation vocabulary. As valuable as this explanation is, it turns mediatization questions into a kind of shadow debate of commercialization. This is not to say that the academic debate about the “media logic” has not been a useful one. It has helped and is helping us to create a more nuanced understanding of what “media logic” actually might mean and how useful a concept that ultimately it. (e.g. Lundby, 2009; Strömbäck, 2008; Kunelius/Reunanen, 2012a; Hjarvard 2013).

But in the case of Bourdieu, the lament also reveals potential complications. After all, he developed a complex theory of differentiation and social stratification as a way of critically exposing how the social domains and institutions patrol their boundaries and their inner order. He also linked these fields to each other and the broader, dynamic power structures of modern societies in a way that still commands much respect and carries considerable explanatory power. But as a sociologist – a key guardian of the academic field – he felt furious and frustrated about the boundaries and autonomy – of sociology. Hence, the rather blunt anger against the media – and through the heteronomy of the journalistic field, mostly against the force of money and the economic field.

2. The “medium” of mediatization

Suppose then, that there is something else than the increasing pressure of commercialization behind our experience of mediatization? What might that be? One way of sketching an answer is to follow another trail of differentiation theory: systems theory.

In Talcott Parsons paradigmatic work we encounter an abstract and technical definition of “media”. At first, it seems alien to communication researchers and the concern about media “proper” (such as television, social media etc.). For Parsons, a “medium” refers to the dominant internal tools of coordination in the main social subsystems of modern societies. Functional social systems all have a designated principal, symbolically generalized “steering media” which differentiates them from other sub-systems. “Money” is the medium of the economic system (tasked with Adaptation), “power” is the medium of the political system (taking care of Goal attainment), “influence” is the medium of the sub-system of societal community (that secures Integration), and “value-commitment” the medium of the pattern-maintenance system (that cultivates Latency). By enabling actors to symbolically represent how much of the key resources a given system they can mobilize, these such “media” help the systems to work effectively. Thus, there is an important analytical distinction between the *resources* of “power”, for instance, and the way these are represented in the relationships between political actors. By enabling the generalized power estimations between political actors, “power” generalized medium lubricates the political system. This is the famous AGIL-model of functionalist society. It has, of course, been criticized severely (for a recent inventory, see Joas/Knöbl, 2010: 76-80). But in the context of mediatization theory, two paths of this theoretical terrain – one from Parsons himself and one from Niklas Luhmann – are worth walking at least for length.

For Parsons, the key idea of steering media in functionalism is that by translating various action resources into exchangeable “currency” between actors, different steering media secure the effectiveness of sub-systems. Economy is “effective” because money helps it to suppress value-maintenance issues and because it partly translates values and traditions into questions of money (and de-values them). While differentiated steering media separate subsystems from each other, they are also the means by which the subsystems communicate with each other. Thus, all subsystems (such as “politics”) have their internal AGIL-structure (political system has traditions and integration patterns as well). But each of them is characterized by the dominance of one particular system media: thus steering media work across the boundaries of subsystems, but they become less effective when operating outside their specific realm or subsystem. Religious value-commitments play a role in political decision-making, but they will not – in a modern, differentiated social system – outperform power calculations in the political system. In this respect, “mediatization” of one system by another can be understood as disturbance of the existing internal balance in a given domain: an alien steering medium gaining in importance in a given sub-system.

Parsons' idea of the steering media is evolutionary: he sees institutional differentiation as the cause for the historical appearance of different generalized media. Niklas Luhmann, however, turns this upside down by arguing that the specific media of subsystems are the cause of differentiation (cf. Chernilo 2002: 436-8). He also claims that operations subsystems are self-referential, i.e. the medium from one subsystem does not circulate to other domains. A subsystem can feel the "pressure" of another system or it can "irritate" other systems, but the only way for a system to adapt to its surroundings is to function via its own medium (or code, as Luhmann prefers to say). Thus, if the system of politics "feels the pressure" from the system of religion, it will not become more "religious", but instead, it will use religion as one resource of power, thus turning religion (in the political system) into a calculation factor in the power game. From a Parsonsian perspective then, "mediatization" refers to a process where a "medium" of one institution or subsystem penetrates or forces its influence outside its core field. Hence, the complaints about the increasing "juridification" of life would be an instance of general "mediatization." For Luhmann, the same phenomenon indicates not penetration but "irritation". The lament about journalism influencing politics too much is evidence of both this irritation and the interpretation work by political institutions of readjusting themselves. This is a perspective that Frank Marcinkowski and Adrian Steiner (2014) have recently elaborate usefully.

In the complaint that media – as a separate institution – "mediatizes" other institutions or domains we must, from a systems theory perspective, assume that the media are in some sense "independent". Here, systems theory opens the next question. What is the "medium" (or, in Luhmann's wording, the code) of the (mass) media?

Luhmann's (2000) reply to this question is worth following. Historically, he locates this moment of institutional closure – the moment the mass media becomes autonomous – in the arrival of the printing press. This is a moment when "the volume of written material multiplied to the extent that oral interaction among all participants in communication is effectively and visibly rendered impossible" (ibid: 16). From this point on the media interprets its audience mostly in quantitative terms, as "sales figures" and "ratings", not "via communication": it has created an internal interpretation of its most important outside relation. Hence an "operational closure" occurs, and the particular "code" of mass media (the "medium" or specific task that differentiates it from other institutions) begins to emerge. Luhmann is not terribly clear on this, but his definition consists at least of suggesting that the "code of the system of the mass media is the distinction of information and non-information" (ibid: 17) and that "the most important characteristic of the information/non-information code is its relationship to time" (ibid: 19). Hence:

It might be said, then, that the mass media keep society on its toes. They generate a constantly renewed willingness for surprises, disruptions even. In this respect, the mass media ‘fit’ the accelerated auto-dynamic of other systems such as the economy, science and politics, which constantly confront society with new problems. (Luhmann, 2000: 22)

We can take his train of thought to suggest that what makes mass media distinctive is the way it constructs public attention. By treating its audiences (non-communicatively) as quantities, by deciding what is (worthy) information and what is not, and by accentuating the constant present (between past and future) as the context of this decision, mass media are a key modern institution in the management of public attention. The fundamental symbolically generalized medium that the mass media functions with, from this perspective, would be “attention” a representation of the imagined public whose eyes and ears are turned to the topic at hand. Its “fit” with other modern institutions refers to the functional interplay of directing attention (and thus public opinion) in ways that can be useful for other institutions. In its moments of superficial “unfit” with other institutions, the “irritation” media causes would then refer to moments when the attention control of media has – from the point of view of other institutions – escaped this fit. Unlike in the case of Bourdieu’, who rebels against the loss attention control of academics, for Luhmann’s cool functionalist discourse itself this is not an explicit cause for lament (albeit he too struggles to sustain a specific place for sociology).

A systems theory interpretation of mediatization lamentpoints to at least three interesting directions. First, it offers a theoretical dimension to the argument by claiming that the lament is caused the emergence of an institutional structure of the media with its “own” generalized medium (attention) and the consequent problems of other modern institutions to manage and control public attention control and public visibility (see in particular the work of Thompson; 1995, 2005). The heightened tension between issues such as free speech and privacy, or such as security and transparency are important signs of this. Second, it allows us to see the recent lament about the “end of journalism” as a variant of mediatization discourse, only now as lament about the mediation of journalism. The crisis of professional journalism or the struggle to redefine it (e.g. Lewis 2012, Waisbord 2013) can be partly explained as an attempt by journalists to adapt to the loss of monopoly in attention control (the monopoly that Luhmann saw as a key factor in producing mass media’s operational closure). Third, this offers new food for thought in thinking what is – or should be – the “medium” of journalism in future of conditions “hybrid media” (Chadwick, 2013) or “networked journalism” (Beckett, 2012).

3. Mediatization of networks

In the opening passage of his recent book “An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence the French”, sociologist Bruno Latour starts with anecdote of a climate scientist faced with a question from an “industrialist”. “But why should we believe you, any more than the others” a member of the audience asks. Latour continues, in the now familiar genre of mediatization lament: “Has the controversy really degenerated to the point where people can talk about the fate of the planet as if they were on stage televised jousting match, pretending that the two opposing positions [climatologists and “sceptics” – RK] are of equal merit?” But in addition, Latour identifies another “scandal”: the climatologist defense. Instead of claiming that science has the answer, the scientist launches into a complicated description of how the evidence is collected, how models and tests are constructed and so on, and says: “If people do not trust the institution of science we’re in serious trouble”. (Latour 2013: 2-3)

Latour’s point emerging from his own spontaneous outrage is that he accepts the claim that indeed, institutions and their values are a key thing to be defended. (This again follows the tacit acceptance of the “value of differentiation”). But order to do this, he claims, we should first investigate institutions for what they are. This provokes him to imagine an anthropologist whose task is to reconstitute the value system of the ‘Western societies’.

She is a true anthropologist: she knows that only a prolonged, in-depth analysis of courses of action can allow her to discover the real value system of the informants among whom she lives, who have agreed to welcome her and, whose account for this system in terms to which she must avoid giving too much weight. This much is obvious: it is the most ordinary ethnographic method imaginable” (...) the Moderns present themselves to her in the form of domains, (...) A metaphor often used in her presence involves geographical maps, with territories circumscribed by borders and marked in contrasting colours. When one is “in Science”, she is assured, one is not “in Politics” and when one is “in Politics”, one is not “in Law”, and so forth.” (...) “Although her informants are obviously attached to these distinctions, she comes to understand very quickly (a few weeks spent doing fieldwork, or even just reading newspapers, will have sufficed to convince her) that with these stories about domains she is being taken for a ride (...) In short, she sees that she will not be able to orient her research according to the Moderns’ domains. (Latour, 2013: 28-9)

To simplify, Latour suggests that the attachment of social actors to their domains is something that we need to – gently, but firmly – overcome. The aim must be to identify the networks of relationships in which their action really takes place and the modes of interpretations (“prepositions”) that operate in such networks. The “real” work of institutions (and hence, the points of struggle for trust), he claims, does not take place in domains but is located in a configuration of modes and networks. In this constellation a particular mode of interpretation (law, religion, science, politics, etc.) with its particular ways

of verifying what is relevant and true is connected to particular networks of actors. In this regard, climate science cannot be justified and defended as merely “science”, but as a network of argumentations, and complicated moments of translations (or passes) from making field findings, to modeling them in computers, to defending them in scientific publications, to debating them with “industrialists” and politicians – and to defending them against “sceptics”.

This is not the place to dwell on the consequent details and not always helpful language of Latour’s vision (which will no doubt be highly controversial and much criticized) about the anatomy of modern thinking. What is useful here is to note that his version of lament is explicitly not based on the value of autonomous “domains”. Instead, it is a complaint about the language of autonomous domains and the way this language and its “category mistakes” are an obstacle for seeing what “actually” happens. For mediatization research, this can open some worthwhile horizons.

First, this can help to construct a new object of research which is not this or that “institution” but the network in which actors are involved and active in. In a sense, this parallels (in a metaphorical sense, anyway) with Hepp’s (2013) argument about “de-territorialization” of mediatization research, but studying such “figurations” in an institutional level and across them. It might help to open a new way of looking what actually takes place in the “institutional level” of mediatization that Hjarvard (2008; 2013) has emphasized.

Second, inside this focus on network constellations, this means focusing on the relationships between actors. We should not only be interested on how the media (say increasingly aggressive journalism) mediatizes “politics” but also on how it affects the (power) relations between politicians, between politicians and economic actors, between politicians and scientists, etc. In this regard, mediatization of “power” or “politics” would look at how the new media environment and its attention economy affects the resources of power and the consequent power bargaining in the actor relations of decision making networks (see Kunelius/Reunanen, 2012a, b). This would also mean that methodologically, an important starting point would be the experiences of mediatization of the actors in these networks (see also Davis, 2007).

Third, in order to understand such actor relationships where different kinds of power resources are drawn from, we should consider focusing on how such configurations are mobilized around particular issues and problems. This would mean looking at issues of mediatization through a lense provided not by a language of domains but through issue or policy networks and their actor-relations. Instead on mediatization of politics, economy or the academy, then, we would have mediatization of immigration policy, elderly care – or climate change. (see Reunanen et al 2010; Kunelius 2014).

4. Mediatization discourse as/and rationalization

Trying to make sense of the interface between the “public sphere” and religious experience, Jürgen Habermas (2010) recently captured our already familiar genre of complaint particularly strongly.

Today, under conditions of globalized capitalism, the political capacities for protecting social integration are becoming dangerously restricted. As economic globalization progresses, the picture that systems theory sketched of social modernization is acquiring ever sharper contours in reality. Autopoietic functional subsystems conform to logics of their own; they constitute environments for one another, and have long since become independent from the under complex networks of the various lifeworlds of the population. “The political” has been transformed into the code of self-maintaining administrative subsystem, so that democracy is in danger of becoming a mere façade, which the executive agencies turn toward their helpless clients. System integration responds to functional imperatives and leaves social integration behind as far too cumbersome a mechanism. Because the latter still proceeds via the minds of actors, its operation would have to rely upon the normative structures of lifeworlds that are, however, more and more marginalized. (Habermas, 2010: 15-16).

This complaint about the growing “independence” of self-maintaining administrative systems, grows out the key distinction in Habermas’ thinking, between systems and life-world. For mediatization research, this distinction offers an early definition of what mediatization is. Again, it partly comes in the form of lament. In his “Theory of Communicative Action” (1987), Habermas speaks of “mediatization” as a process in which:

... a progressively rationalized lifeworld is both uncoupled from and made dependent upon increasingly complex, formally organized domains of action, like the economy and the state administration. This dependency, resulting from the mediatization of the lifeworld by system imperatives, assumes the sociopathological form of an internal colonization when critical disequilibria in material reproduction – that is, systemic crises amenable to systems-theoretical analysis – can be avoided only at the cost of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld – that is, of ‘subjectively’ experienced, identity-threatening crises or pathologies.” (Habermas 1987, 305, emphasis original.)

As is now evident this “mediatization” is drawn from Habermas’ encounter with systems theory, his dialogue with Parsons and the controversy with Luhmann. It is the generalized system media of “power” and “money” that here colonize the lifeworld. But Habermas’ aim is also a critique of systems theory (or “functionalist reason”, as the subtitle of the book clarifies), and for this he builds an analysis of the particular potentials inscribed in the “medium” of the lifeworld: natural (propositional) language and the potential communicative competence and possibilities of learning imbedded in it.

There is no space here to open the nuances and problems of this claim. Instead, I will conclude with a shortcut to three implications it offers.

First, by opening the horizon of intersubjectivity, this “medium” is the key to social integration – instead of system integration. Hence, from the point of view of lifeworlds it suggests that also they are or can be mediatized. In Habermas’ original claim this “colonialization” is done by money and power (the Parsonsian symbolically generalized system “media” *par excellence*), but – if we continue the thought a bit further – this also can apply to “media” proper. This can be and has been a background of much media research focusing on the “mediatization” of everyday life (not always with this vocabulary, of course). It is inspired by a lament about how “the media” penetrates everyday level of social integration – say how mobile, internet technology reorders family life – and how it both breaks up and opens new pattern of social integration (see Hepp, 2013, also Hjarvard 2013: 103-152).

Second, the social integration capacity of (linguistic) communication also relies on the idea that this capacity is not differentiated in the same way as the more institutionally and strategically operating system steering media. Hence, Habermas’ fierce confrontation with Luhmann and insistence that the institutions or networks whose “mediatization” we study are not completely driven by system integration interaction but that they, too, need some kind of integration devices. This means claiming that also systems (or power networks) need lifeworld resources to function, both inside their respective “domains” or “networks” – and in their relationship with the messy “everyday life”: at some level, even power and money have to be legitimated and must build some kind of consent.

Hence, thirdly, the idea of communicative rationality – as a diffuse horizon incorporated into language and functioning at a primary level of social integration – opens yet another perspective to the theme of lament. Briefly put, we could argue that the very genre of mediatization lament takes place at the moment when lifeworlds – either the “everyday” ones or the ones we find inside institutions – feel themselves threatened. Indeed, lifeworlds are articulated or become visible (largely) at such very moments of colonialization. In this respect, popular mediatization discourse is can be seen evidence of the existence of a diffuse communicative “surplus”, “residue” or “resource or resistance” incorporated in language. Thus Socrates – lamenting the decline of the face-to-face communication infra-structure – is worried about the fate of knowledge and reason (logos). Bourdieu is infuriated by the disrespect of journalists towards sociological reason, but makes a plea for uniting the “cultural producers” in a fight to protect chances of “universalism”. Latour wants the Moderns to see themselves for what they are to prepare them for “diplomatic” encounters and negotiations with their Others (including nature). Habermas constructs communicative rationality as something that resists colonization of the system. And so on. “Miscommunication is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place”, as Peters suggested.

The lesson here perhaps is that lament is a symptom of rationalization, in the full complexity of the term. Any standard reference teaches you that rationalization has two interrelated meanings. It refers to the “act of making something intelligible” as well as to the attempt to provide justifications for behavior by making it appear rational or socially acceptable, often by “(sub-consciously) ignoring, concealing, or glossing over its real motive; an act of making such a justification” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). This brings me to the short version of this footnote to mediatization debates: Our love of the lament about the media should teach us to analyze both the academic and popular fuss about mediatization as rationalization discourse in both senses of the term, and appreciate it in this double sense.

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Biography

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