

# mediatization



concept, changes,  
consequences

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# Foreword: Coming to Terms With ‘Mediatization’

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Society is witnessing a historic shift from a dualistic communication environment in which mass mediated communication variously gradually came to complement or undermine the traditional reliance on interpersonal communication. We are moving towards an environment characterized by diverse, intersecting, and still-evolving forms of multimodal, interactive, networked forms of communication. The academic world is grappling with competing concepts and frameworks by which to understand these changes. Although we seem gripped by new communicative forms—digitally convergent, hybridized, remediated, intertextual—it is the analysis of the entire communication environment that matters. This in turn rests on a critical understanding of the socio-historical processes that shape and are shaped by that environment—globalization, individualization, commercialisation, and (the object of this volume) mediatization.

Both society in general and scholars in particular have yet to come to terms with the growing importance of media power. This book examines the idea that, in order to do so, scholars must also come to terms with, indeed to embrace, the notion of ‘mediatization.’ Although an awkward word in the English language, scholarship is now conducted within a global, and therefore multilingual, dialogue. Distinct from, though overlapping with, the notion of ‘mediation,’ which exists in most languages to refer to processes of conciliation, intervention, or negotiation among separated, often conflicted, parties, in the Germanic and Scandinavian

languages, 'mediatization' refers to the meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are historically shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations.

Such distinctions are all too easily lost in translation. But the argument here is that the media do more than mediate in the sense of 'getting in between'—whether to generate mutual understanding by reconciling adversaries or whether to promote (and naturalise the effects of) powerful interests, as insightfully analysed by Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rather, they also alter the historical possibilities for human communication by reshaping relations not just among media organizations and their publics but among all social institutions—government, commerce, family, church, and so forth.

This claim is implicitly marked even in how we label our work. Several decades ago, research in this field was published in books entitled 'Mass Communication and...' or 'Television and...' Now, our books are retitled 'Mediated Politics' or 'Mediated Health' or 'Mediated Family'. This linguistic shift signals an analytic refocusing from a social analysis in which the mass media constitute one among many influential but independent institutions whose relations with the media can be usefully analysed, to one in which everything is mediated, the claim being that all influential institutions in society have themselves been transformed through the history of mediation. According to the earlier model, media and communication studies analyse the relationship between media and politics, say, while in other disciplines they analyse the relation between politics and the health, or society and the family. But in a heavily mediated world, one cannot analyse the relationship between politics and the health, or society and the family, without also recognizing the importance of the media. All these spheres and their intersections have become mediated—or mediatized.

It seems that, for a growing body of European theorists, several of them represented in this volume, 'mediation' is too broad a term, referring not only to the socially constitutive importance of media but also to other mediations—transport, money, narrative, and, the paradigmatic case, language. On the one hand, the claim that the media are now as powerful in shaping society as are these other mediations is in itself exciting, challenging. On the other hand, we must not lose sight of the distinctiveness of media institutions, of their forms and devices, and of the associated activities and practices by which they are becoming embedded in every sphere of life—work, leisure, learning, culture, politics, health, and even our intimate understanding of ourselves. Mediatization retains this distinctiveness and also, usefully, encompasses the very multiplicity of today's media (including and replacing separate discussions of print, radio, television, internet, etc.), recognizing changes in the media themselves, as new and diverse technological and symbolic forms emerge to complicate established theories of communication.

Thus the concept allows us to rethink questions of media power in terms of richly contextualized, strongly historical processes that reject narrowly linear assumptions about media effects or impacts.

These are grand claims we are making—first, that the media mediate everything, entering into and shaping the mundane yet significant relations among individuals and between individuals and society; and second, *as a result*, that the media mediate more than ever before, ushering in historical changes that may be judged more or less critically. The first is a claim about meaning, process, connection; the second is a claim about the gradual transformation of power relations among institutions and publics; these claims are, of course, mutually interdependent. Consider a striking parallel. In the early nineteenth century, Napoleon mediatized the states of the Holy Roman Empire by interposing an intermediate level of territorial authorities between the miscellany of independent cities, the princes and the archbishops and the Emperor, as legitimized by the German Laws of Mediatization. As Wikipedia explains, 'Mediatization, defined broadly, is the subsumation of one monarchy into another monarchy in such a way that the ruler of the annexed state keeps his or her sovereign title and, sometimes, a measure of local power.'

It appears today that, with scarcely less audacity, Rupert Murdoch and the other media moguls of this world are interposing their global capitalist media institutions between publics and governments (and other religious, educational, or cultural authorities). Just how far the power of both publics and their traditional authorities has in fact been 'annexed' by the media is as yet unresolved. But it makes a fascinating agenda for the chapters that follow.

## NOTE

1. An article-length development of these ideas is published as Livingstone (2009), On the mediation of everything, *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 1–18.