

Media and Communication Studies Intersections and Interventions



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Researching 'mediatised worlds': Non-mediacentric media and communication research as a challenge

Andreas Hepp

1. A PROBLEM: THE MEDIATION OF EVERYTHING

This chapter addresses both a theoretical as well as a practical problem in present media and communication research, namely 'the mediation of everything', as outlined by Sonia Livingstone¹. While for a long time, within media and communication studies, the question of the 'effect' or 'influence' of media on other social spheres was dominant in all debates, we increasingly find research implying a general mediation of the social through technical media. As Livingstone (2009: 2) puts it:

It seems that we have moved from a social analysis in which the mass media comprise one among many influential but independent institutions whose relations with the media can be usefully analysed to a social analysis in which everything is mediated, the consequence being that all influential institutions in society have themselves been transformed, reconstituted, by contemporary processes of mediation.

As a consequence of this shift in approach, media and communication studies are confronted with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they gain an increasing relevance as questions of media communication are part of researching (nearly) 'everything'. On the other hand, they lose their specificity if their focus is no longer on mass communication as a separate field but rather on the 'mediation of everything'.

¹ This chapter was inspired by a long running discussion with Nick Couldry and Shaun Moores on the project of developing a 'non-mediacentric approach' within media and communication studies. I would like to thank both of them for the contributions they made on various occasions.

Within this context I will develop a threefold reflection and by this reformulate the thesis of the 'mediation of everything'. My fundamental argument is that the concept of mediatisation offers a promising integrative perspective to research the 'mediation of everything'. However, *as* we are confronted with what one might call 'mediatised worlds' it becomes necessary to develop a research perspective that investigates the construction of the 'centrality' of 'the media', or in other words non-mediacentric media and communication research. Finally, I will conclude with three more practical points relating to what might be relevant for such an approach. In so doing I would like to contribute to the current discussions about 'mediacentrism' within media and communication research, which goes back to reflections on the 'mediating' aspects of technology-based communication (cf. Martín-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone 1994). My main argument is that the multiple ways in which media and communication research needs to embrace a fundamentally non-mediacentric approach has to be differentiated, i.e. a non-mediacentric approach calls for a 'transmedial', 'dialectical' and 'culturally sensitive' kind of research.

2. 'MEDIATISED WORLDS': THE MOULDING FORCES OF THE MEDIA

When theorising 'mediatisation', a useful starting point is the conceptualisation put forward by Friedrich Krotz (2008). He conceptualises mediatisation – just as individualisation, globalisation and commercialisation – as 'meta processes'. A meta process is not an empirical process in the sense that we can investigate it, like – for example – a certain discourse or a person crossing the street. Meta processes are superior theoretical approaches to describing long-term processes of change. So a 'meta process' cannot be researched empirically as a single transformation phenomenon. Only the formulation of theories that account for such 'meta processes' allows us to structure the complexity of different empirical data in order to gain a deeper understanding of ongoing (long-term) processes of change. In this sense, Krotz (2008: 23) defines mediatisation as follows:

By mediatization we mean the historical developments that took and take place as a result of change in (communication) media and the consequences of those changes. If we consider the history of communication through music, or the art of writing, we can describe the history of human beings as a history of newly emerging media and at the same time changing forms of communication. The new media do not, in general, substitute for one another [...].

As such, mediatisation articulates the process of an increasing diffusion of technical communication media in different social and cultural spheres. In such a non-specific understanding, mediatisation is certainly related to the so-called medium theory, which distinguishes between oral cultures, scribal cultures, modern print cultures and current globalised electronic cultures (Meyrowitz, 1995; Schofield and Clark, 2009). Without discussing these debates relating to medium theory in much detail, they refer to the idea of an increasing mediatisation as not just a linear process of change but as a process with certain tipping points; the specificity of certain media is related to the specificity of a certain cultural change.

While this conceptualisation is an important starting point for an understanding of mediatisation in general, it is necessary to theorise the relation of media change and further processes of change in a more complex manner than medium theory does. This is precisely what a theory of mediatisation introduces. Mediatisation adopts the central idea of medium theory, namely that 'media change' and 'cultural change' are interrelated, but tries to capture this not merely from the perspective of the relation *from* media *to* cultural change. To be able to do this, two interrelated aspects of mediatisation need to be acknowledged, a quantitative one and a qualitative one.

Put simply, the quantitative aspects of mediatisation are marked by the word 'more'. Basically, it is obvious that throughout history the basic number of technological media available to us has increased, as have our different uses of these media. As such, mediatisation from this perspective should be understood as an ongoing process of increasing media and communication tools with (a) temporal, (b) spatial and (c) social dimensions (cf. Krotz, 2007).

On the temporal level, an increasing number of technological media are becoming ever more accessible for more people on a continuous basis. Currently, television, for example, has no closedown period anymore, but is an ongoing, never-ending flow of technologically mediated communication. The internet makes it possible to surf all the time, and so on.

On the spatial level, media are more and more accessible across different localities. The telephone, for example, is no longer a media technology related to a certain place of communication, either the office, private home or public telephone box. Personalised mobile communication is available across virtually all spaces. The same can be said for television, which has

again left the domain of the private home through the phenomenon of 'public viewing' (cf. Hartmann, 2008).

These examples inherently implicate the social level of mediatisation, which refers to more and more social contexts being marked by media use. Computer use, for example, is no longer something that is confined to the work context, it stretches over the very different social spheres of the private and public, work time and spare time, and so on.

Taking these three dimensions of the quantitative perspective on mediatisation together, it becomes apparent that this perspective encompasses more than a linear process of increase. With the increase of different media in general, we have a synergetic process that stimulates mediatisation additionally, for example in the way cross-media content production is more and more characterised by mediated communication. The quantitative perspective makes it obvious that we are confronted with a long-standing process of increasing media and communication technologies and usages which inevitably also implies a qualitative change.

As such, the qualitative aspects of mediatisation – how the spread of certain media is related to the specificity of cultural change – need to be considered as well. In a nutshell, these qualitative aspects of mediatisation focus on the crucial questions of how technological media 'structure' the way we communicate, how the way we communicate via media is reflected in technological change.

This consideration refers to Raymond Williams, who has argued that media are at the same time both 'technology and cultural form' (Williams, 1990). Technology refers to material procedures and formations that are used in acting – in our case: in communicating – to increase the possibilities of acting (Rammert, 2007: 17). In this sense, "*media of communication*" signifies "*technological systems with a certain functionality and potential for the spreading of information*" (Kubicek, 1997: 220) such as print. The expression 'media technological change' refers, then, to the change of these technological systems, which has gained a dynamic impulse by means of digitalisation (and the related miniaturisation) in recent decades. Thus, we can say that the qualitative aspect of mediatisation also focuses on the material character of media technological change, in the sense that media technologies have a 'materialised specificity', based on communicative actions and practices, but which at the same time also structures these communicative actions and practices (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, 1994).

What can be observed here is something I have called the 'moulding forces' of the media (cf. Hepp, 2009); media themselves exert a certain 'pressure' on the way we communicate. Television, for example, has the pressure to present ideas in a more linear mode and with a suitable visual presentation. Print, to take another example, makes it possible to develop more complex argumentation as it can be read more slowly and offers scope for complex ways of structuring text. And the mobile phone, as a last example, makes it possible to stay in ongoing communicative connectivity with a group of people while being on the move – and exerts a certain pressure to do this. All these examples, however, also illustrate that this is not a direct effect of the material structure of the media, but something that only becomes concrete in different ways of mediation – by certain forms of communication. As present forms of symbolic action increasingly integrate technological media, 'communicative change' and 'media change' together form mediatisation as a qualitative change that cannot be reduced to each other by arguing that one would determine the other.

Having said this, the concept of the 'moulding forces' of the media is based on the idea that there are different specificities of different media that we have to take into account while researching change. However, these specificities of different media are produced in human acting and without indicating 'one trajectory' or 'logic' of the media. We should thus not just focus on effects but also on the specificity of different media in multi-level transformative processes.

Relating this back to the social phenomenology formulated by Schütz and Luckmann (1989) and their concept of 'everyday life-world', we can say that the present 'life-worlds' are highly mediatised. In this sense we can speak of 'mediatised worlds' (see <http://www.mediatisedworlds.net>). The concept of mediatised worlds points to the fact that the articulation of meaning in an everyday life-world is unquestionably interwoven with processes of media communication. Within mediatised worlds the moulding forces of the media are a constitutive part of their social construction. This cannot, however, be equated with the idea that in a 'mediatised world' everything is communicated by technical media.

3. NON-MEDIACENTRISM: DECENTRING AND CONTEXTUALISING MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

While we see an increasing mediatisation of the everyday through media, David Morley recently reminded us to be careful of overestimating the centrality of the media in an unreflected way. In his latest book *Media, Modernity and Technology* (Morley, 2007) and in a separate article (Morley, 2009) he argues for an approach he calls 'non-mediacentric media studies', which he outlines as follows:

Clearly enough, in the present context, we have to move beyond media studies' historically rather exclusive focus on television so as to also address the contemporary significance of a broader range of communication technologies. However, [...] we need to 'decentre' the media, in our analytical framework, so as to better understand the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other. [...] The key issue here, to put it paradoxically, is how we can generate a non-mediacentric form of media studies, how to understand the variety of ways in which new and old media accommodate to each other and coexist in symbiotic forms and also how to better grasp how we live with them as parts of our personal or household 'media ensemble' (Morley, 2007: 200).

Within this quote Morley shares the argument outlined above, namely that the changes in media and communication over the last few decades also have implications for our understanding of media and communication studies. The idea that this discipline can focus exclusively on a single medium becomes more and more problematic when the internet makes it possible to distribute very different forms of 'media' along one technical infrastructure that transgresses into more and more aspects of everyday life. In this regard, media and communication research has to focus on what Morley calls whole 'media ensembles'. In other words, they have to develop a transmedial point of view. This transmedial perspective, however, should be at the same time non-mediacentric, it should 'decentre' as well as 'contextualise' the media.

In terms of decentring the media, the concept of the 'mediated centre' is particularly helpful (Couldry, 2003: 45). The mediated centre helps us to understand what the centring forces of the media are. In many ways, the mediated centre represents the myth that the media (as an acronym for the totality of mass media) offer a privileged access point to the centre of a society: 'the media' communicate what is 'going on' within a society and in the world (cf. also Couldry, 2006). This allows an understanding of

what 'media rituals' are – the different forms within a society by which the construction of the mediated centre takes place and by which the 'centrality' of the media is confirmed. So 'decentring the media' basically means: *analysing the process by which the media are constructed as central in present societies.*

However, the main problem in the context of mediatisation is that the concept of the mediated centre is mainly linked to an older approach in media and communication studies, i.e. not researching the present mediatised environment but the traditional mass media being 'centred' on a certain 'sender'. In an increasingly mediatised society, symbolised by a saturation of technical media enabling personal communication, the traditional mass media lose their dominant position. Therefore the construction of the mediated centre is also weakened. Nick Couldry (2009: 444f) himself recently addressed this, when he argued that *"instead of interpersonal media becoming divorced from centrally produced media flows and offering an alternative social 'centre' to that offered by the media, it is more likely that 'social' media and centrally produced media become ever more closely linked"*. The so-called social media of Web 2.0 are increasingly linked to 'traditional' mass media (and their digitalised descendants). For example, Wikipedia has become well known through articles in journals or newspapers, Facebook is used for marketing traditional media content, online discussions are distributed by television etc. It could therefore be argued that internet-based media do not necessarily work *against* the articulation of a 'mediated centre'. As Couldry (2009: 447) puts it: *"Instead of collapsing, 'the media' will become a site of a struggle for competing forces: market-based fragmentation vs continued pressures of centralization that draw on new media-related myths and rituals"*.

Nevertheless, it remains relevant to extend the concept of the mediated centre in the context of current processes of mediatisation. In a sense, an 'everyday mediacentrism' which constructs access to and usage of digital media as essential can also be observed. An example of this is what we might call a 'mobile phone centrism', meaning not only that the possession of a mobile phone is expected but also that one is in principle subsequently reachable anytime and everywhere. If someone resists this, she or he has to explicitly argue for such a position. Here we see smaller forms of media centrism at work, but again linking mass media discourses (for example: advertising) with everyday discourses (for example: communicating the expectation that friends and partners are always reachable).

Therefore, 'decentrism' means two things. On the one hand, it is the analysis of processes through which the possession and use of certain media are

constructed as central (that is, as important) in everyday life. On the other hand, it calls for more research of the processes through which media in their various forms are constructed as the main interfaces to the 'core resources' of a society. Very often, both come together, but not necessarily. As already mentioned, however, such research also has to be based on the attempt to contextualise 'the media'. As the discussion of the concept of mediatisation has already exposed, it makes no sense to conceptualise 'the media' as a somewhat unique force with a single logic, an appraisal that is additionally valuable in relation to a critique of the myth of 'the media' as the centre of society. In our research we are not confronted with a unique thing we might call 'the media'. Rather we are confronted with various different forms of technically mediated communication that always take place in their specific context. While there have been various stimulating reflections on such a contextualised form of media and communication research over the past quarter of a century (cf. for example Lull, 1987; Morley and Silverstone, 1991; Schröder, 1994; Ang, 1996), there is, however, one caveat. Contextualising the media in relation to non-media-centric media and communication research might also lead us to conclude that media are far less central than one might have expected at the beginning of this research. To explain this, two empirical studies focusing on 'media and migration' are highly relevant (Moores and Metykova, 2010; Hepp, et al., 2011).

Digital media, especially the internet, are often deemed to be at the core of present diasporas (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Everett, 2009). However, our own research on the communicative connectivity of the Moroccan, Turkish and Russian migrant communities in Germany points to a more balanced view (cf. Hepp et al., 2011). Media are also relevant for migrants to connect translocally. In this respect, internet-based media are increasingly appropriated in other ways through 'small media' (Dayan, 1999) – video, letters, telephone etc. – that enable personalised links within the migrant community and access to 'origin media'. Present migrants can thus be described as 'mediatised migrants': their life-worlds are 'mediatised worlds', which indicates that the present articulation of the status of 'being migrant' cannot be thought of beyond the media. This does not, however, mean that we can speak of a 'digital diaspora'. Through our contextualised qualitative research, including interviews, observations and network analyses, the co-articulation of a cultural migrant identity and communicative networking, which implies that a certain migrant identity does not have any particular communicative connectivity as an 'outcome', becomes apparent. Or vice versa, the communicative networking does not have the

'effect' of a specific cultural identity. Rather, the interrelation between cultural identity and communicative connectivity is exposed as a co-articulation in which the two are mutually reinforcing. And within these processes of co-articulation, *different* media of personal communication (telephone, mobile phone, e-mail, social web) and the media of mass communication (television, newspaper, WWW) go hand in hand with each specific 'moulding force'.

Contextualising the media might even go further, as outlined by Shaun Moores and Monika Metykova (2010). Based on qualitative interviews, they researched the environmental experiences of trans-European migrants. In their phenomenology they typified four fundamental environmental experiences. First, the initial experiences on arrival; second, the emerging senses of place; third, dealing with previously taken-for-granted experiences; and finally transportation and communication links. Without going into too much detail, just this very brief overview of their main analytical framework demonstrates a further contextualising of 'the media' as practices of place-making – media are only relevant for *one* form of environmental experiences. That is, Moores and Metykova (2010: 185) show that media offer migrants the opportunity to establish "*communication links [that] are stitched into day-to-day or week-to-week routines*". However, these links have their limits, as the first and main problem in migrant place-making is to handle the new physical surroundings.

4. PERSPECTIVES: RESEARCHING MEDIATISATION IN A NON-MEDIA-CENTRIC WAY

Up to this point, two core arguments have been developed. First, if we consider the present media change, the concept of mediatisation seems to be a helpful starting point for empirical research, as long as this concept is not reduced to a certain idea of 'one media logic'. Second, if we understand our present 'life-worlds' as 'mediatised worlds', that is as being irreversibly interrelated with processes of media and communication, a non-mediacentric approach becomes very fruitful. But what might this mean practically? Reflecting on this question, there are three points I want to highlight:

1. *Transmediality of research*: If one accepts increasing mediatisation as one of the main present 'meta processes' of change, we can only capture this if we focus not on one medium but on 'media environ-

ments' or 'media ensembles' of an individual or a collective. Only by comparing the appropriation of different media in a cultural field can we obtain an idea of the 'moulding forces' specific media have or do not have.

2. *Dialectic of research*: When focusing on the different 'moulding forces' in a certain cultural field, we should do this in a dialectic way. This implies not approaching the media from the outset as the main force, but rather reflecting how processes of media change are related (or not related) to other processes of change. The decentring and contextualising moments of a non-mediacentric media and communication research are of particular importance here.
3. *Cultural sensitivity of research*: Such an approach is inevitably highly culturally sensitive. The cultural patterns of 'practice', 'discourse' and 'thinking' in the different context fields have to be acknowledged in order to capture the relevance (or irrelevance) of media in them. So any typology or generalisation should from the outset be the result of a grounded research process, and not a theoretical deduction.

In a nutshell, one might say that one of the main challenges of researching current 'mediatised worlds' is to investigate the everyday articulation of the relevance of media and communication without assuming this from the outset.

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