Mediatization

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> **Mediatization**
> refers to the powerful influences and effects that media technologies and organizations exert within everyday life.

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"Media...what?" Mediatization

Kentarō flops onto his futon, groping in the darkness to plug in his phone. He's got to get up early but can't resist a flick through Facebook. Face aglow, he scrolls the newsfeed until drawn into a post on some hot-button controversy du jour. Kentarō hates or loves what the author says (it doesn't matter which, just that he's riled up), and he spends an hour trading comment-stream insults with someone of opposite political faith. Then he

impulse-buys a hoodie before finally shutting things down for a few hours of fitful sleep.

This isn't a particularly pretty picture, but it's quite commonplace in its basics. And lots is going on behind the scene, in terms of life impacts for Kentarō from this interlude with social and mobile media. There's the data harvesting of his bedtime web-surfing to inform future advertisements (Wells, 2016). There's an echo-chamber hardening and/or misinforming of his opinions (Cinelli et al., 2021). Not least, there's the blue-light sabotage of his sleep (Biali Haas, 2018). Such 'media effects'—sociopolitical, psychological, and physiological—are often grouped by scholars under the concept *mediatization*. This term is definable, in its simplest sense, as the powerful influences that media technologies and organizations exert on everyday life.

Mediatization isn't a pretty word, being an anglicization of the German *mediatisierung*; however, no one has yet coined a term more elegant and equally accurate (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). 'Mediation,' after all, merely indicates message conveyance, as though medium doesn't matter to meaning. Marshall McLuhan's contrary dictum—"the medium is the message" (1964)—is clearly an overstatement. But equally obviously, our interpretation of any *text* is influenced by *contexts*, such as whether it's mediated by page, in person, or via an electronic device. Arguably, the latter influence is especially powerful when that machine is a portal into communications spaces such as the internet, social media, and virtual reality.

In recent decades, these media effects have been investigated most intensively under the banner-label *mediatization*. With roots in the 1980s, and based in Europe and the United Kingdom, this tradition attained its prominence in the 2000s. Like most longstanding communication fields, it is very multidisciplinary.

This is reflected in mediatization's customary division into two branches—*social-constructivist* and *institutionalist* (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). These approaches focus, respectively, on psychological concerns and more political and economic matters.

Constructivists would concentrate on Kentarō's late-night rage posting, plus how sluggish and irritable he'll be the next day. They study how the physical properties and technological capacities of media operate mentally and interpersonally in the **'social construction'** of societal realities—that is, how a society's taken-for-granted values and attitudes are shaped by its central institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1968). Constructivist mediatization scholars study media as the main mechanism for this social construction. For prime example, consider the always-accessible ubiquity of current communications, alongside their visuality and/or verbal brevity—first TV, then Tweets, and now TikToks. This multimedia ambience permeates public discourse with "simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization, visualization and stereotypization" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 233).

While also a psychological phenomenon, Kentarō's compulsive hoodie purchase is more in the wheelhouse of mediatization *institutionalists*, who would consider the smartphone-mediated intrusion of corporations (plus who knows what other organizations) into what should be his sleeping hours. They examine the increasing political-economic centrality and consolidation of media sectors, from advertising and public relations to news, polling, entertainment, education, and consumer technology. Their focus is on how these institutions converge with each other and, increasingly, with everything else in our post-industrial 'symbolic economy,' where data, brand, and services reign (Reich, 1991). Consider, for far-flung examples, the increasing computerization and internet-connectivity of cars, or the mega-money spectacle of YouTube influencers.

Contemporary mediatization scholarship aims to bring together constructivist and institutionalist approaches (Couldry & Hepp, 2013), mutually illuminating media effects and societal contexts. They've been compelled to undertake this complex task by emergent technologies that—weirdly but truly—are transforming mediatization from abstract theory and cyberpunk fiction to literal fact, by blurring distinctions between communications and physical reality. This encompasses various often-connected examples. One is Artificial Intelligence (AI). Another is 'deepfakes,' which are photorealistic but illusory videos. There is also the proliferation of microcomputers and sensors being embedded within infrastructure, products, and people—also known as 'the internet of things.' And yes, this includes people. Reportedly, Swedes especially are early adopters of hand-implanted data chips for ID and contactless payment (Winterburn, 2020). Not least, the COVID context has hastened the adoption of virtual reality (VR) for homebound folks, both in the loose sense of Zoom-mediated work and socializing, and literally, in the mass adoption of VR headsets (Anderson, 2021).

CEO Mark Zuckerberg has prophesied that social-media interactivity will augment VR popularity (Stein, 2021), and as prices fall and technical improvements make VR more hi-def, less bulky, and more mobile, our immersion in virtuality will become more ubiquitous and more seamless. In a technical sense it will also become less *mediated* and thus more imperceptibly *mediatized*.

This brings us to the tech-sector buzzword *metaverse*, upon which Facebook has staked a claim with its name change to Meta. The metaverse is variously and vaguely defined, being both buzz and prediction, but not description. Most commentators envision it as an imminent 'embodied internet,' as Zuckerberg puts it (Newton, 2021), in which digital communications and physical, everyday life are blurred or blended. This omnipresent mediatization

of life—socializing, relationships, work, even just walking down the street—will be powered by an array of existing and emergent technologies: 5/6G, 'the internet of things,' and AI; deepfakes and holograms; the internet and social media; VR and AR (augmented reality, meaning the superimposition of digital information on real reality as viewed through computerized screens). If metaverse futurists are right, this will first be mediated via goggles, then by eyeglasses, then using 'smart contact lenses' (Hackl, 2020; Koetsier, 2021), if not bodily embedded microchips.

Picture Kentarō again, in the not-so-distant future, thus kitted out as he starts his day or over-prolongs it, dividing his viewfinder attention between various data feeds, emails, chats, avatars, and whatever he's doing with his body. Mediatization scholars are working to understand this scenario's implications for social construction and political-economic power. Doubtless, the time has come to master the meanings of mediatization: the societal impacts of media institutions and their instruments.

Discussion Questions

- How would you explain *mediatization* to your parents or other older relatives? To some of your best friends? To your younger sibling or child?

- In this text, I write that mediatization theorists' "time has come." In a similar vein, I note that the impact of media effects on people is particularly powerful when the medium is internet-connected. Do you agree with these statements? Consider this question in relation to possible

counterarguments, such as the following:

- ◦ Literal message content (i.e., words, images) has more of an impact than how a message is conveyed (its medium).

- ◦ New media technologies and institutions aren't any more influential than earlier mass media (print, radio, etc.).

- ◦ Most people interpret messages according to pre-existing inclinations, such as individual personality, intellect, or cultural background, rather than the medium (i.e., physical newspaper, video screen, internet, smartphone) that conveys the message.

- Based on your background knowledge or some reading (e.g., Winterburn, 2020), would you be willing to adopt the 'bio hack' of having hand-implanted microchips for purposes such as identification and cashless payment? Consider your answer with regard to the psychological and relational impacts studied by *constructivist* mediatization theorists, and the broader economic and political significance that *institutionalist* mediatization scholars study.

- Mediatization is typically theorized in terms of its negative or worrisome ramifications, aspects, or potentials, from 'internet addiction' and eye strain to 'political polarization' and misinformation. What are some positive manifestations and possibilities of mediatization, and how much do you think they counterbalance the negatives?

- Consider how mediatization relates to *the metaverse*. Then, after reading some tech-industry news articles on that buzzword, devise your own one-sentence definition for the metaverse.

Exercise

For one to three days, don't use any digital communication device, or your TV (assuming you have one). After you've survived this experience, reflect upon it in terms of *constructivist* and perhaps *institutionalist* mediatization concerns. For each moment when you refrained from using such media, how difficult was it to do so emotionally or in terms of things you needed to get done? What impact did it have on your feelings or relationships, in the short or longer term? How long do you think you could make this 'digital abstinence' last?

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