

‘Mediatization and’ or ‘Mediatization of’? A response to Hepp et al.

Introduction

We welcome Hepp et al.’s (2015) response to our recent critique of the concept of ‘Mediatization’ (Deacon and Stanyer, 2014), which they also use to showcase new literature on this topic. Their article demonstrates why further robust debate on this matter is needed. For when internationally renowned academics start to declare ‘paradigmatic shifts’ then a much wider community of scholars need to consider whether or not the earth is moving for them (see Hepp et al., 2015:314-315,321).

Before further clarifying our position, we want to emphasise an important point: we are not denying that media institutions and technologies are of historical and ongoing significance. Nor that their role and power may be changing in profound and unpredictable ways. What we are challenging is the rise of a concept that claims to provide a ‘holistic’ theoretical framework for explaining and analysing such processes, but, in its application and trajectory, risks compounding conceptual confusion and thereby misdirecting the field. Our response here is limited to what we identify as the main issues to emerge from our recent dialogue with Hepp and his colleagues.

Of central concern are the related matters of ‘media causality’ and ‘media centrism’, which we identified as inherent tendencies within the mediatization literature. In response, Hepp et al. accuse us of failing to appreciate that the concept is concerned about the *inter-relationship* between mediatization and wider social cultural transformations, rather than the *influence* of the former over the latter. Essentially, we confuse correlation for causation. Furthermore, they claim we mistake ‘media centredness’ for ‘media centrism’. We accept that this is no vanity of small difference, for to be media-centred is a legitimate job description for a communication researcher, whereas to be media-centric is to be bad at the job. At first sight, these clarifications are reassuring. They set out a clear agenda for adopting what might be labelled a ‘Mediatization and’ approach. This acknowledges the existence of wider mediatization trends and then considers their relationship with other social and cultural domains, but does not presuppose the salience or centrality of the former in all or any of these contexts. This framework also potentially opens up questions of joint sufficiency and how wider processes may limit or inhibit mediatization processes. More generally, we can also see that ‘mediatization and’ approaches provide greater justification for employing synchronous research strategies, as the analytical problematic no longer revolves so centrally upon proving mediatization’s diachronic advance.

This is all well and good, but unfortunately, ‘Mediatization and’ approaches are not as prevalent in the wider literature as these authors suggest. It is far more common to encounter work that declares the ‘Mediatization of’ assorted social,

political and cultural domains and processes. This is clearly revealed in the lexicon of the literature, with its abundant references to the media as 'moulding forces', 'constitutive', 'key', 'transformative', able to 'force responses' and so on. It is in these 'Mediatization of' arguments that work in this area tends towards media-centrism and causal explanations. And it is in the conclusive demonstration of these causal changes over time that empirical evidence is at its weakest (a point conceded by Hepp et al on several occasions).

The next matter for debate concerns the validity of the methodology we used to initiate our original critique. In the article we surveyed references made to 'mediatization' in articles published in fourteen leading communication journals over a ten year period. The results revealed that the term was rarely defined and infrequently rooted in empirical work. Hepp et al dismiss our approach as 'simplified', arguing that terms like 'globalisation' or 'specialisation' would fail a similar stress test, but nobody would insist on their renunciation as a result. Additionally, they make the remarkable claim that our analysis of these leading refereed journals has led us to identify 'mediatization research at its weakest' (p.315) (journal editors please note for future reference). In response, we simply note that this was an initial scoping exercise which represented the start not the sum of our critique. Our subsequent discussion engaged fully with the higher-end literature, some of it written by the authors themselves. Furthermore, their comparison with terms like 'globalisation' and 'specialisation' is not legitimate, as these are broad descriptors that serve to orientate discussion rather than define it or delimit it (just as 'mediation' used to do). A more credible comparison would be to imagine a scenario where a growing number of scholars were suddenly to start referring to processes of 'global-tization' or 'special-tization', and where it would not be unreasonable to expect clarification as to what these neologisms denote and why the grammatical rulebook has required rewriting. At the very least, our review exposed a major disconnect between the high theory of 'mediatization' and its application within the field. In its most common application, the term is more a calling card than a concept.

This raises the question as to why this has occurred. In our view there are two explanations. The first relates to the rhetorical use of the term and the way it promotes media and communication analysis. Billig has observed a paradoxical irony that 'Mediatization' is used to describe 'the so-called logic of the media, while apparently following "the logic" of advertising and promotion' (2013: 114). Interestingly, this is at least partially acknowledged by Hepp and his colleagues who identify one of the benefits of 'mediatization studies' as residing in promotion of the field to other disciplines: 'We attempt to be 'media-centered' (or more specifically 'media- and communication- centered') in order to engage constructively with researchers who come to the table with "politics-centered" or "education-centered" concepts and frameworks' (p.316). We do not doubt the sincerity of these authors' belief that the concept is useful as a means for forging external engagements in productive and proportionate ways, but we doubt this discipline is endemic; indeed,

the term's wide and casual evocation suggests its principal use is to hype up the field rather than develop theoretical clarity. Our particular concern is that this promotional usage tends to encourage 'Mediatization of' rather than 'Mediatization and' approaches, as invitations 'to the table' may be seen depend on *a priori* assertions about the pivotal importance of media and communication dimensions.

We are also concerned about how the term is being used internally to discipline activity within the field. When scholars start using epoch-breaking terminology such as 'paradigm shifts', there is the implication that those who are not part of this community of believers are tethered to outmoded ideas and inadequate theories. We are sure we are not alone in finding these kinds of claims imperialistic and hubristic. Certainly, mediatization theorists can claim no monopoly on recognising the importance of analysing media and communication processes in a 'holistic' manner, as many have been emphasising the importance of doing so for decades (e.g. Halloran et al., 1970).

The second reason we identify for the opportunistic and indisciplined use of the concept is its expansive range. As we discussed, 'mediatization' encompasses and conflates a vast range of media and communication structures, processes and practices and by doing so, we suggested, has become 'a concept of no difference'. Hepp et al. reject this view, but their rebuttal only deepens our concerns. For example, they suggest 'mediatization' should be used 'as the term for conveying historical transformations' (2015: 318) but earlier in the piece they acknowledge resistance to change 'may be just as important to understand as social dynamics that induce transformations' (p.317). They provide the arrival of mass telephony in the US as an example of this resistance, but go on to argue that this 'cannot be just understood as an example of non-mediatization' (ibid.) because of the technology's importance in preserving valued social ties. So there you have it: if transformations are found, the mediatization thesis is proven; if transformations are not found, an identical conclusion should be drawn. It would seem, to adapt an Althusserian saw, mediatization has no outside.

Billig, M. (2013) *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Deacon, D. and Stanyer, J. (2014) 'Mediatization: Key Concept of Conceptual Bandwagon', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 36 no. 7 1032-1044

Hepp, A., Hjavard, S. and Lundby, K. (2015) 'Mediatization: Theorising the Interplay between Media, Culture and Society', *Media, Culture and Society*, 37(2):314-322

Halloran, J.; Elliott, P. and Murdock, G. (1970) *Demonstrations and Communication: A Case Study*, Harmondworth, England: Penguin Books.

