

Looking beyond the field: development of the mediatization research agenda

Olhando além do campo: o desenvolvimento da agenda de pesquisa da midiatização

Interview with STIG HJARVARD *

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FOR THE LAST decade Stig Hjarvard has been one of the leading proponents of the institutional perspective on mediatization theory. His work regarding both the theoretical framework and the empirical manifestations of the dynamics of the mediatization processes in different fields has enlarged the debate about the relationship between media developments and transformations of cultural and social institutions within the context of modernity. He is vice-chair at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication at the University of Copenhagen. He is head of the ECREA Section on Mediatization. He has written and edited numerous books, including *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (Routledge, 2013), which has been translated to Portuguese and published by Editora Unisinos (2014) and *Mediatization and Religion* (co-edited with Mia Lövhelm, Nordicom, 2012). We sat down with Prof. Hjarvard to discuss the potential and misconceptions of mediatization theory, the development of media and communication studies in the Nordic region and the advantages of interdisciplinary encounters.

MATRIZes: In Latin America, the first postgraduate program in Communication studies appeared in 1972 (University of São Paulo); its initial formation being mainly defined by the interdisciplinary links between Literature and Arts studies/fields. From an institutional perspective, their main goal was

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to legitimize the study of communication and popular texts culture within the academic field. Could you trace the history of media studies and the construction and legitimization of the media and communication academic field in Denmark, and in a wider sense, in the Nordic region?

Stig Hjarvard: As it seems to be the case in Latin America and in Brazil, part of media and communication studies grew out of the humanities and in particular out of literary studies, where it was focused on expanding the notion of texts and cultural objects in a broad sense. Some people were coming from literary studies, other people coming from history; I myself come from comparative literature. Also, a few others came from linguistics and other related fields. That was one of the inroads from the humanities and particularly from literary studies.

Another important inroad was a smaller segment within political communication studies that was interested in the way media have intervened in the existing election campaign process, by looking at mass communication and television's role, newspaper's role and so forth, questions about agenda setting. They had some influence particularly in journalism schools. That was another branch, not so big, but still recognizable in the field.

Finally, there was a third inroad from marketing/business studies in which people from advertising industries, but also various forms of business schools, were interested in how to analyze the targeting of audiences and consumer preferences, whether or not you are targeting the right segment and so forth. I think these have been the three inroads and each of these still have a basis in the various universities and business schools.

Clearly, the humanities have been the most prominent inroad to media and communication studies not only in Denmark, but also in Norway, to some extent also in Sweden. In Sweden, there is a stronger emphasis on social science approaches to media and communication studies, in particular, within political communication. Norway and Denmark have been very much based in humanities, not least literary studies. But as the years have passed, things change and there comes a dialogue between the various people. It is interesting to see that within the humanities, the people who were occupied with questions related to media and communication were very often seen by other people from the humanities as the *sociologists*. They were interested in the wider impact of media and communication in society and in culture. Whereas, looked upon from the outside they were clearly understood as people coming from the humanities. There has always been this tension where media and communication was actually based. Was it in humanities? Was it in social sciences?

Lately, there has been a technological inroad as well. The whole *datafication* of communication with insights from computer and information sciences has provided a new inroad for interesting discussions about media and communication in terms of IT and technology. I think that is a fourth but clearly later development.

MATRIZes: Your academic formation is on literature and media studies. You have worked with diverse objects/subjects as Journalism, Media History, Globalization and Media (Global Media Cultures), and for the past decade you have been one of the main proponents of mediatization theory, especially its institutional tradition. Your work has never been focused on media representations (although you have worked with journalism discourse and institutions); it has always had an emphasis on changing patterns of social relations based on empirical research, especially between institutions (media; journalism), society and culture. How and why did you start focusing on the theoretical development of mediatization theory?

Hjarvard: In many of my previous work, I have actually been very much looking at empirical issues, including media representations. These studies have been concentrated on Danish and Scandinavian media, not least news media, but such empirical work usually doesn't travel so well in the international research community compared to theoretical contributions. I have always tried to combine empirical analysis with theoretical considerations in various ways. I think one issue that is always prompted me was that somehow we needed to have a broader framework in order to understand the influence of media and communication. So much of media and communication studies have been focused on representations, but we need to consider structural and historical aspects as well.

I think theory development within media and communication studies itself has developed in a way in which, from my point of view, it has become increasingly inward looking, because it has been so immensely successful as a discipline of itself. It must be, if not *the* biggest success story of institutionalizing a scientific field, then at least among the three most successful during the last couple of decades. Within a very short time span so many universities have adopted media and communication programs, and they have grown, become very influential, also because a lot of students are taking courses in media and communication. In this process the field has, for obvious reasons, developed its own curriculum, its own horizon and framework – that is what happens when you institutionalize a research field as an educational program. As a consequence, the field has come to look a bit too much on the world of

media and communication itself, rather than understanding how media and communication come to influence and interact with the outside world.

I think the agenda of mediatization is exactly to provide, if not an answer, at least an agenda for discussing the influence between media and communication developments on one side, and then cultural and social development on the other. Perhaps my interest in this perspective is also partly due to the fact that I come from the outside. My background is different compared to the present situation in which all of the students we are having here and the younger researchers we employ, they are a product of our own research field. They come out with a media and communication background. There are many benefits to that. I am not going to argue against that. But one of the problems may be that you somehow come to have a bit more closed mindset about what media and communication are, whereas when you come from the outside, you may have a broader framework for understanding why media and communication matters, at the same time as you can acknowledge the limits of media and communication studies.

MATRIZes: That is a good entrance for my first question regarding mediatization. What is the potential of mediatization theory? Livingstone and Lunt (2015) and yourself (2014) have argued that it might be a significant contribution to social sciences. What is your opinion regarding what mediatization theory, and more broadly, media and communication studies can offer to the wider framework of social sciences and humanities?

Hjarvard: As I see it, mediatization as a theoretical framework hopefully offers a macro-sociological framework for investigating how media, culture and society interact in various ways. As such, the theory suggests general propositions about how this interaction takes place. At the same time, I think the actual investigation of how mediatization occurs and take place within the family, within political communications, has to be carried out in what Merton (1968) labeled a *middle range level*.

We cannot expect to have general outcomes of mediatization processes as such because there are so many variables at stake there. There are so many various contextual conditions that influence how the actual usage and the actual institutionalization of these processes come to take place. We need to be much more contextual and empirical grounded when making actual research. Nevertheless, we need a general framework for discussing these developments and comparing across terrains how things are spelled out.

That is the strength of mediatization as a concept. In a similar way, as other similar concepts like globalization, individualization and so forth pro-

vide a general macro-social perspective on some general trends. The idea of globalization as a concept or mediatization as a concept, it is not that it should provide a closed theoretical environment or be a confined theory in itself. We really need a lot of other theoretical concepts, for instance from public sphere theory or network theory. A lot of the work that has actually been done both in- and outside of media and communication studies is very useful for our understanding of mediatization processes.

The idea is *not* that we should start all over again as if our accumulated knowledge and existing concepts until now did not matter. Mediatization as a framework is much more an intellectual attempt to critically consider and synthesize results of existing research, as well as it allows us to rearticulate some fundamental questions that media and communication studies have not sufficiently been able to answer.

There is a lot of good stuff out there, so my point is not that without mediatization we will not get a grip of anything. It is rather to say that it may help us to understand why media and communication have come to take a more prominent place in contemporary societies compared to earlier on. It is also a concept that I hope will be useful for other disciplines in order to understand what is going on in their fields. Perhaps paradoxically, I find that people outside the media and communication school or scholarly field are in a sense more receptive to the notion of mediatization than within the media and communication field itself. It seems to me that this concept offers a bridge to other disciplines in order to clarify why media and communication may be more important now compared to earlier on.

MATRIZES: As you said, the theoretical framework of mediatization is not a blank slate from the previous media and communication research problems that have been discussed for the last half of the century. In a sense one of the tasks of scholars working under the umbrella of mediatization is reframing past research and scholarly works. Is that something you see as an important task at this stage of the theory's development?

Hjarvard: Yes. That is one of the great challenges now, trying to strengthen and qualify the argument by taking into account some of the studies that have been conducted outside the mediatization framework. That has already been done in the sense that, what I have been arguing and other scholars have argued are also based upon research done by other media scholars and scholars from other disciplines. What I find as a very fruitful venue are those studies, which have tried to combine a historical approach with a sociological approach. For instance, a very prominent example is Jürgen Habermas' study

of the transformation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), in which he tries to combine historical and sociological arguments. There are some historical changes taking place over a longer period within which the constellation between various institutional domains is changed. That combination of sociology and history is fruitful for the mediatization endeavor.

MATRIZes: Would you place for example John B. Thompson (1995) in that category as well?

Hjarvard: Yes, I would. I do not think it is a coincident that he also comes up with the idea. He calls it *mediazation*, but he points to the same process that media have become prominent in a particular phase of modernity. He emphasizes mediatization as an integral part of modernity, including part of an increased differentiation of society, and this makes media and communication important for the coordination both within various sectors but also between sectors within society at large. I find it very important to consider mediatization within the context of modernity, because otherwise we come to overlook some of the key dynamics to which mediatization is related. This is currently one of the dividing lines between people who would like to have a much longer, civilizational take on mediatization, looking at it from the dawn of civilization onwards and on the other hand people who tie the mediatization issue to processes of modernity. This distinction has clearly consequences for the historical argument.

MATRIZes: Building up from the difference between that tradition that thinks about mediatization from a larger, historical perspective and yourself working under the institutional dimension, I would like to hear your opinion regarding the media's influence and the effect produced by other high modernity macro/meta-processes. In a 2008 article (*The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change*) you spoke about *direct* and *indirect* mediatization. Do you still think about the whole process under those two distinctive degrees of effect? In my opinion you seem to have developed a more complex understanding of the whole process.

Hjarvard: Hopefully, we have all developed our arguments. The distinction between direct and indirect mediatization was based on empirical observations that mediatization may involve various ways in which social interaction is being influenced by the media. Therefore, the original distinction was put forward to say that there are some areas in which there is a more direct mediatization taking place because people are now using the media for doing a particular practice which they did not do before. These practices now have to

be conducted through the use of media. Then, there are other social practices where the media are not present at the center of the activity. Nevertheless, the practices are at least culturally conditioned in one way or another by the media environment. But maybe the whole general development now, the very rapid spread of various forms of mobile and interactive media – smartphones, social network media, you name it – the whole *datafication* of our life, has in a sense made that distinction less relevant.

Progressively, it becomes hard to think of any kind of social interaction that does not somehow involve the use of media. Therefore, the distinction increasingly becomes hard to make, because many more areas of life are directly mediated in one way or another and therefore subject to the influence of various media logics. I am not saying the distinction may not be useful. It may continue to be so for analytical purposes. It may not, at an overall level, be the most important distinction anymore, because the spread of mobile interactive media have made media involved in still more forms of social interaction.

MATRIZes: A lot of critical commentaries about your work have been made regarding media logics. That has been one of the concepts that has grabbed the debate's attention for the last years. The recent conference on Media Logics held at the Bonn University in which you were one of the Keynote speakers alongside with David L. Altheide and Friedrich Krotz, suggest that media logics still holds a conceptual value in understanding the general process of the mediatization of culture and society process and the specific dynamics found in different domains of analysis. Could you please share your perspective on the development of the concept and its importance in defining the mediatization process of institutional contexts and domains?

Hjarvard: I think the notion of media-logics is helpful because it focuses our attention at the various forms in which media work and come to influence other areas of life. Perhaps some of the criticism of the notion of *media logics* have been made because there has been a misunderstanding of the term.

As I have said a couple of times, it is important to understand it as a kind of metaphor. We should not take it literally and think that various forms of media practices, for instance journalism, are functioning in ways that are completely similar to the laws of formal logic or mathematical reasoning.

Such a literal understanding of media-logic would be misplaced. As I see it, it is rather a metaphor in which we come to think about the media as working by particular identifiable procedures of both a formal and informal kind. Formal rules are given by media regulation, media policies, commercial market laws, and so forth. But media are also governed by various informal rules

such as rules of thumbs, work cultures, journalistic professional conventions, dramaturgical aesthetic conventions, and so forth, which inform the way in which people working with media actually do things. Furthermore, there are also some technological aspects of that logic as well.

As I see it, and that is what I have been arguing recently – if we want to look at media logics through a more general vocabulary – we could translate it into what the discipline of sociology labels *rules and resources*. We could understand the logics of the media as the rules and resources through which media works. That involves institutional dimensions, laws, power structures and so forth. It involves aesthetic dimensions. It involves technological material aspects: that there are certain things you can do with a technology, and there are certain things you cannot do with it. The constellation of institutional, aesthetic and technological rules and resources makes up the media logics.

In that sense I think media logics is a fruitful term. It helps us to understand how other domains of society become influenced through their accommodation to the logics of media, and also how the media to some extent accommodate to logics from other social spheres. It is not that I am in love with the notion of media logics, I would rather problematize that without a notion that specifies the rules and resources through which media work, how are we to explain that they matter within politics, within religion, within other domains of society. If we do not raise the question “What are the general ways in which these various media technologies and institutions work?” then, how are we to understand how they matter in culture and society?

MATRIZES: If one of the assumptions of mediatization theory is that media has a role in historical social and cultural transformations, a theoretical framework from the social sciences – along with empirical data – should be used to understand those transformations. In my opinion that is a perspective that you share with Nick Couldry’s work (2014). Would you agree with that positioning?

Hjarvard: For instance Nick Couldry and a couple of others have argued that what they have labeled a practice perspective would be more useful. However, I still have not heard an account based on practice theory that allows us to generate knowledge on how media and culture in general within a particular context interact with each other. The problem with practice theory is that it easily comes to overemphasize a bottom-up approach to our understanding of social and cultural affairs and therefore it underemphasizes the structural and collective dimensions of the mediatization processes. It never gets to the point where you can say something of a bit more general nature. As stated earlier, I stress the middle-range level of empirical enquiry in order to build theory,

because it allows us to generalize at a level that is both theoretically ambitious and empirically grounded.

To me that also points to the strength of the *media logics* concept. If you do not take it literally but think about it as a metaphor to guide your analysis of the rules and resources through which media work, then you have the appropriate level of generalization. Not too far-reaching in theoretical claims, not too empirically blind.

MATRIZES: You were talking about the misunderstanding of the concept of media-logics. The recent critique on the mediatization concept by Deacon and Stanyer (2014; 2015) shows that far from being a solidified and uncontested concept, mediatization is still trying to impose its agenda in the media and communication field (and to a lesser degree in the social sciences). In a way, it brought back something you have commented before about a general misunderstanding of the core concepts of a general theory of mediatization. Are we still dealing with a misunderstanding of the concept? And also, is mediatization theory lacking self-critique of its own claims?

Hjarvard: As one of the proponents of mediatization perspective, I would leave it to others to be the judge about the lack of self-critique. From the outset, of course, a concept like mediatization should and must evoke criticism. I remember the discussion 25 years ago about globalization, and there was a fierce, intense debate among people discussing the term, whether it was useful or not, its normative implications and so forth. Through that debate, we got a much more nuanced and fruitful understanding of what globalization is to mean at a conceptual level and may imply in different parts of the world.

The general lesson was that globalization is useful as this kind of general framework for addressing a set of important questions. You cannot talk about globalization as one singular unified process. You have to contextualize it if you want to analyze what is going on, both in terms of geography and in terms of the domain you are in.

I see the current discussions on mediatization in much the similar way; that we are in the middle of a fruitful debate that will strengthen and qualify our notion of mediatization. I think, however, that some of the criticism has been misplaced: Deacon and Stanyer rightly state that the notion of mediatization is often used rather loosely or imprecisely by some. I will testify to that, but somehow you cannot really dismiss a concept because it is used by some people in a rather superficial way. If you did a similar analysis of scholarly journals using the term individualization or globalization, you would find many instances in which researchers did not properly define the notion of in-

dividualization or globalization. However, I would not dismiss those concepts on that account, but that was, actually, Deacon and Stanier's key argument.

In that sense, I did not find it a productive intervention, but clearly, mediatization research should also be scrutinized. In my opinion critics have overstressed the notion of mediatization as this overwhelming, sweeping development of media that colonize every aspect of the world. Of course, you should be skeptical towards such an account, but somehow critics have wrongly read the mediatization argument as such. If I should put in a positive note, it seems to me that the more people read the actual literature that has been written on the topic, the less you hear such straw-man arguments. You then get into a much more interesting discussion, about how we could actually understand the relationship between media developments and transformations of cultural and social institutions.

MATRIZes: You recently co-edited a new book called *The Dynamics of Mediatization Conflicts* (2015). It is interesting to analyze conflicts through the mediatization lens because it allows us to understand different degrees and dynamics of the influence of media based on different geographical contexts. Could you talk a little bit about the collection of papers published on that book?

Hjarvard: It is certainly not our invention to talk about mediatized conflict. Simon Cottle is one of the key people working on that issue. Our aim was to provide a collection of studies that tried to combine two strands of research: mediatization studies with a well-known or well established tradition of studying media and conflicts.

An important emphasis in that book is to look at the way in which various forms of so-called new media have changed the conditions under which conflicts are spelled out. There have been a lot of studies over many years about the way in which mass media have influenced conflicts, in terms of framing, in terms of agenda setting, and so forth.

I think what we now have a somewhat new situation because of the presence of various forms of interactive and mobile media that allow many more actors to engage in a conflict. That general shift in the conditioning of conflict is, as I see it, a mediatization phenomenon to study in its own right.

However, it is also important to stress, that when you engage in the study of how particular conflicts are spelled out or take form, you are predominantly studying processes of mediation, and not mediatization. You are examining how people actually communicate with each other, or do not communicate, or miscommunicate with each other, so that is an important part of that analysis.

Nevertheless, I think it is important for the study of mediatization, that it can also bring itself into a position in which it can be useful for the actual study of mediation processes.

In that sense, mediatization is also about conditioning the way in which we come to interact with each other, and conflicts are interesting because they tend to condense and highlight particular problems and power relationships that are changing or in process. If you, for instance, compare conflicts now with earlier examples in the era of mass media, there are interesting studies based on network theory and the notion of *connective actions*, suggested by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) that are very fruitful for understanding these new conditions of conflicts. They are a good example of people contributing to mediatization research, without using the phrase itself. To me this is exactly what new mobile and digital media have changed: they condition how conflicts are spelled out in new ways, in particular, what is known as *connective action*, compared to *collective action*, is a new phenomenon.

It is important to notice that mediatization may entail a new condition, but it does not really determine the way actions are carried out. I think that is an important distinction and reservation to make; as I see it, in terms of conflicts, mediatization may provide new conditions for the way in which conflicts are spelled out, but they do *not* provide determination about how they are spelled out. The outcome of conflicts may be very different from one context to another, so it is not about having some predicted outcomes because of new situations; it is more that they are becoming conditioned in another way compared to earlier on. For instance, by allowing more actors to get involved, but also making the potential to control various forms of networked media communication flows an important factor in the way in which you can actually influence and control the development of conflicts.

Just to give you an example, during the famous or infamous Mohammed cartoon crisis here in Denmark, it has been 10 years now, one of the lessons learned by the Danish Foreign Office was that it needed a new kind of diplomacy. It has, until then, rested upon traditional forms of diplomacy, in which countries speak to other countries, in which you have official channels of diplomacy, but here they clearly understood that something new was happening.

It was much more uncontrollable and uncontainable by traditional communication means, so they had to introduce what they labeled a *public diplomacy* in which they could actually use a variety of media, both mass media and social network media, to try and influence various actors during such forms of crisis. I think that is the way in which media come to condition the way in

which conflicts are spelled out, but what the outcome of the conflicts are, that is not determined by the process of mediatization.

MATRIZes: That book came out from the Mediatization of Culture group, right?

Hjarvard: Yes.

MATRIZes: The group has been active for the last 5 years. Are you continuing with the group's projects now that its funding is coming to an end?

Hjarvard: We had both a research priority area within this department, which I was heading, and then we got this grant from the Danish Research Council. It gathers researchers from three universities, Copenhagen University, Aarhus University, and Aalborg University, and it is for a five-year period. We are not going to renew it in its present form, but definitely we are going to continue the discussion on mediatization. One important success over the past year has been that, we have institutionalized this as a field of research, both in a Danish context, but also in a European context.

I think a very clear result of that has been that the ECREA organization has made it into a permanent section. That ensures that we will have a venue for discussing these issues, so we do not have to try and develop small fora all over the place to keep the discussion running. We have now institutionalized it, and it has been recognized widely as a topic in its own right. Therefore, I am rather optimistic about the future of the discussion, because now we have reached a momentum in which it can continue.

MATRIZes: Any upcoming projects? I know about the upcoming call for papers for a new book on mediatization theory due to be published next year (*Dynamics of mediatization: Understanding cultural and social change*). What else are you working on?

Hjarvard: Yeah. There are some other projects. I am currently engaged in a comparative project about mediatized conflicts relating to religion, comparing Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. That is going to run for the next three years. It is primarily located in Norway, but I am heading the Danish branch of that investigation, and there is a Swedish branch also. That is one project I am engaged in here, and there is the ECREA section and the activities there. Currently, what I am trying to think about is to put more emphasis in the future, on the way in which media, understood as network media, are creating new conditions for the way in which we come to socially and culturally engage

with one another. I would like to combine the mediatization perspective with network theory.

For instance, there are several Dutch people, for instance Jan van Dijk (2012), but also José Van Dijck and her work on cultures of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013). There are very fruitful arguments there that could be linked to the mediatization analysis.

One way of linking it would be to say, that what we are increasingly experiencing is, to borrow some concept from Habermas, that the media tends to encourage an integration between, what he labels the system and the life-world. If you think about, in sociological terms, the systems as those organized activities, institutionalized activities, working on particular forms of bureaucratic logic, commercial logics, or political logics, and so forth, then there are various forms of live world communication norms. Increasingly I think network media are linking those two together in new ways, compared to earlier on.

For instance, when we have social network media, you have a variety of very mundane, ordinary, human communications and interactions, everyday life-world activities, but increasingly they are underpinned by media structures also, not only by these life-world norms, but also, by various forms of commercial logics, technological logics, and so forth. For instance, when you become friends, it is not only prompted by a human, life-world, spontaneous initiative to make friends, but it is certainly also prompted by various forms of algorithms and commercial imperatives to make friends.

I think that is some of the interesting ways in which mediatization may provide new insights to the way in which the various networked media that we are increasingly embedded within come to change how we interact with each other, not only within politics, in terms of religious institutions, but also on a very interpersonal level. ■

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