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Mediatization and the Future of Field Theory



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Mediatization and the Future of Field Theory¹

Debates about mediatization have until now been largely an internal concern of media and communications research, yet carry the promise of opening up something more fundamental: a complete rethinking of the dynamics, even the dimensionality, of the space of social action in an age when everyday life has become supersaturated with media flows. This chapter will explore what mediatization theory might plausibly contribute to that larger question within social theory, focussing particularly on how the concept of mediatization, understood from a certain angle, can enter a productive dialogue with those working within the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory; there are indeed other possibilities for mediatization scholars to engage with social theory as noted earlier, but this seems one of the most promising for reasons explained below. Such arguments will be developed within the broader context of debates on media's contributions to late modernity and in particular on the transformations associated with the predominance of digital media contents and platforms.

Any such dialogue, however, requires from mediatization scholars two preliminary adjustments. First, mediatization theory must rethink *itself* as a contribution to social theory, and so submit itself to all the requirements that social theory must meet to justify its formulations as plausible starting-points for analysing social action and social space. Second, and more specifically, mediatization needs to be conceived as a meta-process that *emerges from* the continuous, cumulative circulation and embedding of media contents *across* everyday social action, rather than as a reproductive logic or recipe already lodged somehow within media contents themselves.

The stakes then are high: a repositioning of mediatization theory - and media and communications research - within wider social theory, and, from the other direction, the reenergising of social theory through a deeper reflection on the consequences of media and communications that it had for so long neglected. The chapter will proceed by a series of steps towards the point where this more ambitious horizon comes clearly into view: *first*, the history of mediatization as a concept will be reviewed, but obliquely, that is, from an angle concerned with the social-theoretical potential, and limits of specific formulations; *second*, and for balance, the limits of field theory will be discussed, particularly from the perspective of its failure so far adequately to address the consequences of mass media, let alone digital media, for its model of social space; *third*, mediatization theory will be reviewed for the possible ways in which it might contribute to the theorization of social space, including an account which is designed to fill the gaps within field theory; *fourth*, in order to bring out how such a social-theory-oriented research agenda around mediatization might develop, I offer a brief proposal for what mediatization research might look like, if applied to understanding media's consequences for the broadest practices that seek to manage social space, that is, government.

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1. Mediatization's social theory deficit

“Mediatization” is the term around which research within various national traditions about the widest consequences of media flows has come to converge: I will not recap here the debates that led to that terminological convergence (For this, see Couldry (2008a; 2012: 134-135). The real debate in any case is not about terminology, but about the type of explanation at which we are aiming. The starting-points are agreed: first, that media influence now extends to “all the spheres of society and social life” (Mazzoleni 2008); second, that, because of this pervasiveness, new types of causal complexity emerge and it is exactly these complexities that we are trying to specify. As Knut Lundby (2009) has pointed out, there has been considerable overlap between the assumptions of apparently separate enquiries into “mediatization” and “mediation”. Roger Silverstone (2005: 189), favouring the term “mediation”, summarised the basic complexity of media's social effects in these terms: “processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other”.

It follows that the transformations of social space that are associated with media's continuous and cumulative flows must be understood in a *non-linear* fashion (Couldry (2012: 29). Only very rarely would we expect such transformations to simplify into something usefully approximated via a linear causal account, that is, an account of how one factor changes social life from one state of affairs over time to another, distinct state of affairs. The principle of non-linear explanation is probably now an agreed starting-point among mediatization scholars. At issue however is *how we grasp that non-linear complexity*. For Silverstone, it was best understood as an open-ended dialectic that resisted further systematization; most scholars now would insist on going further in specifying how such causal complexity works, and its particular consequences for the way that the social is organized. It is here that the difficulties begin.

David Altheide and Robert Snow were pioneers in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Altheide and Snow 1979; Snow 1983; Altheide 1985) of an approach which conceived of what media do in and to the social world through the idea that media spread the *formats* required for media performance: they refer to this (1979) as a “media logic”. But from the point of view of social theory this explanatory account (which we should note in passing Altheide and Snow called ‘mediation’) was always problematic. Certainly, their approach to media power was original and interesting, suggesting that it derives not simply from institutions' production of media and audiences' use of those productions (the two models then available) but from something more complex: the way *everyone* in society interrelates with media. While this basic insight was profound, Altheide and Snow developed it in a problematic way, seeing media as the new “collective consciousness”, and finding the mechanism of this growing influence in the adoption of a “media logic” across everyday life: “media are powerful” they wrote “because people have adopted a media logic”. Yet the very notion of “media logic” brings explanatory problems from the outset, which can be quickly stated. Do all media have a logic? Is it the same logic and, if not, what is the common pattern that unites their logics into an overall “media logic” (this problem only becomes more acute with media proliferation)? Alternatively, when media change over time (as they are doing intensively today), do they acquire a wholly new media logic or does something remain constant? Finally, even if we *can* tie down such a notion of media logic, to the regular features of certain media formats, and show that they *and their copies* are pervasive in

everyday life, does that adequately capture the range of ways in which media appear to influence the social?² Indeed mediatization research has been characterized by a certain instability in which counts as an influence worthy of the term. While some still see mediatization in the sense primarily of a “format”, others use “mediatization” to refer to “the whole of [the] processes that eventually shape and frame media content” (Mazzoleni 2008, quoted in Lundby 2009: 8), or even two new factors (Schulz 2004: 90): the extension of human capacities and the structural organization of social life.

A second type of problem from the outset lay in deciding what counts as empirical evidence for mediatization, for example in accounts such as Altheide and Snow’s. Altheide and Snow’s account was not based on any evidence from the social world of systematic patterning by media formats, but in claims (Altheide 1985: 9) about the wider impact of “the diffusion of media formats and perspectives into other areas of life” that in effect were *projections* from media productions’ known internal features to *imagined* changes in the external patterning of social action. While acknowledging (Altheide 1985: 13-14) earlier sociology of experience (Goffman’s account of the “frames” through which we orient ourselves to the world; Simmel’s account of social forms as the constant patterns that underlie social relationships), Altheide and Snow proposed, in effect, a rather arbitrary *grafting* of media formats *onto* the forms and contexts of social action. This risked from the outset blurring a number of ways in which we might imagine social processes being transformed by media: through actual media presentation formats which may be adopted for specific purposes; through the wider evaluation of media’s authority and importance; through people’s changing definition of what is real; people’s desires for that media reality; and finally, and more broadly, through transformations of social space as a whole. In so far as the term “media logic” continues to be used as shorthand for the type of causal process which mediatization identifies, its very singularity risks repeating such blurring and reducing a diversity of causal processes to one, apparently homogeneous term, so undercutting the multiplicity of processes (Schulz 2004) already acknowledged within the umbrella term mediatization. In doing so, the continued use of the term “media logic” (for example, by extension, to refer to a “new media logic” or “digital media logic”) risks falling short of what William Sewell (2005: 369) has argued should be one of sociology’s tasks: to contribute to “the *de*-reification of social life”. A *multiplicity* of mid-range terms would be more productive, of which “logic” can perhaps be one: the problem is not so much with the term “logic” as such (provided its use can be justified in particular settings) as in its reified application.

Meanwhile, the underlying social-theoretical grounding of most mediatization research’s diagnosis of social change has remained unstated: most approaches to mediatization have been characterised by a lack of specificity about how they understand social ontology. This is the third and deepest problem, which emerges when we ask the following questions: on what basis do we believe that the social world is *liable* to be transformed so easily, or at least so directly, by media materials or media-based processes? Indeed should we imagine social space (as a whole) as available for transformation by *any* logic or principle, whether media-based or not? A number of important sociological approaches would

² For debate on whether mediatization is best understood through the notion of ‘media logic’, see Couldry (2008a), Lundby (2009), Hjarvard (2013). Examples of earlier discussions which appeared to continue Altheide and Snow’s notion of ‘media logic’ can be found Hjarvard (2006: 5), Schrott’s (2009: 47), Hjarvard (2009: 160).

cast doubt on precisely that assumption, for example: Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (1993) which insists that the space of the social is not unitary but differentiated into multiple fields of competition; Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) insistence on value plurality in the social world; and Norbert Elias' (1994) account of social order as something built up through emergent solutions to complex problems of interdependency. Unless mediatization research rejects out of hand all of these accounts of social space, it needs to do more social-theoretical work than it has so far to defend the idea that mediatization refers to a single logic originating in media and working seamlessly across every part of social space; and if mediatization research does *not* intend any such converging explanatory account, it would be safer to avoid a shorthand language that appears to suggest precisely this!

A useful step forward is to follow Friedrich Krotz and insist that mediatization is not a specific transformational process but “a meta-process that is grounded in the modification of communication as the basic practice of how people construct the social and cultural world”. This is to see mediatization as a *structural shift* comparable to globalization and individualization: this structural shift is associated with the increasing involvement of media in all spheres of life so that “media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole” (Krotz 2009: 26, 27, 24). On this approach, mediatization can encompass *many different* types of process across different sites; it is also, for example, perfectly compatible with field theory's insistence upon paying attention to the multiple logics or workings of specific fields, or indeed (see Hjarvard's chapter, this volume) multiple *institutional* logics.

Much work in clarifying exactly what mediatization can contribute to social theory's understanding of the space of social action remains to be done, but at least this alternative concept of mediatization clears the way for that work, rather than tying us to an explanatory model that is, or inadvertently appears to be, at odds with many approaches within social theory. Our starting-point for this new work is the idea that mediatization is not a single transformative logic “within” media but a meta-category of social description that points to the *changed dynamics and dimensionality of the (whole) social world in a media age*. It follows that mediatization research, conceived this way, should be interested in the new types of non-linear causality that follow when media become an irreducible aspect of *all* social processes and their interrelations. As promised from the outset of this chapter, I will explore how much adaptations of field theory can contribute to this discussion.

Before, however, we can begin to develop mediatization approaches in that direction, we need to acknowledge the corresponding limitations of field theory itself. For field theory was an explanatory model that found its shape long *before* the need to consider media's broader social consequences began to be addressed by social theory.

2. Field theory's media deficit

Pierre Bourdieu insisted that we cannot analyse sociological processes without first relating them to what goes on in specific fields of practice where particular forms of capital are at stake. Bourdieu's field concept is a highly sophisticated response to the processes of *differentiation* in late modernity: Bourdieu readily acknowledges that fields are emergent phenomena and the concept should only be used if it helps us grasp the order in what particular types of people do, but he rules out immediately any account which does not

acknowledge the deep differentiation of social space in late modernity. Well-known examples analysed by Bourdieu's field theory are fields of cultural production, such as literature, art, and politics (Bourdieu 1993 and 1996b; Champagne 1990). Over the past decade, work has emerged on journalism as a specific field (Bourdieu 1998; Marliere 1998; Benson and Neveu 2005), and the specific relations between the journalistic field and other fields such as medicine and economics (Champagne and Marchetti 2005; Duval 2005). Here, however, I will be concerned more with field theory's *general* model of social space and whether this can account for the types of *transversal* media effect in which mediatization is interested: by 'transversal' I mean linked effects and transformations that occur simultaneously at all or very many points in social space simultaneously.

Bourdieu himself, in his early work on symbolic power (collected as Bourdieu 1991) completed well before he developed his field theory, showed considerable interest in the role of symbolic institutions in shaping belief right across social space as a whole. Bourdieu's concern then was with religious institutions, not media. In an early essay he suggests that some concentrations of symbolic power are so great that they dominate the whole social landscape; as a result, they seem natural and get misrecognised, their underlying arbitrariness becoming difficult to see. In this way, symbolic power moves from being a merely local power (the power to construct this statement, or make that work of art) to being a general power, what Bourdieu (1990: 166) called a "power of constructing reality". Understood this way, symbolic power plays a deep definitional role in social life and is involved "in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced" (Bourdieu 1977: 88). Two decades later Bourdieu (1998: 22) recalled this when in a popular work he made some controversial claims about television's effects: "one thing leads to another, and, ultimately television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead. We are getting closer and closer to the point where the social world is primarily described - and in a sense prescribed - by television". How such claims could be understood to work consistently with field theory remained unclear.

A similar urge to understand media's general consequences for social space characterizes work by Bourdieu's followers. Patrick Champagne (1990) analysed media's impacts on the field of contemporary politics, suggesting boldly that the journalistic field has acquired a relationship with the political field so close that it becomes "a journalistic-political field". This relationship, Champagne argued, has transformed the definition of politics in damaging ways. By a "circular logic", both journalists and politicians "react" to a version of public opinion which they have largely constructed, for example through the framing of questions for opinion polls, through the reported reactions to those polls' results, and through the influence of journalists' accounts of politics.

We are not concerned in this chapter directly with the particular problem of how to understand media's influence on the field of political competition. More interesting here are the implications of Champagne's way of exploring media's broader influences for the original model of field theory as a whole. For we can ask: how exactly do representations made by actors in *one* field come to have such influence on the actions and thoughts of across in *another* field? Champagne (1990: 237, 239, 243) introduced the notion of 'media capital' to capture people's relative ability to influence journalistic events. But this seemingly plausible and intuitive notion generates major difficulties for field theory's strictly differentiated social ontology. *Either* we understand Champagne to be claiming that media capital is a new basic form of capital like economic capital that applies anywhere (a

claim he never makes explicitly). *Or* we try and fit his statement within field theory's basic assumptions, which is difficult: where exactly is media capital acquired and exercised? In the media field or in the (political, medical, academic, etc) field where the agent in question primarily acts? Perhaps the point of the hybrid term 'journalistic-political field' is that such questions don't matter, but suppose we were to repeat Champagne's move in explaining all non-media fields and their relation to media: the result would be either to fuse all fields into *one* "journalistic-cultural field" or to generate an *open-ended series* of hybrid "journalistic-specialist" fields (medical, political, and so on), each with its own version of media capital. Either way, field theory (both its social ontology and its toolkit of mid-range concepts, such as capital) would no longer serve to differentiate the dynamics of particular fields.

The underlying problem is that field theory was born out of an account of social differentiation developed long before the transversal operations of media's representational and categorising power became such a dominant feature of social space. Yet such transversal effects cannot be ignored, and both Bourdieu (in his popular book *On Television and Journalism* 2000) and Champagne (1990) in his developed work on the journalistic-political field recognised this. Their difficulty was that field theory's differentiated model of social space does not provide any obvious way of registering what some educational sociologists have called "cross-field effects" (Lingard et al 2005). But it was exactly such cross-field effects (and what I am calling "transversal" effects) of media flows on social action that mediatization theory was developed to address.

Some accommodation of mediatization theory and field theory would therefore seem to be useful. In the next section, I want to explore how field theory might be adjusted to take account of universal or cross-field effects, but without undermining the logic of field theory itself. This will start to flesh out what I mean by an approach to mediatization that engages with, and contributes to, social theory. Note already however that this is not the only route by which mediatization theory can enter into dialogue with social theory; indeed, because of the limitations of field theory, other ways must be explored and some further candidates for this will be discussed in the next section.

3. Converging mediatization and general social theory

Field theory is, I suggest, the most promising potential interlocutor for mediatization research within general social theory. This is for at least two reasons: first, field theory proponents have in the past decade become interested in media processes, as was Bourdieu in his last years; second, the differentiated nature of field theory's analyses (which always respect the specific dynamics of, and capital formation within, particular fields) naturally generate a diversity of cases where our thinking about mediatization as a broad meta-process can be refined and applied. This is not the place to consider multiple such examples, but a discussion of how to think through media's consequences for the fields of politics, art, education and religion within a broader mediatization approach can be found in Couldry (2012: chapter 6). My interest here is rather in the 'meta'-question of how transversal or cross-field media effects can be thought about in ways that both capture their pervasive reach - indeed their potentially disruptive and *de*-differentiating effect - *yet* remain consistent with the differentiated nature of social space, as conceived by field

theory. Making progress on this is potentially an important contribution to mediatization research, understood in relation to wider social theory.

3.1. Revising field theory from the perspective of mediatization

An important clue to squaring this circle comes from Bourdieu's late work on the state. Bourdieu takes over and extends Weber's notion of the state, conceptualising it as a monopoly of not just legitimate physical but also legitimate *symbolic* violence (Bourdieu 1996a; Weber 1968). This generates a fascinating question: what is the nature of the resulting power that the state exercises over the rest of social space, that is, over *all* fields and space simultaneously?

In his book *La Noblesse d'Etat* (in English, *The State Nobility*) Bourdieu was interested in the state's preeminence over social definitions, for example, of legal and educational status (Bourdieu, 1996a :40-45; 1990: 239-241): clearly this influence works not in one field only, but across *all* fields via what Bourdieu calls the field of power. The concept of field of power is rather undeveloped in Bourdieu, as Goran Bolin (2009: 352-353) notes. Formally, the field of power is the space above and beyond specific fields where the forces that vie for influence over the interrelations *between* fields operate: the state is the main focus of the field of power, but perhaps not the only one, a point to which I return later. This field of power is arguably *not* best understood as a "field" in Bourdieu's normal sense, that is, a bounded space of competition over specific forms of capital by defined sets of actors; rather it is a general space where the state exercises influence over the interrelations between all specific fields and so over the dynamics of social space itself. As Bourdieu puts it, the state is "the site of struggles, whose stake is the setting of the rules that govern the different social games (fields) and in particular, the rules of reproduction of those games"; more precisely, the state influences what counts as "symbolic capital" in each particular field. Bourdieu calls this influence over the "exchange rate" between the fundamental types of capital at stake in each individual field (for example, economic versus cultural capital) "meta-capital".³ This meta-capital of the state is, crucially, not derived from the workings of any specific field, but works across them.

What if media institutions have an influence over what counts as capital in particular fields that is similar in type to the influence Bourdieu attributes to the state? Could the types of pervasive media influence in which mediatization research is interested be conceived - at least in part - along these lines? This too would be a form of "meta-capital" through which *media* exercise power over other forms of power. It would operate only at the macro-institutional level (the level of meta-process, or "mediatization" in Krotz's sense), and so would be quite distinct from, although linked to, media-related capital at work through individuals' actions in specific fields. We could hypothesize that the greater the media sector's meta-capital, the more likely the salience of media-related capital for action in any particular field, but this would not be a general logic, but rather an emergent process from transformations under way in many fields simultaneously: that is, transformations in the types of capital needed by social actors in particular fields of action where capital derived from media-related activities has increased in importance.

³ See respectively, Bourdieu in Wacquant (1993: 42, added emphasis); Bourdieu (1996a: 265).; Bourdieu in Wacquant (1993: 23).

By incorporating the broad concept of *media* meta-capital, mediatization research can give clearer shape to Bourdieu's own most interesting insights about the media. When Bourdieu (1998) discusses the increasing pressure of television on, say, the academic field, he notes the obvious economic dimension (a large television audience means more books sold), but suggests that television exerts also an indirect pressure by distorting the symbolic capital properly at stake in the academic field, creating a new group of academics whose symbolic capital within the academic field rests partly on television appearances. If comparable shifts are occurring in other fields too (see Couldry (2012: chapter 6) for detailed discussion), this requires an overarching concept to capture such a transformation and the concept of media meta-capital performs this role.

Another interesting point follows. Although the notion of media meta-capital was developed originally (Couldry 2003) to address the challenges of field theory (and initially outside the context of mediatization research), it points to one of the key ways in which media flows transform everyday social action: through the transformation of what count as resources for action, and particularly as legitimate bases for recognition within particular settings. This is an insight which can be extended to aspects of social life that are not field-focussed, for example, within the general domain of media and cultural consumption (Lahire 1999). Meanwhile, the concept of media meta-capital is also quite consistent with Bourdieu's fundamental point that capital is only *realised* by agents in specific forms in specific fields. The symbolic capital among chefs, for example, that derives from doing a successful television cookery series is *not* necessarily convertible into symbolic capital in a very different field, such as the academic field; this is because the former need involve few, if any, of the specific attributes valued *by media* in representatives of the latter. But this does not make the work of media across fields any less significant; nor does it rule out the possibility that media-based symbolic capital developed in one field can under certain conditions be directly exchanged for symbolic capital in another field. Indeed an interesting development is how particular media domains (for example, business-based "reality" programmes such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragon's Den* in the UK and elsewhere) have become sites where PR companies, politicians and business people can work together for overlapping promotional advantages (Boyle and Kelly 2010). When the media intensively cover an area of life (cooking, business, gardening, and so on), they alter the internal workings of those sub-fields and so widen the valence of media meta-capital *across* the social terrain. Indeed this is one important way in which, over time, media institutions have come to benefit from a truly dominant concentration of symbolic power. Mediatization approaches have so far been strong in pointing to the social significance of media institutions' rise to power (see especially Hjarvard 2013), but this refinement, developed through an engagement with field theory, uncovers one key *social mechanism* through which this has happened.

Yet media meta-capital (which concerns ultimately the *resources or capital* that individual actors have under their control) is only one dimension of the meta-process of mediatization, as it is worked out in social action. Think of other aspects of what social actors do: the stable configurations of actors, institutions and infrastructures that shape the *space-time* in which certain concatenations of action are possible, and others impossible; or the *meaning-contexts* in which certain types of action make sense, while others do not. Mediatization as a meta-process is concerned equally with transformations in those dimensions

of social action. In a moment I will consider, briefly, how mediatization research could contribute to social theory's understanding of those areas too.

Before that, however, it is worth summarising what my direct drawing on the language of field theory has, and has not, achieved for mediatization research. *First*, it has provided a way of understanding of a mass of field-specific transformations in a linked way, but without reducing them to one single mechanism that would cut across the distinctive causal dynamics of each field. Understood this way, mediatization is consistent with diverse outcomes in fields whose structure (their distinctive forms of capital, their closeness to economic power or to the state) differs, perhaps quite substantially. *Second*, it has helped isolate one process-type to which mediatization research should pay attention: that is, media's implications for the resources upon which social actors can individually rely to act and to influence the actions of others, whether close or remote, and whether or not within a bounded field of competition. But, *third*, because it has refused any notion of a general "logic" *internal* to media contents and media operations themselves, this account has avoided assuming that mediatization will *automatically* lead to the increasing convertibility of media-related symbolic capital across social space as a whole: that outcome remains undecidable at this stage, even though we can see various evidence from diverse sub-fields pointing in this direction.

But my account also leaves certain important questions unanswered. One question is how we should understand the impact of media meta-capital on the state: the state (and the specific fields of practice within the state that generate policy) are certainly subject to media's meta-capital, via the latter's operations within the political field and, in turn, politicians' executive influence over the state. But what deeper implications does this have for political authority in different countries? This requires further investigation. An even broader question is how does media's meta-capital interact not only with the meta-capital of the state but also with that of business in shaping the overall field of power? Through loose competition, or through a complex hierarchy of forces that we have yet to understand (compare Bolin 2011: ch.2; 2009)? Resolving these questions would perhaps be mediatization research's ultimate contribution to field theory, but as yet it is some way off.

3.2. Alternative interfaces with social theory

Field theory, while it was offered as a complete rethinking of the space of social action, nonetheless has gaps. Bourdieu always acknowledged that fields are emergent, need to be empirically established, and that the boundaries between fields may not be fixed or clear. This leaves open the possibility that some areas of social space are not yet, or have never been, caught up in an external field of competitive action. Bourdieu and his followers tended to neglect this possibility, with the result that field theory left under-developed its account of how social action is shaped in spaces that *are not fields* (Lahire 1999), but there are at least two ways of exploring it. One is to explore media's growing role in the internal structures and organizational "logics" of specific institutions and institution-types; the challenge there remains to understand how such institutional dynamics link to the wider field-based competition in which such organizations are involved (on which see Hjarvard, this volume). Another is to consider media's many diverse consequences for the only partly competitive space of everyday consumption and leisure. A high proportion of

everyday social action takes that form, including many activities where people use for serious or playful purposes media contents and media platforms. How, from the perspective of mediatization research, are we to understand the media-related forces shaping such activities, in a way that is sensitive to the challenges of social theory? Let me focus on this latter route.

The arguments against assuming such non-field spaces are structured by any singular media logic (because of the diversity of media types and the changing dynamics and features of media, and so on: see earlier) still apply, but a different type of explanatory account needs to be developed which does not rely on the scaffolding of field theory. One emerging candidate for such work is “figurations”. Norbert Elias (1994) introduced the notion of “figurations” to capture the emergent patterns of practice that arise over time as stable solutions to the many normative, resource and personal conflicts that derive from the changing weaves of mutual interdependence. His early modern examples include the minuet dance as an ordered form of group entertainment and the rules and technologies of table manners for eating. Such figurations, once established over time, spread throughout social space, not because they contain within themselves any particular logic or generative force, but because they have de facto become working default solutions (though made of many heterogeneous elements) that reduce certain pressing risks, regulate the satisfaction of certain basic needs, and channel the pursuit of certain basic pleasures. Because they multiply, they generate other forms, indeed whole cultures, of extension, adaptation and appropriation. Can the notion of “figuration” help us understand the patterning at work in our contemporary media-related practices under conditions of media supersaturation and today’s highly complex relations of interdependence between media and many other institutions? For an excellent recent overview of the latter, see Mansell (2012).

It is too early to give a definitive answer to this. I tentatively suggested the notion of figuration in an earlier essay (Couldry 2011: 201-202) as a way of making sense of the enduring role of ‘reality media’ in Western and non-Western media systems since the early 1990s. The detailed *explanandum* in that case was the rise and surprising persistence of claims to present “reality” in many different and evolving television and online formats, and the curious moral and social force that such formats have acquired: particular rules for presenting social ‘reality’ through media; certain forms of authority to judge everyday and more spectacular performance; certain new forms of expertise to underpin such judgements. Why reality media formats emerged at a certain point of history in Europe and North America and quickly spread globally is overdetermined, but some less explored factors are the progressive decline of traditional forms of social authority and role-model, and a growing legitimation deficit affecting not just political but also media institutions. A new stage emerged where “reality” could be presented in a different, compelling and legitimate way, and where populations could be made to “appear” to each other and to government (Couldry 2011, drawing on Arendt 1960). The result is a phenomenon of primary importance for mediatization research to understand. A new research programme is now also under way in Germany which will explore the usefulness of “figurations” as a

concept for understanding the patterns emerging in the multidimensional process of mediatization.⁴

The outcome of these applications of Elias' notion of figuration within mediatization research is unknown, but they promises to be an important new front in enriching its interface with social theory. It is worth noting however that the term "figuration" only points in broad terms to a *type* of emergent order or pattern, without giving any detailed account of *how* figurations emerge, or of how they do their structuring work. To go further, the notion of "figuration" needs to be connected up with a series of more specific concepts that help us piece together those social mechanisms, as they operate in the relatively unstructured space of everyday leisure and much everyday interaction: a key link here, I will suggest, will be understanding media's role in contemporary processes of categorization and norm-formation.

There remains a further possibility for mediatization research's developing dialogue with social theory. This is to bring it face-to-face with the sort of iconoclastic social theory that denies "the social" itself and offers an alternative "associo-logy" (Latour 2005), building its explanations out of contingent networks and assemblages. For sure, if mediatization research is serious about engaging with social theory, it must not evade this challenge to the notion of the social. There is also a related challenge: this argues that the very notion of "mediatization", because of its root in the term "media", risks locking in a view of how contemporary worlds are built that overplays the causal importance of 'media' (Slater forthcoming). These two challenges - to the explanatory valence of 'the social' or alternatively of 'the media' - intersect, since mediatization is an attempt to think through the structured ways in which *media*, and particularly larger-scale media institutions, are involved in the enabling and shaping of *social* space and action. The means for addressing these two fundamental challenges are also connected. Although there is no space to discuss this in detail here, a key step is to notice the failure of Actor Network Theory (and its successors) to grasp that representations are *more than* links in a reified assemblage out of which new spaces of action are built (Couldry 2008b; 2012: chapters 1 and 2). Media institutions are, at their most basic, mechanisms for the production and distribution of *representations* of the world in which we live and are embedded. While those representations can certainly become routinised, reified, and locked into everyday life and habit through categories and symbols, they are never entirely black-boxed and always remain open to further hermeneutic work (for a hermeneutic sociology, see recently Sewell (2005: chapters 5 and 10). In their semiotic content, they carry the *means* for further interpretative work: even when temporarily reified, they do work in organising the social, by providing tools for one category of person or thing to be marked off from another. The outputs of media organizations (representations) provide the raw material for people's (indeed societies') ongoing hermeneutic work and transformations. All this open-ended cultural work is absent (Couldry 2008c) from the explanatory models of Actor Network Theory and Latour's associo-logy, even as they claim to build from different materials a new explanatory model of the conditions of everyday action out of. By taking seriously media as *institutions that produce representations*, mediatization research is therefore explicitly and justifiably at odds with the general trend towards *non-representational* theory in contemporary sociology (for more detail see Couldry 2012: chapter 1).

⁴ 'Communicative Figurations', Universities of Bremen and Hamburg, 2013: <http://www.communicative-figurations.org>.

3.3. Summary

Through these various approaches to media's consequences for social ontology, it should, I hope, have become clear that mediatization research occupies a distinctive position within the explanation of everyday action, allied particularly to hermeneutic approaches to culture and social organization (Sewell 2005). It is not the case (contra Slater) that mediatization research allocates to 'media' in advance a prevailing importance in the overall mix of social explanation, at least not if mediatization research is understood, following the argument of this chapter, as open to multiple causal dynamics. Mediatization research's only assumption - surely uncontested in large, "developed" societies - is that media platforms and contents play a large and significant role in people's and institutions' everyday lives, and more specifically in their rules and resources for everyday action. In this way, mediatization research contributes directly to the understanding of the "structure" of social action (compare Sewell 2005 chapter 4, discussing Giddens 1984) in late modernity societies supersaturated by media.⁵

4. Government and the future of social-theory-oriented mediatization research

At this point, a further challenge comes into view. Mediatization research, if it is serious about engaging with and contributing to the wider space of social theory, should be willing to address the question of what it would mean to say that government is mediatized. A lot of the initial research in mediatization looked at political communications and the most competitive aspect of government communications (during elections and so on). But there has been less consideration of mediatization as a meta-process affecting the general nature of government.⁶ It would be absurd to claim to treat such a large topic in any substantive detail here. My aim instead is to sketch the shape of a plausible approach to the mediatization of government by way of illustrating the social-theory-oriented approach to mediatization research in general that has been developed in this chapter (compare also Ihlen, this volume, on public bureaucracies and mediatization).

Government in modernity is the attempt to manage the totality of human affairs within a defined territory, and it is common knowledge that it is saturated by media processes at every level. mediatization debates have contributed to our understanding of these processes.⁷ Government is the most ambitious institutionally-based process that mediatization research could track in attempting to understand media's contribution to social change. It is inconceivable that media have not changed how government is done and is imagined. Government is a multidimensional process and, though of course it involves a very direct and continuous instrumental use of media which arguably (Couldry (2012: 148) is one sphere where something close to "media logics" (plural) play out daily, the overall process of government cannot be understood if it is reduced to the processes of government that are directly "about" media communication. It is necessary also to think about how political strategies are formed and framed, how policy is generated, how policy is

⁵ For 'supersaturation', see Couldry (2012: 5-6).

⁶ For an exception see Cook (2005).

⁷ See for example Mazzoleni (2008), Stromback and Esser (2009).

implemented and resisted, in other words, media contents' and contexts' role in the transformation of all stages in the governmental process.

To understand the mediatization of government in the broadest sense requires us to think of mediatization from within multiple perspectives on social theory. It is essential to follow how governments are, or are not, able today to exercise power over particular fields of competition, and media's role in shaping that process of exercising power in what Bourdieu calls "the field of power". The concept of media meta-capital already discussed is one way into understanding this, since media are clearly a central tool today for governments to influence the terms of play within the fields they wish to dominate: governments everywhere from the USA to China use negative media coverage as a threat and a weapon over their opponents, and in the long term this may affect what counts as capital in particular fields.

It is also important however to think about how the general flow of media messages - from and about government - affects governments' conditions of operation, including their possibilities for taking action and sustaining legitimacy (Rosanvallon 2011). Much of this interplay occurs in general discourse, rather than being confined to the specific boundaries of the field of political competition. One way forward to grasp this would be to look at the role media processes play within the specific institutions of government (compare Hjarvard, this volume). Another approach is through the concept of figuration which may point us towards some key aspects how mediatization works in this context. Speculatively, one might see as a figuration the necessity for professionals in the political field (whether or not politicians) to be "on message" at all times, that is to conform *all* their communications, public and increasingly also private, to a communications 'line' (whether of policy, or more frequently, just of how to interpret a policy or an event or another communication). There is no tolerance for communication deviance because the costs (in terms both of damaged capital and further interpretative turbulence) are too great.

It is not just politicians of course but every institutional actor in the governmental process, who must submit to the overwhelming need, at all costs, to control and conform their communications: indeed all are deemed *accountable* for such conformity, whether it is desirable in a wider sense or not. This is an area where communications pressures, because such communications are continuously feeding on themselves, are having profound implications for the mediatization of management in all institutions, and above all for government as the institutionally-based attempt to manage 'everything' (Bimber 2003). The structural account of social space and the field of power derived from field theory is particularly helpful for grasping the *complexity* of government's communicational and organizational task under conditions of mediatization. Government seeks to dominate the field of power, but it is no longer the only force in that field: media and broad forms of corporate power, as already noted, compete in that space to influence the overall terms of competition and basic existence in society and in specific fields. Government nonetheless is specifically accountable for (and its legitimacy depends on) how far it *appears* able to control key activities and outcomes in every or most specific fields. But media affect every aspect of that process: first, the instruments of government (the tools it uses to communicate its actions, proposals, responses, sanctions) are mediated; second, the objects of government action (the actors in each field) compete with government for media attention, and good media coverage; third, every action in each field is potentially mediated, and is available to be interpreted and presented in multiple ways through media,

and most actors with whom government interacts work from that starting-point. The idea that government regulates the operations of any field ‘freely’ from the outside is not sustainable under these conditions because *both* government and governed are entangled in an open-ended skein of actual and anticipated mediated communications. The very stuff of government, its space of possibility, is already (and has been for more than a decade) profoundly mediatised (Meyer 2003).

There is clearly a great deal more work to do on understanding how in detail the mediatization of government plays out, but we have done enough already to establish that mediatization research needs to operate flexibly, drawing sometimes for example on field theory, sometimes on notions of figurations, if it is to be adequate to grasping the complex ways in which something like “government” is mediatised. Actor-Network-Theory-inspired notions of assemblage and infrastructure will also no doubt contribute to understanding the mechanisms whereby this occurs. What matters in mediatization research most now is a commitment to explanatory plurality as the best way of dealing with the epistemological challenges set by media’s supersaturation of the social.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that mediatization is best conceived as a contribution to wider social theory, rather than understood narrowly as a branch of media studies. This reconceptualization has as its precondition that mediatization research moves beyond an explanatory model that treats mediatization as something that works through a logic that is internal somehow to media contents.

Instead mediatization research must be alive to multiple explanatory models of how the meta-process of mediatization is worked through in specific domains and fields, while at the same time looking for a linking account that enables us to see the connections, say between how the mediatization of politics and the mediatization of the literary field might work: that was the rationale for reintroducing here my earlier work on media meta-capital, as a concept that can supplement field theory in such a way that cross-field effects derived from media are understood without disrupting the basic principles of field theory.

The chapter has also however argued for mediatization research’s need to be open to other ways of interfacing with social theory, including through drawing on Elias’s concept of figurations. We have explored the implications of such alternative approaches, whether independently or in tandem with an approach to mediatization oriented more to field theory.

This chapter has aimed to illustrate how an understanding of mediatization and a corresponding programme of empirical, provided it is flexible and draws on a range of conceptual toolkits and explanatory models from across social theory, can begin to tackle quite fundamental questions, as yet unanswered in social theory, about how everyday life’s supersaturation by media contents is changing its very possibilities of order.

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