

Research Paper

Thomas Birkner

The matrix of mediatization

Journalism in a new media ecosystem

Abstract: The interrelations and interactions between politics and the media have been broadly discussed in communication studies, and mediatization has become a popular and fruitful concept for empirical research. However, the concept of mediatization has not yet been applied broadly within journalism studies. This conceptual and theory-based article argues that the challenges that affect journalism today are interconnected with processes of mediatization, and the paper aims to integrate mediatization research into journalism studies. Therefore, this paper elucidates its argument in four consecutive steps. First, journalism is located in its interactive media ecosystem; second, the analytical concept of mediatization is explored, including the differentiation of its two main theoretical traditions – in German differentiated as *Medialisierung* and *Mediatisierung*. In a third step, the distinct traditions of mediatization are expanded and integrated into a matrix of mediatization. In a fourth step, the fields of the matrix are filled with already existing empirical journalism research, systemizing the interrelations and interactions between mediatized social systems such as politics, science, and sports and journalism and opening up perspectives for future research.

Keywords: Journalism, mediatization, media ecosystem, social media, artificial intelligence.

Introduction

The theoretical framework presented in this paper integrates the concept of mediatization into journalism studies. In their double-volume special issue regarding

the mediatization of politics in *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism Practice* in 2014, Strömbäck and Esser argued that the »essence of mediatization is increasing importance and influence of media« (STRÖMBÄCK/ESSER 2014a: 246; 2014b: 244). With this understanding of the media's influence, mediatization research contributes to enabling an enhanced understanding of the media's role in societies around the globe, such as the interrelations between politics and the media. While in political communications, mediatization has primarily been understood as the dominance of journalistic news media over politics (MEYER 2002; STRÖMBÄCK 2008), the concept has not yet been used broadly in journalism research. Although some scholars have discussed its potential (KAMMER 2013; KUNELIUS/REUNANEN 2016; NEUBERGER 2023; STRÖMBÄCK/ESSER 2014a, 2014b), mediatization is not at the crux of theoretical considerations within journalism studies (AHVA/STEENSEN 2019; Steensen/Ahva, 2015; Steensen/Westlund 2020), and it is not addressed within the important handbooks of the field (FRANKLIN/ELDRIDGE II. 2016; WAHL-JØRGENSEN/HANITZSCH 2019; WITSCHGE/ANDERSON/DOMINGO/HERMIDA 2016).

The »crisis« of journalism (ALEXANDER/BREESE/LUENGO 2016; BLUMLER 2010) has likely rendered the concept of a growing media influence within journalism studies counterintuitive. However, Barbie Zelizer (2015: 888) has asserted that the new »set of technological, political, economic, social, occupational, moral, and legal circumstances« does not necessarily have to be referred to as a »crisis.« Moreover, Deuze and Witschge (2018, 2020) have laid the foundations for theoretical considerations »beyond journalism.« The integration of the concept of mediatization into journalism research follows that trajectory, specifically addressing the fact that journalism has lost its monopoly regarding the provision of access to the public (SKOVGAARD/VAN DALEN 2013), due to »platforms non-proprietary to the news publishers« (STEENSEN/WESTLUND 2020: 48). On the other hand, journalism has access to new opportunities in a »hybrid media system« (CHADWICK 2017).

Before the fruitfulness of the concept of mediatization for future journalism research can be developed, journalism needs to be located within its interactive media ecosystem. Then, the process and the analytical concept of mediatization are defined and explored. In a third step, the concept of mediatization is expanded and the two distinct traditions are integrated into an inclusive matrix of mediatization. In a fourth step, already-existing research is organized within this matrix of mediatization laying the foundation for empirical journalism research therein. The integrated, joint concept can enable an improved understanding of the interrelations and interactions between journalistic news media and mediatized social systems (LUHMANN 1995), such as politics (ESSER/STRÖMBÄCK 2014; MAZZOLENI 2008), sports (FRANSDSEN 2016; 2020), and science (SCHÄFER 2014; SCHEU/VOLPERS/SUMM/BLÖBAUM 2014).

Journalism in an interactive media ecosystem

Modern journalism extends far beyond the textbook definition of »the systematic gathering, filtering, and circulating of information deemed to be news and in the public interest« (LEWIS 2019: 1); rather, the concept has remained somewhat nebulous in the handbooks of the field. When new types of journalism are defined in contemporary journalism research (e.g., »digital journalism«), the »digital« aspect receives more attention than the concept of journalism: »Digital journalism, in a broad sense, refers to all sorts of journalism that use digital technologies for researching, producing, and publishing news« (SALAVERRÍA 2019: 1). However, »journalism is about more than digital technology« (ZELIZER 2019: 343), as »digital journalism« only »constitutes the most recent of many conduits over time that have allowed us to imagine optimum links between journalism and its publics« (ZELIZER 2019: 349).

Particularly the linkage between journalism and its public has changed in multiple ways in an »evolving digital media ecosystem« (HOLLIMAN 2011, e.g. COLAPINTO 2010; MAZZOLENI 2017; SCOLARI 2012), as media communication itself has changed profoundly: »The incorporation of digital media into the overall matrix has forced the 20th century mass media to accommodate themselves with the new media landscape« (FINNEMANN 2011: 87). New media have invariably exerted an enormous societal impact in history: »In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe« (POSTMAN 1998: 4). Postman continues, explaining that after »television, America was not America plus television. Television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry, and so on« (POSTMAN 1998: 4). The monumental changes in political culture caused by television stood by the cradle of mediatization research (ALTHEIDE/SNOW 1979; ASP 1986; BIRKNER 2023; MARTÍN-BARBERO 1987; MEYROWITZ 1986; MAZZOLENI 2008).

The media inventions that shape our lives and journalism in the digital era include, among others, social media platforms and artificial intelligence. Lewis (2019: 2) has observed that the term »journalism« has become »slippery« in »in a digital era of social media, mobile hyper-connectivity, and human augmentation, when the hybridized nature of media – between old and new, publisher and platform, professional and amateur, institutional and individual, human and machine – is challenging basic boundaries.«

This paper's aim is to establish a theoretical framework that can help us understand the impact of the current media environment on society in general and on journalism in particular. Therefore, the concept of mediatization is integrated into journalism research. Within this framework, mediatization shapes the environment not only for social systems such as politics, sports, and science but also

for journalism itself. Kunelius and Reunanen (2016: 373) have posited that »we are witnessing simultaneously a process of mediatization (felt by other institutions as the imagined growing influence of the media) and a process of de-mediatization (the news media losing some control over their own power resource).« It is no longer merely journalists who adjudicate which information is distributed; this function may now be performed by »the people formerly known as the audience« (ROSEN 2006) or by social bots. Thus, while the second portion of these observations relates to the challenges of journalism in new media environments, the first part relates to the core of the concept of mediatization.

The concept of mediatization

Hjarvard (2008: 13) defines mediatization as a multifaceted process wherein media »become an integrated part of other institutions like politics, work, family and religion, as more and more of these institutional activities are performed through both interactive and mass media.« Over time, mediatization has become increasingly regarded as a »process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (e.g., politics, religion, and education) become influenced by and dependent on the media« (HJARVARD 2012: 30; e.g., LUNT/LIVINGSTONE 2016).

Two different paths of mediatization research developed separately (and can be differentiated in German by their spelling), one concentrating on interactive media (*Mediatisierung*), and the other focusing on mass media (*Medialisierung*). The constructivist tradition (*Mediatisierung*) can be distinguished from the institutionalist tradition (*Medialisierung*) based on their conceptualization of media and their focus on the respective media's impact (COULDRY/HEPP 2013; MAZZOLENI 2017). Neuberger (2023) views the constructivist tradition as a technical media perspective and the institutionalist tradition as a systemic perspective. While the former focuses more on the changing modes of communication via interactive media technologies such as smartphones, the latter focuses on the impact of mass media on social systems such as politics, science, and sports. The distinction between media institutions and media technologies reveals the differences between the two conflicting traditions of mediatization research. For an improved understanding of the future challenges of journalism, both traditions must be integrated, as we can no longer clearly distinguish between institutions and technologies in relation to platforms, artificial intelligence, and journalism.

Grounded in the technical, social constructivist media tradition that focuses more on human interactions via mobile devices and social media, Couldry and Hepp (2017: 34–56) have identified three waves of mediatization, including mechanization, electrification, and digitalization, which has now entered the stage of »deep mediatization« (HEPP 2020). The concept of mediatization as a

process has sharpened our understanding of the historical dimension of developments. This is also helpful to detect continuity within all the changes, a demand recently made by several journalism scholars (ELDRIDGE II./HESS/TANDOC JR./WESTLUND 2019; RYFE 2019; STEENSEN/WESTLUND 2020; ZELIZER 2019).

In alignment with the systemic, institutionalist perspective, Strömbäck (2008) proposed phases in the mediatization of politics in the course of the 20th century. Initially, in the first phase, the media are heavily dependent upon politics; however, they are also the most important disseminators of political content. In the second phase (media are still dominated by politics) and in the third phase (politics are already dominated by the media) a balance is established (BIRKNER 2018) before politics is colonized by the media in the fourth phase (STRÖMBÄCK 2008: 240). This perspective exemplifies the understandings of mediatization as a process, the direction of this process and the focus on the mediatization of politics (BIRKNER 2023).

Mediatization, politics, and journalism

The concept of mediatization was developed in the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s in the context of the impact of private television in several countries around the world. In the U.S., David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow (1979) developed the term *media logic*, and Joshua Meyrowitz's book *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* was published in 1985. At that time, the Swede Kent Asp (1986) already addressed the mediatization of politics. The 1990s then were concerned with *How the Media Colonize Politics* (MEYER 2002). Mediatization research was mainly conceptualized as an investigation of »the media« overruling politics.

Over the last several years, the concept of the mediatization of politics shifted from »diabolic visitations« to »summoned ghosts« (MARCINKOWSKI/STEINER 2014: 88), thereby introducing a »push-and-pull-model« (MARCINKOWSKI/STEINER 2014: 87; e.g. DONGES/JARREN 2014; BLUMLER/ESSER 2019) encompassing processes of the self-mediatization of politics, be it politicians, parties, or parliaments (BIRKNER 2015; CASERO-RIPOLLÉS/FEENSTRA/TORMEY 2016; ESSER/MATTHES 2013). In this perspective, politics is no longer regarded as merely an object of mediatization but also as a subject to the usage of media for their own purposes. Deacon and Stanyer (2015) therefore suggest referring to »mediatization and« rather than »mediatization of« for a more balanced model of the relationship between journalism and politics: »Mediatization of« carries media-centric and causal meanings« (MAZZOLENI 2017: 138). Mazzoleni (2017: 138) argues that the »media industry« itself is »affected by dramatic changes vis-à-vis the penetration of the Internet and of web-centred (sic!) logics and practices.«

Kunelius and Reunanen (2016: 381) have attributed the new challenges of journalism to a »broader ›transparency discourse‹ used for questioning and defending the legitimacy of actors and institutions in a democratic system.« This also applies to politics, science, and sports in the digital age. Social media platforms and artificial intelligence have challenged all these social systems, as the digital ecosystem of social systems within our societies has mediatized, including journalism.

The matrix of mediatization

The concept of mediatization must be reshaped and incorporate the challenges facing journalism in light of the »changes in contemporary communication ecosystems« (MAZZOLENI 2017: 136) or »digital journalism ecosystems« (BUHL/GÜNTHER/QUANDT 2018, 2019). The new journalistic ecosystem is characterized both by mass media influences on social systems, encompassing the systemic, institutionalist tradition of mediatization research and by »communicative AI« (GUZMAN/LEWIS 2020) and platform distribution, encompassing the technical, social constructivist media tradition.

The suggested integration of the two conflicting traditions of mediatization research into the matrix of mediatization first synthesizes the one-way mass-media-oriented mediatization research and mediatization research focusing on interactivity. Schäfer (2014) has suggested such an integration for science communication, using a taxonomy introduced by Schulz (2004) in the systemic, institutionalist tradition (*Medialisierung*) of mediatization research (extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation). He combined these with three types of media communication (mass communication, individual communication, and interactive communication), following a taxonomy introduced by Krotz (2007) in the technical, social constructivist media tradition (*Mediatisierung*). In a second step, both traditions are expanded:

1. The technical, social constructivist tradition should be expanded by including Hepp's (2000) »deep mediatization« and by differentiating between communicative activities of actors, audiences, and actants (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015) on the x-axis of the matrix.
2. In the systemic, institutionalist tradition, »the other side of mediatization« (NÖLLEKE et al. 2021) should also be included on the y-axis of the matrix.

When examining journalism in particular, the x-axis combines Krotz's (2007) distinction between mass communication, individual communication mediated via telephone, and interactive communication through software and robots (e.g., online-gaming) with the four A's posited by Lewis and Westlund (2015). They argue that journalism should be regarded as a »system of actors, actants, and

audiences engaged in a complex set of media activities« (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015: 34) and, thus, conceptualize the interplay of human actors, non-human technological actants, diverse audiences, and their complex media activities.

Additionally, the reorganization of the dimensions delineated by Krotz aims to integrate »deep mediatization’s quantitative trends« (HEPP 2020: 40) into this matrix for future journalism research. Hepp (2020: 5) understands »deep mediatization« as »an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures.« In the first dimension, the degree of »differentiation« and »convergence« (HEPP 2020: 41) of communication makes it difficult to distinguish mass communication from individual communication; thus, we conceptualize this as media communication, which is »omnipresent« (HEPP 2020: 45). The second dimension is interactive communication, which is characterized by »connectivity« (HEPP 2020: 43) and shapes an interactive journalism. The third dimension is datafied communication, characterized by the »pace of innovation« (HEPP 2020: 47-50) in journalism that includes data journalism and automated journalism (Lewis et al., 2019). Combining these three dimensions with the matrix of Lewis and Westlund (2015), as mentioned above, produces the following x-axis for our matrix:

1. Actors and media communication (classical journalism)
2. Audiences and interactive communication (interactive journalism)
3. Actants and datafied communication (automated journalism)

For the y-axis, we examine the systemic, institutionalist tradition of mediatization research and the systematization by Schulz (2004). Schulz (2004: 89) viewed media as an extension of human communication, a substitution of non-media activities (e.g., online-banking), an amalgamation of »mediated and nonmedia activities,« and an accommodation of politics, for instance, to media affordances: »Political actors adapt to the rules of the media system trying to increase their publicity and at the same time accepting a loss of autonomy« (SCHULZ 2004: 89).

However, mediatization cannot be limited to »offensive adaptations to the media« (NÖLLEKE et al. 2021: 738). It must also encompass defensive strategies wherein, for example, scientists, athletes, or politicians attempt to avoid media coverage – an aspect mostly neglected in mediatization research. From this perspective, the work of Nölleke, Scheu and Birkner (2021) has focused on strategies of shielding against the media and has integrated them into the concept of mediatization. Therefore, in our matrix, accommodation is accompanied by the defensive strategy of shielding from media affordances (NÖLLEKE et al. 2021). Between extension (and substitution) and amalgamation (and fusion), we place accommodation toward media affordances, but less in a submissive sense, as argued above. Altogether, this culminates in a new organization of the dimensions by Schulz (2004), in accordance with Schäfer (2014) and Marcinkowski (2015):

1. Extension and substitution (of the media)
2. Accommodation and shielding (towards the media)
3. Amalgamation and fusion (within the media)

In this sense, the extension of media communication and the substitution of non-mediated communication coincide with one another, while accommodations to media affordances and efforts to shield against them are two sides of the same coin. Finally, amalgamation and fusion represent a third dimension, namely the »molding force« (HEPP 2012) of mediatization, for example the fusion of journalistic formats in cross-media settings (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015). In the following, the matrix of mediatization (Table 1) is presented, based on recent research regarding actors, audiences, and actants in journalism and social systems such as politics, science, and sports and their interrelations and interactions in a deeply mediatized ecosystem.

Table 1
The matrix of mediatization

	1) Actors and media communication	2) Audiences and interactive communication	3) Actants and datafied communication
a) Extension and substitution	Extending media communication, emerging non-linearity and non-journalists substituting journalists	Interactive communication extends the exchange with audiences, in some places substituting journalism	Automated news is extending; algorithmic newsfeeds substitute the gatekeeper
b) Accommodation and shielding	Media omnipresence leads to adopting and shielding, journalism is marketing the news	Media enter arcane areas and enable audiences; journalism is shielded by paywalls	Social bots spread hate speech and fake news; journalism combats this with fact checking
c) Amalgamation and fusion	Media formats fusion to multimedia; in the newsroom, journalistic structures amalgamate	Audience metrics amalgamate journalism and audiences; the fusion is called citizen journalism	Journalism and datafication amalgamate in robot journalism; fusion of infotech and biotech

Inspired by Schäfer (2014), Schulz (2004), Krotz (2007), Hepp (2020), Nölleke et al. (2021), and Lewis/Westlund (2015), see also Birkner (2020, 2023).

Journalism in the matrix of mediatization

The interrelations and interactions between journalism and other social systems within a mediatized ecosystem are multifarious and complex. The nine fields of our matrix are not sufficient to display them all but are helpful to systemize already-existing research, and they can help structure and plan future studies.

1. Actors and media communication

- a. The extension of media communication is a nearly omnipresent phenomenon in »mediatized worlds« (HEPP/KROTZ 2014), and the »unbounded journalistic field« (ELDRIDGE II. 2019), including the substitution of journalists by actors that »look like journalism« (MAARES/HANUSCH 2022: 1270) and »nonjournalistic actors in the news production process« (KUNERT 2020: 5), due to skills formerly not necessary in journalism. The linearity of news consumption is substituted by non-linearity, resulting in the emergence of new formats such as podcasts and extending the field of journalistic production (STARKEY 2016) in »mobile app ecosystems« (WESTLUND 2013: 8).
- b. The affordances of omnipresent media can be met, for example, by enlarging public relations departments and extending external communications and providing content for all types of social media channels, as in the case of professional soccer players, professors, and parties in the fields of sports, science, and politics (PÉREZ CUIRIEL/NAHARRO 2019). Agenda setting is joined by agenda cutting (NIELAND 2023). These communicative activities can be regarded as defensive strategies that shield against journalistic affordances by using tweets or YouTube-videos for direct communication. Also, journalism is actively marketing news (TANDOC/VOS 2016).
- c. Within journalism, the amalgamation and fusion of formerly separated media into »transmedia« (EVANS 2013), a »media manifold« (COULDRY 2012; HEPP 2020: 84-86), »polymedia« (MADIANOU/MILLER 2013), or »crossmedia« (BJUR et al. 2014) has culminated in »cross-media news work« (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015), thus also shaping the structure of digital news (BARNHURST 2012; BARNHURST/NERONE 2001). The convergence on the format level has materialized in the structures of newsrooms, challenging the working practices of journalists (DEUZE/WITSCHGE 2018). Journalism has been reconfigured in pioneer communities (HEPP/LOOSEN 2021).

2. Audiences and interactive communication

- a. Interactive communications within »interactive journalism« (USHER 2016) have expanded on social media platforms (PÉREZ DASILVA/MESO AYERDI/MENDIGUREN GALDOSPÍN 2018), broadening the journalist–audience relationship (WILHELM/STEHLE/DETEL 2021; BIRKNER/KEUTE/DAVYDOVA 2024). Audiences can interact directly with politicians and athletes via these platforms (THORSEN 2013), substituting journalism (NÖLLEKE/BIRKNER 2019; BOEHMER 2016; HULL/LEWIS 2014). Audiences have found new means to use the news (PICONE 2019).

- b. Accommodations to media affordances have been observable in the mediatization of formerly arcane areas and spaces, such as back rooms or locker rooms, by politicians or athletes who post or tweet secret information or simply pictures (WITTEN 2018) for their audiences. The same audiences enable media companies to use metrics (CARLSON 2018; LEE/TANDOC 2017; LOOSEN/SCHMIDT 2016; NEHELI 2018; TANDOC/THOMAS 2015) because they »leave digital footprints that platform companies can capitalize on« (STEENSEN/WESTLUND 2020: 43). Another means of protecting themselves from the new autonomy of audiences involves the erection of paywalls (CARSON 2015; SJØVAAG 2016).
- c. Audience participation (LEWIS 2012; SINGER et al. 2011; THURMAN et al. 2019), audience engagement (NELSON 2021), and audience integration via crowdsourcing (AITAMURTO 2015, 2016) alter the »symbiotic relationship« of journalism »with its audiences« (STEENSEN/WESTLUND 2020: 89) and the connections between actors and audiences (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015). The fusion of journalism and its audience, or more precisely, the »people formerly known as the audience,« is referred to as citizen journalism (ROSEN 2006).
3. Actants and datafied communication
- a. The extension of datafication enters a new stage when non-human technological actants (LEWIS/WESTLUND 2015) are involved. Journalism is permanently measured in terms of the numbers of clicks and views via analyses of analytics (TANDOC 2019; for clickbait, see also BLOM/HANSEN 2015; MOLYNEUX/CODDINGTON 2020). Automation (WU et al. 2019) is observable in technical news production or in automated sports coverage (KUNERT 2020). Algorithmic newsfeed recommendations (BOUSSARD 2019: 673) are substituting the gatekeeper, beyond gate watching (BRUNS 2009). Steensen and Westlund (2020: 103) allude to a »separation of news from journalism.« Also, journalism's *quantitative turn* (CODDINGTON 2015) enables big data projects (HELBERGER 2019).
- b. Journalism's struggle with algorithms (DIAKOPOULOS 2015) has been multi-faceted and data journalism is surely an accommodation to datafication. Social media platforms have become a preferred battlefield for politics (BARBERÁ/ZEITZOFF 2018; BOSSETTA 2018; NUERNBERGK/CONRAD 2016) where social bots disseminate fake news and hate speech (VOSOUGH- HI et al. 2018). Journalism is shielding against this with fact-checking teams, such as *Factcheck.org*, *Politifact*, and *Washington Post Fact Checker*. It is about trust, also into automated journalism (KÖRNER 2024).
- c. Automation, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (BOUSSARD 2015) have been amalgamated in the »robotic reporter« (CARLSON 2015) or »communicative robots, specifically work bots« (HEPP 2020: 131) in the

field of »robot journalism« (THURMAN et al. 2017: 1251). Future developments, such as the fusion of information technology and biological technology (HARARI 2016), should most likely also be placed in this field of the matrix.

Conclusion

The future challenges facing journalism are highly complex and multi-layered. Mediatization research can help us to understand these challenges and investigate them on distinct levels. Within the matrix of mediatization already-existing empirical research can be systemized and interrelated. The matrix can serve for future research to distinguish which aspects of the interrelations of journalism should be investigated or which facets of journalism in an interactive media ecosystem should be researched. It is important to develop such »theoretical models to guide our selection of concepts and to contextualize future empirical findings« (MELLADO/GEORGIU/NAH 2020: 339). As Lewis and Westlund (2015: 33) have emphasized the limitations of »traditional theories and concepts for unpacking journalism,« this paper suggests integrating both traditions of mediatization research into a joint model for journalism research to ensure a better understanding of journalism's role in 21st-century societies.

This matrix has its limitations and cannot comprehensively display the interactions of actors, audiences, and actants of journalism in a deeply mediatized ecosystem, both defensive and offensive. Nevertheless, the integration of already-existing research regarding journalism, its digital media ecosystem, and the interrelations with social systems such as politics, sports, and science demonstrate the usefulness of such a matrix to systemize research and data concerning journalism and to complement and extend scholarship regarding mediatization. The matrix here might serve as a starting point for further theoretical considerations and for empirical studies.

About the author

Thomas Birkner, Dr. (*1977), Professor of Communication Studies and Journalism at the University of Salzburg. His research focuses on journalism research, political communication, communication history and media and sport. Contact: thomas.birkner@plus.ac.at

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