

Mediatization – Empirical perspectives: An introduction to a special issue

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Introduction

In general, the concept of mediatization tries to capture long-term inter-relation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other. As institutionalized and technological means of communication, media have become integral to very different contexts of human life. The media are not just neutral instances of mediation: Media like television, radio, newspaper, the web or the mobile phone are in themselves mediators of social and cultural change.

Within media and communication studies two strands of research, medium theory and effect research, have in very different ways addressed this ‘influence’ of media on processes of social and cultural change. Medium theory describes socio-cultural change as deeply structured by the advent of a new leading medium, and constructs human history as the succession of oral, scribal, print and electronic cultures (cf. for example, Meyrowitz, 1995). Approaches of media effect research analyze the rather short-term impact of certain media content on the social world (cf. for example, Rosengren, 1994). Both kinds of approaches have contributed to the understanding of the relationship between media, culture and society, but they clearly have some shortcomings. Medium theory conceptualizes the relation between one medium and its socio-cultural influence too directly and neglects questions of media content. Effect research theorizes the influence of certain media contents too directly and neglects questions of media specificity and cultural context. Furthermore, these approaches have not been able to conceptualize a key feature of contemporary culture and society: Media are no longer ‘outside’ society exerting a specific influence or effect on culture and therefore on individuals. In our present media-saturated society media are inside society, part of the very fabric of culture; they have become ‘the cultural air