

# THE MEDIUM OF THE MEDIA

## JOURNALISM, POLITICS, AND THE THEORY OF "MEDIATISATION"

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### Abstract

In academic and popular discourse, the power of media in current globalised and "postdemocratic" societies is often discussed with the notion of "mediatisation." It suggests, for example, that media institutions are increasingly influential because they dictate the way issues are framed for public discussion. Consequently, other institutional actors (in politics, science, religion) have had to internalise a "media logic" in order to sustain their power and legitimate their actions. Recent studies of mediatisation largely ignore

Jürgen Habermas' early use of the term "mediatization" in order to analyse the relationship between system imperatives and lifeworlds. While at first this use may seem distant to recent concerns, a return to Habermas can enhance the *theorising* of mediatisation and media power in two ways.

First, by underscoring the importance of a system-theoretic vocabulary it helps to unpack the notion of "media logic" and narrow down the specific power resource of the media (i.e. what is the "medium" of the media). Second, by articulating a fundamental criticism of system-theoretic vocabulary it opens a normative perspective for an evaluation of the media's democratic function (i.e. the "quality" of mediatisation). This essay highlights, elaborates and illustrates each of these potential contributions by looking at journalism research in general and drawing on a recent empirical study on the mediatisation of political decision-making in Finland.

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## Introduction

Broadly put, “mediatisation” has been used to refer to a process in which the influence of the “media” (i.e. media as institutions or sometimes as technologies) increases in other institutions (or spheres) of society and in everyday-life. However, in spite of the popularity of the concept, the “theory” of mediatisation has remained somewhat descriptive and general.<sup>1</sup> In a recent collection, Lundby argues that while general talk about overall mediatisation can serve as a “reminder of how involved late modern societies have become with the media (...) a workable analysis has to be more *specific*” (Lundby 2009, 4, our emphasis). This is an important demand given the diffusion of “mediatization” discourse (cf. Livingstone 2009) both in popular and political settings. Sweeping claims stretching from one production culture to another (say from journalism to the music industries), from one institution to another (say from religion to science to economics) or from one socio-political context to another (say from China to the USA to Finland) can creatively capture new insights, but also easily end up simplifying and exaggerating. It seems tempting to think that we must first develop a set of more focused studies of mediatisation before launching into broad theoretical claims. Mediatisation means different things in different contexts (cf. Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2010). In order to build a general theory of “mediatisation” as one key characteristic of contemporary social change we must intimately understand the specifics “on the ground.”

In this paper, however, we shall work in the opposite direction. Instead of focusing on a particular media, location, topic or moment we turn to more abstract theorising. We hope to modestly contribute not only to the task of *generalisation within* the debate about mediatisation but also to offer a clearly *articulated link* between discussions about mediatisation and broader social theory. If mediatisation is a key characteristic of contemporary social change, these tasks must be essential.

We keep our discussion within Hjarvard’s understanding of mediatisation as an institutional process in which “the media have become *integrated* into the operations of other social institutions, while they also have acquired the status of social institutions *in their own right*” (2008, 113). When describing the media as an independent institution Hjarvard refers to Giddens’ structuration theory and states that mediatisation implies that “other institutions to an increasing degree become dependent on *resources* that the media control, and they have to submit to some of the *rules* the media operate by in order to gain access to those resources” (ibid. 116-117, emphasis added). When describing the interfaces between institutions Hjarvard uses Bourdieu’s field theory. Writing, for example, that art is “dependent on the media as a field, since media exposure is the key to publicity and fame, which may be converted into other forms of value on the art market or in culture policy contexts” (ibid. 126).

The emphasis in mediatisation research have been more on the rules the media operate by, and not so much focused the resources that the media control. These rules are often referred to with a catch-phrase “media logic” (various media values, genres and formats widely studied in media sociology), which is then juxtaposed to other logics, such as the “political logic.” However, this juxtaposing does not explain how the “media logic” becomes influential in other domains (how and why mediatisation occurs). Therefore, in addition to analysing media logic or media

rules, mediatization theory should put more effort in studying the resources (or in Bourdieu's terms "capital") that the media control. As Hjarvard's example of art shows, understanding the resources that the media controls is even more crucial for making sense of the mediatization than exposing the "logics" that they obey.

An institutional approach to mediatization and the question of the media's own power resource point to one key theme in social theory: the processes of *differentiation*, the simultaneous specialisation and dependency of different spheres (fields, institutions, etc.) of social life. It suggests taking seriously the way systems theory (from Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann) and its critics (especially Jürgen Habermas) have applied the notion of "media" (cf. Chernilo 2002; Joas and Knöbl 2010). In this theoretical field, the use of the term "mediatization" has a more definite origin. It is in this context that Jürgen Habermas, who in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, speaks of "mediatization" as a process in which:

*a progressively rationalized lifeworld is both uncoupled from and made dependent upon increasingly complex, formally organized domains of action, like the economy and the state administration. This dependency, resulting from the mediatization of the lifeworld by system imperatives, assumes the sociopathological form of an internal colonization when critical disequilibria in material reproduction – that is, systemic crises amenable to systems-theoretical analysis – can be avoided only at the cost of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld – that is, of 'subjectively' experienced, identity-threatening crises or pathologies (Habermas 1987, 305, emphasis original).*

As Lundby (2009) and Krotz (2009) rightly note, this very abstract and general definition of "mediatization" is not restricted to the effects of institutionalised communication media. Mostly because of this, Lundby (and with some broader remarks, also Krotz [2009, 3]) turns away from a more detailed reflection on Habermas' contribution. This may at first seem perfectly reasonable, but we believe that by adopting Habermas' wider conception of mediatization it is possible to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of "mediatization" – also concerning the media "proper" (i.e. the assumed growing influence of media institutions). First, as an *elaboration of and thus a contribution to systems theory* this approach opens a view to the relationships *between* different institutions (or social fields) as well as *between* institutions and life-worlds. Second, as a *critique of systems theory* (or "functionalist reason") it evokes an analysis of the particular potentials inscribed in the "medium" of the lifeworld. This raises questions about the *consequences* of mediatization and the vocabularies with which we evaluate them.

In this paper we (1) briefly situate Habermas' use of "mediatization" in its context of origin, i.e. the tradition of social systems theory (Parsons and Luhmann). A systems theory approach offers a useful analytical language for understanding institutional instances of mediatization. Following this path raises our first key question: *What is the "medium" of media institutions?* We also (2) try to offer and defend a tentative answer: *the medium of media institutions is "attention" (or: the controlling of attention).* We then turn to Habermas' specific (3) critique of functionalist reason and look at how this view helps to articulate further questions about the *normative quality* of mediatization by the media. This leads to an elaboration on the (4) *relationship between strategic and communicative action in the process of mediatization.*

We will tackle these themes in this order drawing on various kinds of evidence. Particularly we exemplify and illustrate these theoretical points with findings from an extensive study on Finnish elite power brokers' views on journalism and its influence on their work.<sup>2</sup>

## Mediatisation and Systems Theory

A “medium” in systems theory refers back to Talcott Parsons' legacy. As parts of his overall AGIL-model of social systems, each of the four main social subsystems has a designated principal “steering media.” “Money” is the medium of the economic system (Adaptation), “power” is the medium of the political system (Goal attainment), “influence” is the medium of the sub-system of societal community (Integration), and “value-commitment” the medium of the pattern-maintenance system (Latency). Roughly put, these media serve two functions. By representing and generalising various action resources in the symbolic exchange between actors, they secure the effectiveness of sub-systems (the fruits of differentiation). They perform effectively only within the realm of their own subsystem. But they also provide the means by which the subsystems communicate with each other. This is because subsystems (such as “politics”) have their *internal* AGIL-structure, but are characterised by the dominance of one particular system media (cf. Joas and Knöbl 2010, 76-80). Steering media work across the boundaries of subsystems, but they become less effective when operating outside their specific realm or subsystem. Religious value-commitments play a role in political decision-making, but they will not – in a modern, differentiated society – outperform power calculations in the political system. For Parsons, the idea of generalised media was also based on an evolutionary trajectory: institutional differentiation is a precondition and cause for generalised media to appear and function (Chernilo 2002, 436).

Anchoring societal differentiation into the idea of institutionally specific media of interaction (for each subsystem) has since been one driving force of systems theory. Niklas Luhmann, in particular, has enhanced this strand and a few of these contributions are important for our purposes here. First, Luhmann turns Parsons upside down by claiming that the specific media of institutions are the *cause* of differentiation (and not the other way around) (cf. Chernilo 2002, 437-8), thus denying the more evolutionary claims of Parsons. Second, Luhmann claims that systemic operations are essentially *self-referential*, i.e. the media from one subsystem *do not* circulate to others. A subsystem can feel the “pressure” of another system or it can “irritate” other systems, but the only way for a system to adapt to its surroundings is to function via its own code or media. Thus, if the system of politics “feels the pressure” from the system of religion, it will not become more “religious,” but instead, it will use religion as one resource of power, thus turning religion (in the political system) into a calculation factor in the power game. Third, Luhmann gets rid of the idea that there is a specific number and a particular set of institutions or subsystems. In other words, there is no historically given shape or direction that institutional differentiation will necessarily take.

Systems theory has developed impressive listings of institutionalised domains. In a recent contribution, Abrutyn and Turner (2011) list ten different institutional domains (from kinship, economy, polity, law and religion to education, science, medicine, sport and arts) and their respective generalised symbolic media (from

love/loyalty, money, power, influence and sacredness/piety to learning, knowledge, health, competitiveness and aesthetics, respectively). They also argue that these generalised symbolic media comprise meta-ideologies that in different combinations dominate societies. For example, in current advanced capitalist societies, polity and economy might be dominant institutional domains, and the meta-ideology combines their symbolic media, money and power, respectively (ibid. 289).

Generally speaking then, “mediatisation” refers here to a process where a “medium” of one institution or subsystem penetrates or forces its influence outside its core field. This abstract definition can also be used to formulate questions concerning mediatisation “proper”: the whole idea of mediatisation (as the increasing influence of media institutions) presupposes both the image of an institutionally differentiated society and a *particular medium* that characterises “the media” as a sub-system. Hence, thinking about mediatisation (by media institutions) in this parlance takes on a somewhat annoyingly tautological form: *what is the medium of the media?* This question – that logically underlies much of the mediatisation debate – is often weakly pronounced. It is also a question that sociologists (though not Luhmann, as we will address below) have often overlooked, perhaps thinking of media lamely as something that just mediates rather neutrally.

Following the trail of systems theory has also raised the question of the differences between the *qualities* of different steering media. Parsons, famously, identified the whole idea of steering media through an analogy to money. This analytical insight becomes increasingly difficult to spell out once one moves from the realm of economy (money) and politics (power) to realms of integration or pattern-maintenance (value-commitments) (cf. Habermas 1987, 269-282; Joas and Knöbl 2010, 82-84). Abrutyn and Turner (2011) elaborate this question by distinguishing between the *coolness* and *hotness* of system media. Cool media, like money and power, are “universalistic,” while hot media, like love/loyalty and sacredness/piety are more “particularistic.” Three crucial capacities differentiate cool media from hot. 1) They *circulate freely*, because they do not limit permissible actions by generating intense moral codes in their respective ideologies. 2) They *increase the complexity* of any domain they become influential in (outside their “original” domain). 3) They also have an ability to *replace the ‘indigenous’ medium* of another domain. (Ibid. 288.) For mediatisation theory these are all crucial points. Domains functioning with a “cool,” easily circulating medium obviously have more potential to “mediatise” other domains. Thus, although the “media proper” is not on Abrutyn’s and Turner’s list of institutional domains, they help to formulate another important inquiry: *how cool (or hot) is the medium of (communication) media?*

In this parlance, “mediatisation” thus refers to a diffusion of the “media’s medium” into other domains. The “increasing influence” of media, in turn, means that the “media’s medium” has an effect on the way that the dominant (or self-referential) medium of another given field, institution or subsystem can function.<sup>3</sup> This way of posing the question about mediatisation is, we think, worth considering for several reasons. First, it forces to the forefront the neglected focal point about the media’s medium. While many influential analyses of mediatisation have referred to a particular “media logic,” they have also often implied that this is best captured by referring to something “behind” the media (as institutions), most often money (but also technology). Effectively, the claim is that the real “medium” that is mediating

is actually money. The often cited and influential references to the mediatisation debate – from Altheide and Snow (1979) to Bourdieu (1998), for instance – can be seen as examples of this kind of reasoning. It is, of course, true that money and business affect the media. However, in order to have a more elaborated view of how this takes place we also need an idea of what the *original dominant medium* of the media is that is being affected by the economic system. Second, reducing mediatisation to money and the logic of markets often produces a *prematurely normative* perspective on mediatisation. We believe that following a more analytic route in thinking about mediatisation enables us to better recognise its different aspects and potentials. This will, to be sure, *lead* to a normative discussion, but to one that is less determined and one-sided from the outset.

### “Media’s Medium”: Attention?

Media researchers writing of “mediatization” (cf. Hjarvard 2008) have, of course, provided some food for thought pertinent to our quest for *the medium* of the media. Early on, for instance, Kent Asp (1986) described the relationship between politics and the mass media as an exchange where politicians have information (or knowledge) and the media holds the capital of *publicity*. To varying degrees, research concerning source–journalist relations has suggested that this exchange is either strongly dominated by sources (the “primary definers” in Hall et al. 1978) or that there is more contingency (e.g. Schlesinger 1990), because journalists hold something that politicians and sources need to control. For Habermas (1996, 376), the media’s *power* (here: the influence on other institutions) seems to lie in its ability to *choose* issues that will be taken under the scrutiny of public discourse. While such a gatekeeping metaphor might be broadly useful, there has also been a lot of research pointing to the ways that the media agenda is in fact controlled and structurally dominated by other institutions (e.g. Bennett 1990; Schudson 2003).

John B. Thompson (1995; 2005) has developed a line of thought suggesting that it is the control of *visibility* that is indispensable for understanding contemporary society.<sup>4</sup> Thompson emphasises the importance for politicians and other actors to be visible in the media, but at the same time underlines the risks of media exposure: 1) gaffes and outbursts, 2) performance that backfires, 3) leak and 4) scandal. The need to control these risks, then, encourages different institutions to increase their PR-efforts. Such *reaction* to media (the increased investment of controlling mediated visibility) is, from a systems theory point of view, an important evidence of “mediatisation,” showing how the influence of “the medium of media” increases the complexity of other domains.

Thompson’s emphasis on *visibility* and the history of scandal also links to the changing role of the media (as a general social force). Robert Darnton (2010a; 2010b) recently produced a fascinating account of how the increasingly flourishing illegal publishing business of the late 18th century produced a viable stream of scandalous pamphlets for Parisian readers (usually about the political, financial and sexual corruption in the court of Versailles). This bad attention and damage to reputation was irritating enough to the power holders to sustain constant police attempts to control this literature, often penned by authors who had escaped to London.

This early example of the social strength of *visibility*, of the power of exposing (true or imagined) elite vices, points to the role of public *attention* as one key ingre-

dient of the idea of “public opinion” which began to emerge after the spread of the printing press. The idea of “transparency” and the power of the “curiosity of the public at large” was a key part of understanding the power of “publicity,” both at the high theoretical level of philosophers (e.g. Bentham, cf. Splichal [2006]) and at the level of everyday survival in the popular markets of literature.

We can also look at the history of journalism and its professionalisation with an eye on what might be called the *particular differentiating force* of the media as institutions. At least a brief and eclectic history of the media in this respect points to how crucial the (almost technical) question of the *authority over attention* is in the development of journalism and media. Think, for instance, of the progression of journalistic storytelling from the early invention of shorthand journalism in reporting on parliamentary debates (cf. Smith 1978), or the development of an interview as a genre (cf. Schudson 1995), or the emergence of the news lead, or of journalism’s increasing authority over what is quoted (and how long) (c.f. Hallin 1992). These events indicate not so much journalistic “power” to control the general flow of political information but its apparently increasing ability to suggest what parts or details of this flow are worthy of the most *attention*.

In order to bring this historical narrative to the present and, more importantly, to illustrate the influence of attention as a circulating, “cool” medium of the media, we turn for a moment to our recent empirical work in Finland (cf. Kunelius et al. 2009; Reunanen et al. 2010; Kunelius and Reunanen 2012). In this extensive study on the relationship between decision-makers<sup>5</sup> and the media the question of *attention* also surfaced quite powerfully from the experiences of decision-makers.<sup>6</sup> In a survey informed by an analysis of 60 thematic interviews with Finnish decision-makers, we got the following results:

Table 1: Statements Characterising Media Impacts in Decision-making (Reunanen et al. 2010, 301)

	Agree totally	Agree some-what	Disagree some-what	Disagree totally	Sum	Sum
	%	%	%	%	%	N
I have noticed that media attention increases my own or my institution’s authority in working groups, negotiations and other similar situations	25	54	18	3	100	371
Our organisation’s communication is open, and aimed at transparency regarding our actions.	60	36	4	0	100	409
I avoid public presentation of concrete goals and opinions on issues that are not yet decided.	24	42	26	8	100	398

Some 79 percent of decision-makers admitted that media attention increases their authority inside political networks (i.e. the subsystem of politics). This can be taken both as evidence of mediatisation, and also as a potential identification of *attention* as a primary resource that the media control (in the field of politics). The fact that 96 percent of respondents present their organisation as being “aimed at transparency” (while, at the same time, 66 percent say they avoid the public

presentation of concrete goals and opinions on open issues) is also a testimony to how “attention” (as the media’s medium and, correspondingly, “transparency” as a meta-ideology of the day) puts contradictory pressures on actors in different sectors of society. While media attention was felt to increase decision-makers’ personal authority in decision-making situations, it was also often seen as a potential threat to rational decision-making (Reunanen et al. 2010, 302). It was *attention* especially – due to the unpredictable consequences it might cause – that the decision-makers felt they needed to take into account. Attention is something that is needed but it is also something to watch out for.

Suggesting “attention” is the key medium of media comes close to Niklas Luhmann’s (2000) view of the code of *information vs. non-information* as the “medium of mass media.” For Luhmann, the *mass media* is regulated by an internal binary code in which basic selection involves the question of *whether something is news or not*. Luhmann thus basically says that the media controls descriptions of *reality* (i.e. representations).<sup>7</sup> However, we know that many media studies would claim otherwise: reality constructions or representations in the mediated public sphere are heavily *structurally dependent* on the *information, views and knowledge produced by other institutions*. We also know that institutions exchange crucial (often more crucial, surely) information and knowledge between themselves via other means than the media. In a more specific sense, however, what *is* (or at least might be) controlled by the media is a momentary *attention* to particular issues, to particular actors and situations and to details (choosing parts of the reality constructions it has been offered). Analytically put, attention as the media’s medium would, then, be differentiated from representations, i.e. the *act* of pointing to something would be distinguished from the act of naming, framing and interpreting the issue or thing pointed at. The “coolness” of attention (management) as a medium can be seen as related to this. Whereas all linguistically (and potentially propositionally) differentiated media – to borrow a key point from Habermas that we shall return to below – are necessarily “hot,” one could perhaps suggest that, analytically, attention is something almost quantifiable and fundamentally undifferentiated: in itself it makes no explicit validity claims. It is also worthwhile to underscore the time-dimension here. Media’s chance of directing *momentary* attention, its somewhat unpredictable capacity of *pointing at something*, is the uncontrollable aspect of mediatisation. The more sustained media attention is, the more manageable it becomes to other institutions, as the agenda-setting tradition has taught us well.

Tentatively, then, we will re-formulate the mediatisation thesis like this: *mediatisation is the increasing influence of public attention (as the generalised medium of the media) in other fields and institutional domains*. The ability of “attention” to circulate and exert its influence is itself a piece of evidence of its “coolness” as a medium. But its ability to “mediate” other institutional domains testifies further to its “coolness.” First, attention does not – *by itself* – dictate *specific* moral codes that would restrict permissible actions. Sure enough, it often provokes spontaneous moral reactions – this is what scandals are made of – but the media’s stake in what follows from the scandals is always (much) smaller than its stake in the scandals themselves. Attention can serve celebration just as well as condemnation. Thus, it is both a lucrative and volatile intruder in various institutional domains, and a general medium applicable in almost any institutional domain. Second, attention easily *builds com-*



*plexity* in domains by increasing potential contacts and encouraging organisational efforts in order to gain attention and to control it. Third, attention seems capable of influencing (if not replacing) the “original” media of another domain by integrating into its meta-ideology as something desirable and even indispensable. This can be illustrated by the role of “transparency” as an explicit ideological conceptualisation in the integrated dominant meta-ideologies of current societies.<sup>8</sup>

These features of a “cool” medium were also easily discernible in our recent media-politics research (Reunanen et al. 2010; Kunelius and Reunanen 2012). Media attention was felt in all sectors of society from civic activism to business and policing. However, the response seemed to be clearly differentiated according to the power resources the actors had at their disposal.<sup>9</sup> The increasing needs and risks of media attention complicated the lives of politicians much more than the experts of the judicial system, for instance. It was also evident that media attention seemed to complicate the decision-makers’ actions and action-networks, demanding them to invest a lot of time in controlling media attention. The interviewees explained that when making decisions, they always think about how to “sell” them in the publicity.<sup>10</sup>

Generally speaking, the whole discourse (and its spontaneous “lament”) of mediatisation also testifies to the “coolness” of attention as a medium. There is a kind of nostalgic tone in the (popular) mediatisation debate – a feeling that a certain domain is being colonised by something else. This lament resembles the one represented by Habermas’ notion of the colonisation of the lifeworld. However, in connection with mediatisation, it is not the lifeworld that is threatened but other institutional orders (or parts of them) that rely on less cool media than the attention that media controls. The popular laments of mediatisation of politics, religion or science are apparent examples here.

## Limits of Systems Theory

From a systems-theoretical perspective, mediatisation itself is a non-normative concept: it only *describes* – or points to – a process in late-modern societies. But since mediatisation is always a *historically situated process* that shakes the existing order of things in different fields and institutions, it also *evokes* responses that are articulated normatively. However, as Hjarvard (2008, 114) states, they are *empirical* questions.

To elaborate this discussion conceptually, and to find a normative framework for evaluating mediatisation’s empirical consequences, we return to Habermas. While adopting some systems theory vocabulary from Parsons and Luhmann, he sees systems theory as fundamentally insufficient as a (comprehensive) theory of society. One important reason for this is that the systems (like economy, politics, and bureaucracy) themselves are embedded in lifeworld contexts where the integration medium is *natural language*. Systems need lifeworld resources to function and the system media, such as money and power, also need to be legitimised in lifeworld contexts.

*Luhmann’s systems functionalism is actually based on the assumption that in modern societies the symbolically structured lifeworld has already been driven back into the niches of a systemically self-sufficient society and been colonized by it. As against this, the fact that the steering media of*

money and power have to be anchored in the lifeworld *speaks prima facie for the primacy of socially integrated spheres of action over objectified systemic networks. There is no doubt that the coordinating mechanism of mutual understanding is put partially out of play within formally organized domains, but the relative weights of social versus system integration is a different question, and one that can be answered only empirically. (...) I see the methodological weakness of an absolutised systems functionality precisely in the fact that it formulates its basic concepts as if (...) a total bureaucratization had dehumanized society as a whole, consolidated it into a system torn from its roots in a communicatively structured lifeworld, and demoted the lifeworld to the status of subsystem among many. For Adorno, this 'administered world' was a vision of extreme horror; for Luhmann it has become a trivial presupposition* (Habermas 1987, 311-312, first two emphasis added).

There are several points that Habermas' critique of systems theory adds to the discussion of mediatisation. First, while some institutionalised systems are based on non-reflexive (non-communicative, not "propositionally differentiated") mediums like power and money, the lifeworld's medium of natural language, instead, *carries with it the structure of rational criticism*. This sets it qualitatively apart from other steering media and enables its status as an "integrative" medium that can build intersubjective relations and temporary consensus among actors. This, in turn, offers us a vocabulary with which to further elaborate the claim about mediatisation. Mediatisation is a process where *attention* (the principal medium of the media institutions) is a non-linguistic, propositionally undifferentiated (and cool) medium that circulates relatively easily in late modern societies. It passes institutional boundaries without being (as such) tied to normative implications (this is part of its potential of circulation). But – just as is the case with money and power – it does not completely detach media institutions from lifeworld rationality. Attention in itself does not "mean" anything. Just like power (cf. Kunelius and Reunanen 2012, 60-61), it will have to be *communicated*, i.e. its meaning and potential consequences will have to be interpreted, negotiated and framed by the use of language. The use and managing of attention can also be framed and criticised communicatively using the lifeworld medium of natural language.<sup>11</sup>

The structure of a propositionally differentiated natural language carries the potential of criticism and the possibility of deliberation in democracy. Habermas argues that human communication is ultimately impossible without reference to the three implicit validity claims: truth, rightfulness, and truthfulness. He also makes a distinction between *communicative* action, in which arguments are criticised on the basis of these validity claims, and *strategic* action, in which these validity claims are ignored (or muted) when orienting to success (Habermas 1991a, 273-337).

On the foundations of communicative action Habermas elaborates his conception of the political public sphere and deliberative politics. The political public sphere is a communicative structure that identifies, thematises and dramatises problems in such a way that they can be taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes (Habermas 1996, 359). To be genuinely deliberative, this process of identifying and solving societal problems should be based on argumentation where arguments should be criticised communicatively by referring to the validity claims.

This discussion raises two other simple but fundamental points. First, natural language, the medium of the lifeworld, is *qualitatively* different from system steering media. Here Habermas takes distance from Parsons, saying that lifeworld media cannot be understood through the analogue of money.<sup>12</sup> Second, natural language potential is widely spread and diffused in society: it is *not* a domain specific medium. It is the medium that all social systems are dependent on, and it is the medium of legitimation that all social systems (or most of them) have to use to build up the public arguments that defend their action. Therefore, natural language becomes a crucial factor both in *intra- and inter-institutional* communication (it is a channel with which institutions communicate, however imperfectly, but always in much more nuanced and consequential ways than merely by “irritation”) and in *system-lifeworld-*relations where institutions will also have to retain and reproduce their legitimacy (in democratic contexts, at least). Armed with these Habermasian insights, we now take another look at mediatisation in a more empirical and historical sense.

### Mediatisation as a Strategic and Communicative Process

The “public sphere” debates have – far too often than would have been healthy – circulated around Habermas’ early work (1991b [1962]) on the bourgeois public sphere. They have been fruitful in producing diverse critical reflections but also tended to polarise the discussion about publicity and the dynamics of journalism, media and rationality (e.g. Fraser 1992; Mouffe 1999). Craig Calhoun’s (2012) recent work offers a welcome corrective to these dualisms. He argues that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century “counter-publics” were not isolated from the idea and emerging practices of more dominant public spheres. Indeed, they were constituted in the same process and as a consequence of various kinds of exclusions from the larger public. In the parlance of later Habermas, this actually makes a lot of sense. It points to the way in which the critical resources of the emerging public sphere were located not only in the private bourgeois sphere (which Habermas himself emphasised in the 1960s) but also in the more collectively shared life experiences of craftsmen, workers and other communities.

In media research, the link between everyday talk, discussion or conversation and the production cultures and practices of the media has been a long and rich source of theoretisation.<sup>13</sup> A key theme has concerned the media’s (in)ability to capture and represent the experiences or “logic” of lifeworlds in relation to current issues and its skills of bringing these communicative potentials into lively and fair interaction with system-actors. This is also the task that Habermas imposes on the mass media:

*The mass media ought to understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce; like the judiciary they ought to preserve their independence from political and social pressure; they ought to be receptive to the public’s concerns and proposals, take up issues and contributions impartially, augment criticisms and confront the political process with articulate demands for legitimation (Habermas 1996, 378).*

By mass media Habermas seems to refer especially to journalistic media institutions.<sup>14</sup> This is natural, because journalism as a media genre and profession has

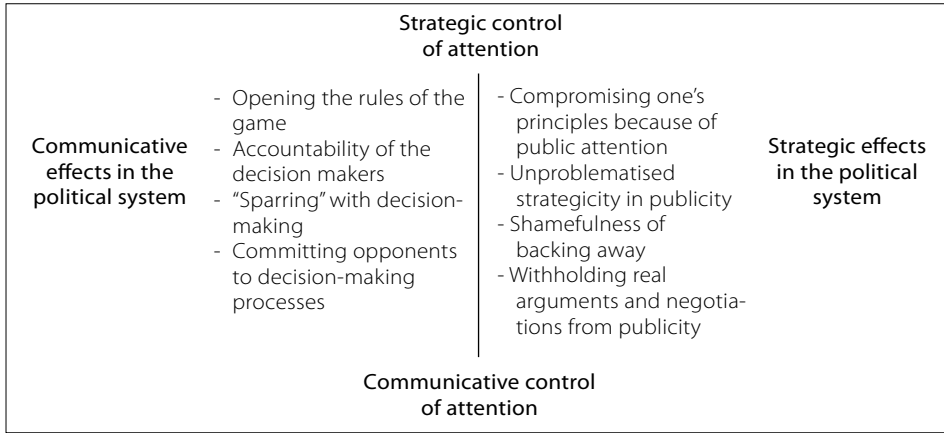
explicitly adopted these kinds of tasks.<sup>15</sup> In our quest to evaluate the normative “quality” of mediatisation, we also limit our discussion here to journalistic media. To be sure, the communicative role of journalism presented by Habermas is a normative ideal that cannot be fully realised in the empirical world, for a number of reasons. First, journalism also follows market strategies when competing for audiences, and the control of attention can be trivialising, sensationalist and unfair to many participants (i.e. strategic and excluding). Second, communicative criticism is by no means a monopoly of journalism. Instead, it is a general lifeworld medium and the principle that the public sphere (which is a much wider and diffuse thing than journalism) is based on. Thus, journalists can criticise other actors appearing in the public sphere communicatively, but the other actors can also criticise each other – and journalism. Of course, strategic action is also possible for all the participants.

In order to clarify this, a distinction between *journalism’s action* logics and the *effects* (consequences) they may cause is needed. Our study of Finnish political decision-makers illustrates well how the *quality* of mediatisation depends on its consequences in the fields that it affects.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, these consequences can vary considerably, even within a single institutional context (such as the political system). When elaborating this it is useful to analytically distinguish between two questions. First, we can roughly think that the *control* of “attention” by journalists can be communicative or strategic (e.g. is journalism *itself* critical, inclusive and rational or uncritical, exclusive and sensationalist). The control of attention is communicative when journalism critically questions the strategic aspects of the claims of actors, takes up issues, augments criticisms and confronts the political process with articulate demands for legitimisation. Second, we think that the *effects* (the reactions) of journalistic attention in target domains can be either communicative or strategic (e.g. media attention can increase or decrease the quality of deliberations in decision-making processes).

Distinguishing these two questions helps us to see how even if journalism acts communicatively, it can generate strategic action in target domains, and conversely, that strategic journalism can cause communicative action. These somewhat (democratically) paradoxical situations were well in evidence in our interviews among Finnish decision-makers (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> However, it is not insignificant if journalism controls attention communicatively or strategically. Acting communicatively journalism can also actively organise the rational argumentation of issues, not only focus attention on them.

In the interviews, Finnish decision makers talked a lot about situations where they saw that journalism and journalists were acting in a narrow, strategic manner (the upper half of the figure). They widely shared a general understanding that journalism exaggerates, plays with emotional responses, sharpens policy-conflicts and gets hung up on details. This attitude came up as a general lament about “mediatisation,” but also as detailed and well-argued evidence concerning the case issues the interviews focused on. However, the decision makers were also able to recognise that they themselves acted strategically (or at least, that other decision makers, and thus the system of politics, did so). The right half of the figure points to this kind of negative (strategic) mediatisation. The decision-makers thus (both in the interviews and in the survey) articulated a moral (or moralistic) ideal according to which media pressures are “temptations” that should be resisted when making

Figure 1: Strategic and Communicative Control and the Effects of Media Attention



actual decisions (cf. Kunelius and Reunanen 2012, 65). However, there seemed to be no moral concerns about being able to *use* media strategically to further one's own serious political ends. Effectiveness in gaining a positive public image and public support seemed to be more important than open and honest public discussion (ibid. 67). On balance, in our material the decision makers dominantly saw the media acting strategically, based on a logic of attention that is detached from rational political decision-making. This, in turn, seemed to legitimise a counter-move: the attempt to strategically manipulate the public discussion.<sup>18</sup>

The upper left corner of the figure identifies situations where the strategic (sensationalist, attention-driven) acts of journalism can actually provoke communicative processes or reactions in the political system. It is noteworthy that exaggerations and the overblown emotional media coverage sometimes make the decision-makers worried about their reputation or honour – and force them to react and take a stance on real problems. This was quite directly recognised by political decision makers. Such pressure of attention can also make visible some habitual rules and rituals of behaviour between decision makers and question their legitimisation. These positive (communicative) consequences of strategic media attention were brought up particularly by respondents who did not belong to the innermost core circles of power.

Often, even if the ministry has been informed about a particular issue and demands, and pleas have been made, nothing really happens before it is made public on a TV-show. Then, things start moving. It is in my view quite incredible, actually. Apparently, that people would like to make some things better has no meaning or relevance. But if somebody's own name and reputation is threatened, and the support of the party, then they start to act. (Trade union actor)

Even if the respondents emphasised the strategic nature of media attention (and thus reproduced the general narrative of mediatisation), they also recognised the possibility that the media's contribution *in itself* (and not only by virtue of the consequences of its attention) was more communicative.<sup>19</sup> Typically, this came out when decision makers talked about their relationships with specialised reporters

they trusted (the lower left corner of the figure). In such moments, by calling potential critical voices and perspectives to the fore, media and journalism can also (in the views of the decision makers) enhance the quality of the decisions that are reached. Furthermore, such media coverage can begin to attach opposing actors to the process of decision-making and help the formulation of compromises by making different parties more aware of each other's arguments. Media and journalism can then, ideally, act as a "sparring opponent" to decision makers. However, the general view of decision makers was that media is usually unable to bring up issues, facts or arguments which would not otherwise have been taken up in the preparatory work of policy networks.

It would be horrible if everything would function on media's terms. Then, we would not need much education or specialisation either, right, a kind of general expertise would be enough (...). But on the other hand, the media is a good "sparring" opponent. It is of course a good challenger. It is often said that a good enemy is the best thing you can have. (...) It presents questions, and if you are not able to answer those, something is probably wrong with the project (Civil servant).

The lower right corner of the figure also came up clearly in the interviews, showing how the communicative or critical contribution of journalism (or anticipation of it) can lead to strategic reactions. Especially when dealing with matters that are seen as potentially sensitive to criticism and resistance, even the media's communicative (not sensationalist, not overblown etc.) intrusion can be seen as threatening the insider-rationality or critical communicativeness of decision-making. Public attention was seen as something that easily provokes conflicts of power and status positions which, in turn, sharpen arguments and can lock people publicly into positions from which they cannot move when a reasonable compromise becomes necessary. There was indeed a rather widely shared view among the respondents that serious talk of matters of deep interest conflicts should be conducted outside media publicity (Reunanen et al. 2010, 301-303).

Altogether, then, it is fair to say that because of these increasingly felt media pressures, two separate realms dominated the imagined political landscape of decision makers. In the realm of *network rationality*, decision-makers concentrate on routine, everyday preparatory consultations and bargaining taking place in policy networks, largely outside media attention. In the realm of *media rationality*, they turn towards political performance and public discussion. Some interviewees even saw that these two logics are becoming more detached from each other (Reunanen et al. 2010, 302).<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, if this sharpening *distinction* of action logics is the main consequence of mediatisation, it is clearly bad news for democracy. Hard-working, issue-centred and humble dedication to common interests (as they are understood by the elite) is in decision-makers' discourse juxtaposed with the media's emphasis on quick reactions, egoism, and sharply oscillating moralism. In the Finnish context, it is tempting to distinguish here an ethos that springs from the "lifeworld" experience of a traditionally small and personally networked, ideologically divided but practically consensus-driven political elite of a Northern ("secular" Lutheran) welfare society. Securing common interests calls for self-discipline while the media offers the temptation of quick and easy (short lived) victories. However, from a broader

horizon the judgment concerning the *quality* (or normative interpretation) of mediatisation does not have to be quite so grim. There is distinct potential (also inside the political system or elite networks) for media to – even by focusing exaggerated, non-communicative attention – create public pressure which *can* also lead to debates about *the rules of rationality* on which elite discourses function. Media drama and spectacles themselves are hardly model examples of critical discussion. Nevertheless, the arguments and rationalisations (in both senses of the term) provoked can lead to new insights. Media itself is not a sufficient – neither always the dominant – actor in such cases, but perhaps it is a necessary catalyst for various social actors to see – even momentarily – that there are questions, views, logics and experiences that have been bracketed out of public discourse. Of course, a journalism that would serve democracy much better would be one that would also be able to mobilise diverse and clearly argued public debates about the spontaneous (and necessarily historically and culturally narrow) moral outrage that it provokes.

## Conclusions

Reading social theory is an invigorating experience for a media scholar in two ways. On the one hand, broad sociological perspectives have a sobering effect on the dangers that always lurk when social theoretisation tends to *centre* around media. The “media” does not develop with a logic of its own. Its “medium” is always a historically defined factor. Thus, “mediatisation” has to be understood in a socio-historical context that media research cannot capture by itself.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, for a media scholar, it is inspiring to see how thinly sociologists seem to be aware at times of the rich empirical research on the practices and production cultures of media institutions.<sup>22</sup> Playing both these games a little bit – media research *and* social theory – we have aimed in this essay to make a theoretical contribution to the general debate about *mediatisation*, understood as a narrative of the changing relations between some modern institutions, and the “increasing influence” of the “media” as an institution. The suggestive contribution of this excursus can be summed up in the following points:

(i) By taking seriously the abstract, systems-theory originated vocabulary of “mediatisation,” the debate of mediatisation inside media research can be elaborated and sharpened. Defining the dominant steering media of different institutions (or: dominant capital in their fields) enables potentially sharper questions and research angles on how the “medium of media” penetrates other fields, redefines their internal orders and possibly redefines their dominant steering media or their functional dynamics.<sup>23</sup>

(ii) By following the system-theory vocabulary, it is possible to offer a tentative answer to the question: *what is the medium of the media?* Our candidate for an answer is “attention.” “Attention” can also be seen mostly or potentially as a “cool” medium, which explains its ability to circulate widely and complicate other institutional orders.

(iii) While systems-theory offers analytical rigor in specifying differentiation, its extreme forms easily overlook the mechanisms and “mediums” of cooperation and integration. Here, Habermas’ definition of mediatisation is particularly useful, since it describes a process that comes to be identified when something is “mediatised” by system forces. Thus, the strategic biases (or violence) toward

the communicative potentials of life-worlds (which in turn are always somehow narrowly actualised historically and locally) not only “irritate” but also provoke critical, communicative responses.

(iv) Conceptualising “mediatisation” (1) as an increasing influence of the media’s medium and (2) as (legitimation) *discourses* concerning its consequences, helps to avoid *premature* normative conclusions about mediatisation. Instead, it makes it possible to identify a sociologically distinct process of increasingly intensive competition over attention in current societies. This process in itself is neither good nor bad, but can only be normatively discussed in its historically specific instances and against our historically contingent understandings of values and norms.

(v) For journalism (and journalism research) such vocabulary offers a (somewhat poetic but provocative) chance to talk about the “mediatisation of journalism” (i.e. the increasing weight of *attention* as the key capital in the journalistic field). “Attention” (cf. Splichal 2006) can historically be seen as a necessary ingredient and aspect of the (theory of) modern forms of democratic publicity. But “publicity” as a democratic force necessarily calls for the interplay of “attention” with another ingredient: “argumentation.” The modest reminder that our paper offers to journalism, then, is this: Resources of “argumentation” which are necessary for making the most of the good consequences of “mediatisation” and the “mediatisation of journalism” are always crucially located “outside” journalism: in system-institutions, between them and “out there” in the uncategorised experiences of the changing lifeworlds of real people. Defending the critical “rational” aspects of journalism, its ability to function for democracy, depends on its ability to remain open to these interactions. Fundamentally (and only superficially paradoxically), it is this openness that also builds its necessary independency from political and social pressure for fulfilling the Habermasian task to “take up issues and contributions impartially, augment criticisms and confront the political process with articulate demands for legitimation.”

## Notes:

1. Some, like Schulz (2004), have tried to be more specific, listing processes of change that represent different aspects of mediatisation: 1) the media *extend* capacities for communication in time and space; 2) they *substitute* social activities and social institutions; 3) they *amalgamate* with various non-media activities that 4) *accommodate* to the media logic. Some formulations, like Strömbäck (2008), describe aspects of mediatisation in particular fields (here, politics), suggesting that mediatisation refers to the degree to which 1) the media constitute the most important or dominant source of information; 2) they become independent from political institutions; 3) their content becomes governed by media logic, and the degree to which 4) political actors are governed by “media logic” instead of “political logic.” Some analyses, like Gitlin (2003), look at the overall saturation effects of the media in society and everyday life.

2. The study was based on 60 thematic interviews and an elite survey of 419 respondents. The *Media in Power (2007–2009)* project was conducted at the University of Tampere and funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. The research was reported in Kunelius et al. (2009). See also Reunanen et al. (2010) and Kunelius and Reunanen (2012).

3. The media’s medium will, then, logically, have *different* effects on different kinds of institutional domains. Thus, as we suggested in the beginning, research on mediatisation must, indeed, be concrete and specific (in domains and in locations). The mediatisation of religion, for instance, is *different* than the mediatisation of politics. The mediating medium (the penetrating code) may be the same but the dominant medium affected is different.



4. Thompson develops this into an idea about publicness which is not dependent on the co-present dialogical burdens of the earlier Habermasian public sphere theory (1995, 260ff). This connects with our increasing ability to become exposed to experiences and suffering at a distance (see also Silverstone [2007]).

5. By “decision-makers” we refer to a broader category of actors than merely politicians. We have categorised our interviewees into eight groups and survey respondents into seven sectors of society: 1) labor unions, 2) business, 3) administration, 4) NGOs, 5) police and judiciary, 6) politics, 7) the research sector, 8) public sector employers (interviews only).

6. For similar lines of research often with similar kinds of results, see particularly the work of Davis (2007; 2010) and Spörer-Wagner and Marcinkowski (2010).

7. To be sure, Luhmann puts this in a complex and typically paradoxical and ironic form: “It is not, *what* is the case, what surrounds us as world and as society? It is rather: *how* is it possible to accept information about the world and about society as information about reality when one knows *how* it is produced?” (Luhmann 2000, 122).

8. In our data 96 percent of respondent agreed to the claim about the “openness” of their organisation. This can be seen as a reaction to the problems and complexities produced by mediatisation and its medium of attention. The claim of being “transparent” can be seen as an attempt to neutralise the influence and complexities of not being able to control attention. “Transparency”, somewhat fascinatingly, combines the suggestion that everything is there to be seen in the first place (this partly neutralises the effects of attention) and the idea that what is transparent is actually often invisible or difficult to see. Of course, transparency as a legitimation strategy for institutions also leads to an overflow of information and data, reinstating some of the power related to *focusing* attention.

9. The most prominent pattern seemed to be that mediatisation correlates with other power resources. Those with official status and who are actively involved in policy networks also make use of media resources and, to differing extents, mold their actions to the demands of the media. However, there are also small minority groups who (according to their own report) seem to be quite independent of the media. On the one hand, there are (in most sectors of the political system) those who seem to have enough other power resources to be fairly indifferent to the media. On the other hand, there are those who seem to work independently (or in an independent field) and who do not need to struggle for influence or to bargain on their issues in policy networks. In this group the judiciary is especially well represented (Kunelius and Reunanen 2012).

10. One interviewee, for instance, told that potential media attention makes decision-making complicated, because when writing meeting memos one must be *careful not to write down anything too concrete* or controversial that would arouse opposition if it generated publicity.

11. This, of course, does not mean that these interpretations, in turn, cannot be controlled and closed by ideologies (power) or money.

12. This, in fact, does not mean that lifeworld could not in some degree be made sense of via the Parsonian media-idea (or via the “hot” indigenous media of Abrutyn and Turner 2011). Commitments, for instance, can, of course, function in some sense like money (propositionally undifferentiated), but they too are exposed to the critical potentials of language use and – despite the ritualised nature of social life – to a need to every now and then be argumentatively legitimated.

13. Think, for example, of John Dewey’s dream of Thought News (albeit from the perspective of making science meaningful in society) (cf. Westbrook 1992) or the early theoretisations of the public (de Tocqueville, de Tarde, Park, etc.). Several kinds of experiments and journalistic genres have been built on the idea of “public access.” In election coverage, debate formats including “citizens’ questions” have been a standard part of the journalistic imagination for some time. And of course, the vast array of possibilities currently explored in the interface between social media and journalism links to and continues – sometimes also claims to redefine – these efforts. While some research has tended to underline the ideal that journalistic professionalism has incorporated into itself and its values as the task of “representing” the lifeworld perspective of the people (against system forces and vocabularies), a steady line of research and theorising has also underlined the insufficient nature of this effort (at least from Tuchman [1978] and Gans [1979] to the “public journalism” movement in the 1990s (cf. Rosen 1999; Glasser 2000; Friedland 2003).

14. Habermas also refers here to a list of the media's tasks in democratic political systems presented by Gurevitch and Blumer (1990): Surveillance, agenda-setting, platform for advocacy, dialogue across a diverse range of views, holding officials accountable for their exercises of power, giving incentives for citizens to become involved in political processes, defending the media's autonomy, respecting audience members as potentially concerned and being able to make sense of his or her political environment.

15. Of course, other kinds of media, like entertainment and art, can more implicitly fulfill democratic or public sphere functions, for example by taking up social problems or deconstructing oppressive cultural beliefs (cf. e.g. McGuigan 2005).

16. Here we use the self-reported evidence from interviews to illustrate the complexity of "mediatisation" by looking at the consequences of the increasing importance of journalistic attention in the field of political decision-making. To be sure, part of such evidence is to be analysed with a healthy dose of suspicion: even if produced in a research context, it is not free of strategic formulations. But we also want to underscore two issues. First, following the Habermasian notion of the role of language as a shared, potentially rational medium means recognising that such interviews can also capture "genuine" moments of criticism and valid evidence. Second, even if some combinations (for instance: strategic media causing communicative results) might be seen fitting into a strategic explanation frame (for instance: we politicians are under constant scrutiny and therefore legitimised), all combinations are not as self-celebratory (for instance: communicative journalism causing strategic reactions from decision makers).

17. Because the effects are not clear-cut according to the communicativity or strategicity of the control of media attention, the upper and lower parts of the figure are not decoupled as separate fields.

18. Of course, this is also because of the fact that other political actors are assumed to do the same. Hence, this is not merely a reaction towards *media* and its somehow independent, strategic use of attention logic.

19. This, of course, offers some kind of evidence that media functions with other media (natural language) than merely with its dominant medium (attention).

20. Similar or parallel interpretations have also been suggested by other Finnish scholars (Alho 2004, 310; Kantola 2002, 297).

21. For instance, mediatisation now (with the recent emergence of global capitalism) means *somewhat* different things than it did in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (during the emergence of national states and world capitalism), albeit these can also be seen as historically connected waves of "mediatisation".

22. This is, of course, understandable in a sense, however Habermas' (1996) account of the media and Luhmann's (2000) reading of news research, tend to *overlook* the media as an institution.

23. Our research on how Finnish decision-makers feel the pressures of media attention and how they control it is an example of an attempt to ask these questions empirically.

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