

Mediatization Research and Causality: Toward a Critical Realist Ontology

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Mediatization research has been identified as an influential new approach in media and communication studies. However, being a theory of change, a proper discussion about causality and its correlated ontology foundations must be fundamental. This theoretical work builds on the idea that much of the shortcomings of mediatization research might be attributed to a lack of an explicit ontological discussion. The article reflects on causality and on the influence of constructionism in mediatization research, which might imply explanations based on a flat reality. Considering that a proper theorization of social ontology should be fundamental and that others have argued for a complementary meta-theory to operationalize mediatization research, this article argues that specific features of critical realism could be helpful in developing better tools to deal with the questions that mediatization research tries to answer. Some of those features include an emphasis on ontological discussion, the theorization of causal powers and emergent properties, the advantages of analytical dualism in the relationship between agency and structure, and the mediatory importance of reflexivity and internal conversations.

Keywords: mediatization, social ontology, causality, critical realism, constructionism

In the last decades, mediatization has become a key concept for media and communication research and one of its most vibrant fields (Adolf, 2017; Hepp, 2012). According to Hepp and Hasebrink (2018), mediatization “captures, on the one hand, the increasing spread of technologically based media in society; and on the other hand, how different social domains are being more and more shaped by these media” (p. 17). About investigative goals, mediatization tries to build “a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the role of media in cultural and social change” (Driessens & Hjarvard, 2017, p. 7), an effort that entails “not only different levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro) and structural and agency perspectives but also a contextualized and nuanced understanding of media-related change” (Driessens & Hjarvard, 2017, p. 7).

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However, its influence has also been coupled with criticism (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021; Deacon & Stanyer, 2014, 2015) and vivid debates, primarily because of conceptual divergences and different understandings of what mediatization is and how to research it properly (Adolf, 2011; Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Ekström, Fornäs, Jansson, & Jerslev, 2016; Lundby, 2014). Different traditions in mediatization research, such as the institutional, socioconstructivist, material, and culturalist, emphasize diverse aspects of the issue and conceptualize distinct elements of the relation between media and society. Those differences and controversies are still at play, and according to Ekström and colleagues (2016), "the fundamental question of 'what counts' as mediatization remains largely unsolved" (p. 1091).

Moreover, even though the claim about the current process in which "media" is shaping "social change in particular (or all) fields of society" (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 704) remains central, there is not a consensus about the ontological status of mediatization. Therefore, potential ways to support that claim might vary depending on the relation between the type of causal analysis and the ontological underpinnings of the offered approach to sustain it. Thus, dealing with social ontology in a mediatization research context requires a discussion about causality, especially if we conceive media as a "molding force" (Hepp, 2013) that, by definition, has causal powers.

However, the ontological framework is not always addressed explicitly in mediatization research (Couldry, 2014c), and the lack of ontological reflection is problematic not only for methodological issues (Collier, 2011; Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2001; Sayer, 2000) but also because the charge of ontological neglect is not that ontological commitments are absent, but that they are left overly implicit and unexamined (Lawson, 2019).

To theorize about causality, I argue that mediatization research must be explicit about its social ontology foundations and that causality claims must be coherent with those foundations. This article proposes that critical realism (CR) might provide a framework to make visible the implicit and latent assumptions embedded in mediatization research. At the same time, some meta-theoretical elements of its ontology might help to operationalize mediatization research.

Furthermore, ontology is relevant because, from a critical realist perspective, attributing causality necessarily requires attention to the nature of the object of study. In other words, causal statements are dependent on what an object is and the things it can do by virtue of its nature (Danermark et al., 2001).

Although condensing CR to a brief definition might oversimplify a diverse and complex assemblage of ideas (Wiltshire, 2018), it can be said that it emerged as an attempt to overcome the limitations of positivism and constructivism/interpretivism (Gorski, 2013) and is "concerned with the nature of causation, agency, structure, and relations, and the implicit or explicit ontologies we are operating with" (Archer et al., 2016, p. 2).

Thus, CR as a meta-theory can help to refine mediatization claims about ontology, causality and the interplay between structure and agency.

That search for ontological reflection is comparable with visions that promote and encourage a mediatization agenda combined with complementary social theory and their corresponding ontological and

epistemological frameworks such as structuration (Hjarvard, 2014) or fields theory (Couldry, 2014a) to deal with the shortcomings of mediatization research.

Even though CR has hardly been explored in media and communications research, with a handful of examples (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Lau, 2004; Toynbee, 2008; Richmond & Porpora, 2019; Wright, 2011), it has been successfully applied to several social sciences (Sayer, 2000). The absence could be attributed to parochialism and mediocentrism present in a large portion of media studies (Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008) that privilege empirical questions, despite conceptual and ontology issues being prior and more critical because implicitly or explicitly, they effectively define the constituents of the social world (Archer, 2016).

To support the arguments, this article proceeds in the following way. First, I explore the essential claims in mediatization traditions, arguing that underlying ontological commitments can be attributed to a constructionist perspective. Then, there is an analysis of how mediatization studies conceptualize causality, sometimes neglecting ontological discussion, which can affect its explicative program. Considering that absence, I propose a CR ontology as meta-theory and elements of its conceptual corpus to strengthen mediatization research and its claims about the social world. Those elements are the idea of a stratified reality; an understanding of the agency/structure problem that does not conflate them; the relevance of emergent properties and analytical dualism; and the exploration of self-reflexivity and internal conversations in a mediatized world.

Consequently, this work tries to use CR to make explicit some of the ontological underpinnings of mediatization research and, at the same time, endorse it as a suitable meta-theory that could help in the operationalization of causality claims in mediatization research.

Mediatization and Ontology

Mediatization as a concept is, in many ways, vague and nebulous. According to Livingstone and Lunt (2014), it is best understood as the influence of media institutions and practices in other fields of social and institutional practice. Considering its broadness and ambiguity, different subdivisions have been proposed, such as the "institutional," "technological," and "media as world" triad proposed by Bolin (2014), or the "institutional," "cultural," or "materialist" developed by Lundby (2014). However, the "institutional" and "socioconstructivist" division proposed by Couldry and Hepp (2013), is the most used and influential scholarly division about mediatization (p. 196; Adolf, 2017; Andersson, 2017; Garland, 2017; Schröder, 2017).

Overall, we could say that the fundamental claim in every mediatization account is that media has causal powers over society or parts of society. However, those causal powers' specific nature depends on theoretical and methodological issues.

Another shared characteristic, according to Couldry (2014c), is that mediatization, in general, has been silent and unspecific about social ontology. In his account, mediatization has claimed correctly that media is changing the nature of the social world, although without "an explicit account of the understanding of that wider social world on which that claim, even its very possibility, relies" (Couldry, 2014c, p. 57).

Jensen (2013) argues that institutional and socioconstructive traditions, represented in Hjarvard's (2008) and Couldry's (2008b) accounts, are both examples of "definitive conceptualizations" of mediatization, labeling them as "institutionalization" and "hegemony," respectively, and positioning in the same spectrum. Interestingly, his other category for distinction is "sensitizing conceptualizations," which could be more suitable for studying the empirical social world.

Following Adolf (2017), another feature of the two main traditions ("institutionalists" and "constructivists") is not about a stricter adherence to social constructionism, as both traditions are based on the idea that social reality is the product of social practices and meanings that orient and influence further social action. In Adolf's (2017) argument, if we are considering the bigger picture from the field of communication or social science, both traditions have more similarities than differences and "they might be traced along the same conceptual continuum rather than positioned as antagonistic perspectives" (p. 19). Therefore, the institutionalist approach can also be explained from a constructivist ontology, if we understand institutions as having sets of roles and procedures that create social facts (Adolf, 2017). In those terms, it is possible to defend the idea that the ontological and correlated epistemological stance in mediatization, regarding social reality and the causal powers of media, rests on a constructionist framework. By constructionism, defined in its broader sense, I follow the idea that reality is constructed through human activity and that members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000).

The constructionist underpinning of mediatization research is also present in a majority of media theories and approaches, which commonly, implicitly or explicitly, tend to adopt a constructionist or constructivist² ontology and adjacent complements such as interpretivism and hermeneutics (Fortner & Fackler, 2014), especially when dealing with the "realities" constructed by media, its production, distribution, interpretations, and conditions of reception, alongside all the "representation" issues associated.

Continuing with the specificities of mediatization research, the constructionist perspective is explicitly endorsed in the account of Couldry and Hepp (2018). They use, with theoretical adjustments, the basis of social constructionism proposed by Berger and Luckman (1971) and their main claim is that the current social world is constructed in and through mediated communication. Also, Knoblauch (2013) expresses that mediatization should be framed in the larger context of communicative constructivism, which is based on communicative action, as a proxy to a social practices approach, resting on the idea of the duality of objectivation "referring both to objects 'produced' by actions and to the 'production' of objectivations" (Knoblauch, 2013, p. 303). Similarly, Krotz (2014) argues that "society and culture and all other social and cultural entities are socially constructed by people. Then we can conclude that

² About the uses of "constructionism" or "constructivism," Young and Colling (2004) differentiate both terms: The former have a social rather than an individual focus, and "constructivism" is more interested in the cognitive process that accompany knowledge. However, Gergen and Gergen (2008) noted that both terms are commonly used interchangeably in the social sciences. Holstein and Gubriem (2008) claim that it is difficult to sustain the distinction because constructivists increasingly find mental practices to be reflections or embodiments of social process. In mediatization tradition, Knoblauch and Wilke (2016) following the German terminology and the sociology of Berger and Luckman prefers to use the term "social constructivism."

communication is the relevant connection between media changes and changes in culture and society" (p. 82).

Given mediatization research interest in how media shapes social reality, a constructionist approach seems natural. However, if the main implicit objective of mediatization is to understand the causal powers that media has over society or their subdivisions and not only the effects of X on Y, the question about the construction of the real must be linked to questions of ontology about what is the "real" in the social world, and how that construction (if possible) deals with its relations to a potential reality beyond construction. As Elder-Vass (2012) explains, only a certain type of constructionism can properly deal with questions such as "what exactly it is that is being constructed, what it is that is doing the constructing, and what the process is through which this can occur" (p. 6).

That type of moderate constructionism should be, according to Elder-Vass (2012), differentiated from radical constructionism or "strong" social constructionism using Sayer's (2000) terminology (p. 62). Radical constructionism supposes the impossibility of describing any external circumstances that do not fit in the category of social constructions or even in the constructions of others and also, the denial of any type of independence between the world and the ways in which we think about it. This form of constructionism is related closely to Humean empiricism and foundationalism, in which ontology is reduced to epistemology, producing a flat reality (Danermark et al., 2001).

The traditional way to contest radical constructionism has been by using and promoting the different branches of realism and its notion that the world exists regardless of what we happen to think about it, which is not the same as naive objectivism and its claim about unmediated access to the truth, because, from a CR perspective, facts are also theory-dependent (Danermark et al., 2001; Sayer, 2000).

Even though there are accounts in social theory in which this divide is nuanced and even transcended, such as Sayer (2000) claiming that CR proposes "combining a modified naturalism with a recognition of the necessity of interpretive understanding of meaning in social life" (p. 3), or Elder-Vass (2012) arguing for a "realist social constructionism" (p. 7), media theories³ in general, and mediatization research in particular, tends to undertheorize the discussion about the stance between realism, constructionism, or its potential combination. A good account in which this discussion is present and could be coined as a weak constructivist vision in mediatization is in the already mentioned work of Couldry and Hepp (2018). In addition to Berger and Luckman (1971), they mention Searle (1995) as a source to avoid idealism and ground the analysis in the real, material world, following the idea that "we live in exactly one world, not two or three or seventeen" (Searle, 1995, as cited in Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 21).

Nevertheless, even weaker forms of constructivism, such as the above, imply a division between the "ideational" and the "material," and therefore, it means putting epistemology questions before ontological questions (Fiaz, 2014). Here, we find a tension between constructivism and realist ontology because, following Joseph (2007), "realists try to get past this material-ideational question by insisting instead that structures—as underlying processes—are real and have real causal effects" (p. 351). Then, a

³ An interesting account is developed by Bolin (2009), who proposes an explanation of the media and its ontological and epistemological questions from the opposition between functionalism and critical theory.

critical realist framework could potentially grant “ontological status” to various contextual structures, both material and ideational (Fiaz, 2014, p. 497).

Causality in Mediatization

If, following Krotz (2017), we understand mediatization as a process that changes all because it creates new conditions for the basic human activity of communication, a challenge for every conceptualization of mediatization is how to account for change.

A part of mediatization literature has contributed with relevant conceptualizations about dealing with change and operationalizing causality empirically. For example, Bolin (2017) develops an operationalization with a generational approach to media; Hepp (2020) offers causal theorization to overall societal transformations; and Bengtsson, Fast, Jansson, and Lindell (2021) propose an operationalization concerning lifestyle.

One shared characteristic in those types of approaches, and present in a major part of “media sociology” and mediatization research—as argued by Hepp (2022)—is the common focus on “social patterns.” In his words, mediatization research is concerned with empirically identifying patterns and “gradually arriving at more general theories on the role mediated communication plays in processes of social and cultural change” (Hepp, 2022, p. 6).

From a realist perspective, causal claims are not only about a regularity between things or events, “but about what an object is like and what it can do and only derivatively what it will do in any particular situation” (Sayer, 1992, p. 104). Therefore, causal powers may be related to objects independently of any particular pattern of events.

Just an example: In the institutionalist tradition, Hjarvard (2014) points out that media is a semiautonomous institution in society, controlling how other institutions access communicative resources and the public sphere. Therefore, research in mediatization must consider the institutional interdependence between the media and the field to be analyzed (Hjarvard, 2017). That interdependence entails that, in his words, we should not only be concerned about the mediatization of politics, but we also must be aware of the reverse process: the politicization of the media, that is, the media influenced by the logic of political institutions as well. He also exemplifies the above, using the educational field, warning about a possible “educationalization of media” (Hjarvard, 2017, p. 13).

In that type of analysis, based on patterns of influence and not necessarily on the nature of the object, there is not only a model of causality going from media to society (or their subdivisions or even institutions) but also from society to media. Then the question should be why, given this double flow, mediatization approach should be relevant, considering the interchangeable nature of the object, transposable causation, and overall indistinctness in the strata between what is being mediatized and what is triggering mediatization. The point is that if we cannot identify the constitution of an object and its internal causal powers, it is challenging to differentiate levels in which the phenomena occur and assigning causality might derive in instrumentalism (Danermark et al., 2001) or even idealism.

One of the theoretical standpoints about this problem is the endorsement of the principle of nonlinear explanation (Couldry, 2014a; Hjarvard, 2014; Verón, 2014), which in the words of Couldry (2014a), is the recognition that mediatization research must be alive to multiple explanatory models of how the meta-process of mediatization works in specific domains and fields, and especially “be open to multiple causal dynamics” (p. 240).

To achieve this multiple-cause analysis beyond a perspective anchored in media-centric accounts and constructed around the idea that mediatization should not be about a transformative logic “within” media but a meta-category of social description, several authors have argued for the necessity of complementary social theory. Thus, for example, Hjarvard (2014) claims that to carry out empirical analysis informed by social theory, middle-range theories, such as mediatization, should be combined with highly abstract theories with ontological levels of analysis. Therefore, the idea of duality of structure around Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory could be helpful to suggest that media may be simultaneously inside and outside human agency (Hjarvard, 2014). Other authors have combined mediatization with Bourdieu’s field theory (Couldry, 2014a; Rawolle, 2005; Santa Cruz & Cabalin, 2018) and Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Hepp, Breiter, & Hasebrink, 2018). Also, there is a tradition in mediatization research coming from Latin America (often neglected in scholarly work from the Global North) built around Eliseo Verón’s work on social semiosis (Scolari, Fernández, & Rodríguez-Amat, 2020; Verón, 2014).

One could argue that those accounts have widened the trend in specialism and fragmentation in an already highly partitioned field; however, they have also entailed an expansion and a denser and more complex theorization around mediatization, especially around issues of ontology and epistemology. Nevertheless, there are still unsolved problems about the tension between social constructionism and realism, and, as I argued, CR ontology could be helpful to make causal claims coherently, avoiding a flat reality and without equating ontology with epistemology.

Critical Realism and a Stratified Reality

Going back to the question about what is being constructed by the media, how to know it, and what the nature of its relationship is with the real, a fundamental aspect of CR that could be useful in mediatization is the idea of a stratified reality. Because ontology (the nature of the real) cannot be reduced to epistemology (our ways of knowing or understanding the real), human knowledge can capture a small portion of reality (Danermark et al., 2001). Therefore, there are different levels in which the real and the ways of knowing it interact. According to Bhaskarian CR, the first is the “empirical” level, which is the domain of direct interaction with the world and how we experience it. That is the transitive level of reality, where social ideas, meanings, decisions, and actions occur. The middle level consists of the “actual,” where events occur independent of human observation or how we interpret them. These events are not predetermined and depend on contingent conditions (Sayer, 2000, p. 15). The third level is the “real.” Causal structures, or “causal mechanisms” exist at this level. These are the inherent properties in an object or structure that act as causal forces to produce events (Danermark et al., 2001). Therefore, even when we cannot “see” the real, we potentially could see the mechanisms behind it and its effects.

In those terms, the concept of emergent properties is fundamental, because, as Elder-Vass (2007) explains, emergence is "taken to justify a central ontological claim of social realism: that social structures, although the product of human individuals, have causal powers of their own, which cannot be reduced to the powers of those individuals" (p. 27). Emergent properties (or causal powers) of an entity arise from the organization of the entity's parts. Therefore, causality in social structures can be explained by their possession of emergent properties (Elder-Vass, 2007).

This idea, combined with the notion that society is concept-dependent (Bhaskar, 1998; not concept determined) and that there is a real social world built on concepts and meaning, allows for the identification of causal mechanisms driving social events, activities, or phenomena that are selected and formed using rational judgment. Thus, CR claims to be able to combine and reconcile ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality (Archer, 1995).

If mediatization has consequences on people's lived and daily experience, the acknowledgment and description of that experience (and related practices) and how it has changed, would be part of the empirical level. The latent quality of radical social constructionism present in some portion of media, and communication studies have implied that an important fraction of scholarly work about mediatization remains mainly at the empirical level. A possible explanation could consider cultural studies' shaping force and pervasive influence and its reflection on how media analysis begins and ends with lived experience (Toynbee, 2008). Therefore, causal powers, causal mechanisms, and emergent properties in conjunction have not been addressed by a major part of mediatization research, although concepts like "molding forces" (Hepp, 2013) could be considered as causal mechanisms.

In the next level, and using a weaker form of social constructionism, there are accounts of mediatization that appear willing to explore the realm of the actual, not explicitly using that category, but studying events. Beyond the direct experienced perception of people or collectives, these events are instantiations that occur when the powers that objects or structures have in the level of the real are activated (Sayer, 2000). In mediatization terms, we could say that examples of events are the rise of time-space measurement and signaling systems based on GPS (Couldry & Hepp, 2018); the pervasiveness of new information and communication technologies as learning tools in a way that is distinct from any previous pedagogical process (Breiter, 2014); or the increasing ubiquity of music as a sounding phenomenon in modern society (Pontara & Volgsten, 2017).

In terms of the level of the real, mediatization research, at its best, has explored only in a few cases causal powers and mechanisms in structural terms. Using the previous example of the GPS, we can see that Couldry and Hepp (2018) explain the empirical and the actual in terms of a "converged locatedness" that relies entirely on "distributed technological systems that gather, process, and transmit information, anchored in surveillance mechanisms routinely embedded in particular types of work and economical structures" (p. 58). This could be an example of an analysis of the "real" level that seeks causal mechanisms and causal powers from the social context (types of work and economical structures, as named in the example) that are constraining, enabling, or motivating certain phenomena.

This type of example could be closer to a critical realist account, and even Couldry (2008a) himself has advocated for CR as a useful meta-theory when discussing social theory in media, claiming that, for understanding media power in society and its relationship with the nature of society, CR might “provide the friction that a genuinely critical and deconstructive project needs” (p. 173).

Agency and Structure in Mediatization

Considering the heterogeneity in mediatization research, the reflection about agency/structure has been influenced by the different theoretical stances of their authors and the traditions they promote. Hjarvard (2014) develops a framework that seeks to relate media system as structure and media use as agency using the mediatization-as-structuration thesis (Peruško, 2017). In those terms, Hjarvard uses Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory to understand how “social structures work as resources for social interaction in particular situations and how social structures are reproduced and perhaps altered through agency” without favoring social structure over agency or to highlight institutional order at the expense of social practice (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 203).

Authors like Couldry (2014b) have emphasized that a practice approach could lead to an analysis anchored in the subject’s agency but should also consider the macro conditions that enable or impede those practices. In that view, practices should be examined through the micro/subjective but also from the macro/objective, or in his own words: “media phenomenology not grounded in political economy is blind, but a political economy of media that ignores the phenomenology of media is radically incomplete” (Couldry, 2012, p. 12). That manifestation of the “practice turn” is characterized as a way to overcome the theoretical division between structure and agency (Couldry, 2004). In media studies terms, it entails understanding media, not as texts or structures of production, but a shift to study the whole range of practices that are oriented toward media and the role of media in ordering other practices in the social world (Couldry, 2004). Elsewhere Couldry and Hepp (2018) insist on the importance of “practices of communication” (p. 33) as the base for constructing a mediatized social world molded by a long-term institutionalization and materialization of media.

In this challenge, CR presents an opportunity given its historical developments of meta-theoretical underpinnings that entails not just full-bodied agency but also for an analytically distinct conception of social structure (Porpora, 2015).

In the Archerian model of CR (Archer, 1995), structure, culture, and agency need to be connected but the conflation of one over the other is avoided because this would result in determinism or voluntarism, depending on the type of conflation.

In Archer’s conceptualization, conflationism ignores the stratified character of reality, considering only one dimension of it (Archer, 1995). Conflation can move in three directions: upward, downward, or central. In upward conflation, the individual is the ultimate constituent of social reality, and structural properties become an inert and dependent element, leading to methodological individualism. On the other hand, the assumption in downward conflation is that structural properties exert a deterministic influence on the regular occurrence of events, implying that the individual and the acts of the individual become an epiphenomenon. Later, with new

sociological accounts pursuing consensus, the two dimensions were reconceptualized and linked together. According to Archer, two main branches can be distinguished in that process: elisionism and emergentism. The main difference would reside in the inseparability or separability of agency and structure. Constructionist approaches, such as symbolic interactionism, are mentioned by Archer (1995) as an example of the elision of agency and structure because "every aspect of structure is held to be activity-dependent in the present tense and because there is a conviction that any causal efficacy of structure is dependent upon its evocation by agency" (p. 60). She also references structuration theory as an elisionism example for central conflation, even though on a "more acceptable basis" than symbolic interactionism considering that the former incorporates "material resources and power, rather than dealing with networks of meaning alone" (Archer, 1995, p. 60).

Conversely, emergentism, using analytical dualism and a realist ontology, consider that agency and structure are entities with different properties and powers. Because of that, methodologically, it is necessary to distinguish between them to examine their interplay and to understand why things "are so and not otherwise in society" (Archer, 1995, p. 65).

As an illustrative example, Archer (1995) mentions a commentary by Bhaskar directed to Peter Berger's elisionist theory: "People and society are not . . . related 'dialectically.' They do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different things" (p. 63).

Cultural analysis can also be an object of conflation. As Archer (2020) explains, in downward conflation, "some cultural code or central value system imposes its choreography on cultural life and agents are reduced to bearers of its properties," and in upward conflation, "cultural properties are simply formed and transformed by some untrammelled dominant group, which successfully universalizes an ideological conspectus to advance its material interests" (p. 153).

One conceptual tool built by emergentism is the idea of analytical dualism (Archer, 1995), developed by Margaret Archer. Analytical dualism separates the two dimensions, structure and agency, analyzing them as relatively independent (Archer, 1996). However, it also encompasses the possibility of interaction between them and a reflection on the moment the interaction takes place. For Archer (1995), one of the advantages of her proposed approach is that it allows accounting for the influence of each dimension and the emergent properties of each of them.

Interestingly, while Archer (1995) emphasizes the distinction between structural and cultural processes, she nevertheless sees their development following similar principles. Thus, Archer (1995) insists on analyzing distinctive properties and powers pertaining to structure, culture, and agency without conflating them, examining the interplay between them and their theorization. This model of analysis, coined with the acronym SAC (Structure–Agency–Culture), is helpful in distinguishing between structure and culture as well as their different causal influences upon agency. The main point is that "the interplay between culture and agency could be examined in the same way as between structure and agency" (Archer, 2020, p. 152).

Thus, the SAC model was developed to confront the "canon" of "cultural holism" present in a great portion of social theory, in which culture(s) have been regarded as homogeneous (their internal

components are always coherently integrated) and with members that share the same ideational homogeneity (a uniformity of beliefs, collective representations, central values, ideology, form of life, and so on; Archer, 2020).

A good example of a mediatization account that theorizes about agency avoiding conflation and without a standard and ready-to-use concept of culture can be found in Hepp (2022, p. 18), with the use of a "hybrid approach" to agency:

an approach that neither understands media technologies merely as a 'delegation' of human agency nor as an agency in its own right. Instead, it seeks to understand how new forms of agency develop in the entanglement of human practice and the latest media technologies. (Hepp, 2022, p. 18)

Although it could be said that the use of "practices" as the fundamental mediatory element between structure and agency might be problematic from an Archerian critical realist perspective.

In those terms, it is possible to argue that the underpinnings of the most influential traditions in mediatization research could be regarded as expressions of elisionism, which, following a CR perspective, obstruct the analysis by merging the difference between the systemic and the interactive.

In other words, if mediatization research treats agency and structure (culture) as different faces of the same coin, whether using structuration theory, the "practice turn," or any other implicit or explicit form of elisionism, it could jeopardize its explicative ability, not least when dealing with complex issues about precisely the interactions between agency and structure in time.

And about time, although there is recent literature about how mediatization conceptualizes and addresses it (Bolin, 2017; Kaun, Fornäs, & Ericson, 2016), a general critique addressed at mediatization research is the ambiguous and heterogeneous perspective about time and change (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014).

Following that critique, time in mediatization research often takes a recursive and tautological conceptualization based on a vague and undifferentiated amalgam of notions such as simultaneousness, general interdependency, and permanent and indistinguishable feedback, as we can see in the following examples:

- "These developments of simultaneous growing independency and integration into other domains are not, however, necessarily contradictory but may be mutually reinforcing" (Hjarvard, 2017, p. 7).
- "Media and politics may in some respects work in tandem, enabling a simultaneous mediatization of politics and a politicization of media" (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015, p. 317).
- "The starting-point for this is to conceive mediatization not as a logic internal to media contents (as for example in the pioneering work of Altheide and Snow), but as a meta-process that emerges from many simultaneous transformations in specific settings" (Couldry, 2014a, p. 227).

In those terms, another possible contribution from a CR perspective to mediatization theory about time conceptualization could be the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995). Overall, the morphogenetic approach claims that structure and agency operate over different periods of time in the following terms: structure necessarily predates the action(s) that transform it; and structural elaboration necessarily postdates those actions (Archer, 1995, p. 76). The approach allows for identifying temporary discontinuities in the actions of structures and agencies. Therefore, the temporal gaps and overlaps constitute the key to explaining the properties of each of the dimensions and social change (Hernández-Romero, 2017).

The examples presented above are not used to dismiss a potential process of "politicization of media" (Hjarvard, 2017, p. 13) or deny the possibility of a mutual and coincident influence between media and other social spheres. Instead, the argument is that a CR perspective could help to make causality claims coherent with causal proprieties and ontologically anchored in the studied objects, establishing causal claims that follow a sequence emerged from the interplay between structure, culture, and agency.

Also, a CR realist perspective would enable an alternative reflection that does not rest almost entirely in "practices" as the only existing link between agency and structure because, "unlike central conflationists who amalgamate structural properties and agential properties into an undifferentiated amalgam of practices," a critical realist approach can make visible the subject/object distinction (Archer, 2017, p. 148).

Reflexivity and Media

A relevant question, linked to the structure/agency problem and to the analysis of "practices" as one of the fundamental pieces in mediatization research, is related to what is beyond "practices" and why it matters ontologically. The answer provided by Archerian Critical Realism is personal reflexivity, which precedes and has causal power over practices. In her words, "social practices are produced from agents' reflexive deliberations, which determine their projects by reference to their objective social circumstances" (Archer, 2007, p. 17).

For Archer, reflexivity is an emergent personal property that mediates between structure and agency. Thus, by internal dialogues, reflexivity mediates the impact that structures have on agents and also conditions individual responses to particular social situations.

In a statement that could be regarded loosely (and perhaps boldly) as a mediatization argument, Archer (2012) claims that from the 1980s onward, the synergy between multinational production and information technology resulted in unprecedented morphogenesis (p. 64), which, in turn, has entailed a growing reliance on the own personal powers of people instead of habitual and traditional guidelines. The consequence is an unfolding process of "contextual discontinuity" (Archer, 2007, p. 315) or the absence of intersubjective dialogue with similars and familiars, being the individual abandoned with their own resources. In one of the relatively rare passages that Archer mentions media-related issues, she expresses that new media and technology provides a novel level of diversity of cultural exposure that is hostile to "contextual continuity," defined as the situation when "one generation or cohort are much the same as they were for their predecessors" (Archer, 2012, p. 12). Thus, media and technology are regarded as one of the factors in globalized societies that have enabled a decrease in the communality of experiences, the lack of

biographical reference points, the increased absence of shared history and geography, and the decline of similar structural features and cultural landmarks (Archer, 2007, p. 320).

Even when there have been critiques to the idea that we are under a process of contextual discontinuity (Caetano, 2015; Sayer, 2009), and that from a communications research perspective, the notion that media and technology could diminish "communality of experiences" or "cultural landmarks" is highly controversial and difficult to sustain empirically, the idea of reflexivity, in conjunction with contextual continuity/discontinuity, seems especially relevant to mediatization research, even more, considering that "communicative reflexivity" (Archer, 2007, p. 158) is one of the four types of reflexivity conceptualized by Archer. That type of reflexivity stems from internal conversations that require confirmation by others before resulting in specific actions or practices.

One interesting element to consider is that media and communication research has paid little attention to the internal conversation or self-reflexivity issues and their consequences for media-related practices. Likewise, CR and its reflexivity literature have not engaged consistently and systematically with media and technology aspects and how they may affect internal conversations. Open questions that combine both approaches could be used to problematize unresolved issues about media and technology and their relationship with changes in society and culture. What role does media practices, contents, or platforms play in the internal conversation of people in advanced societies? Or, conversely, what consequences for media-related decisions have self-reflexivity in people or even institutions? From a mediatization perspective, it is possible to assert that media is playing an increasing role in the internal conversation of people. However, such a perspective has been almost absent in mediatization literature.

Conclusion

In his pioneer work for mediatization theory, J. B. Thompson (1996) argued that if we want to understand the world, we must understand the process of "mediatization of modern culture" (p. 11). Mainly because institutionalized networks of communication increasingly traverse our world, and people's experience is more than ever mediated by technical systems of symbolic production and transmission. A few years before, Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987), focusing on mediations instead of media, contributed to a better understanding of cultural and communicational processes and experiences, beyond a media-centric analysis.

From those first seminal concerns, many approaches, theories, and models have been proposed within a "mediatized society" framework, and mediatization has been regarded as one of the most promising approaches for investigating the question of the emergent and increasing influence of media and technology in the current world. Among some of its advantages, we can mention its heterogeneity, considering the different strands such as the institutional, socioconstructive, and others; elasticity or how it allows different levels of analysis, whether macro, meso, or micro; and a multidisciplinary drive that entails research beyond the media/communications field, opening the question to other areas or social theories.

Some of those advantages also have their counterpart. The heterogeneity and elasticity have resulted in conceptual ambiguity, inciting criticism considering the challenge of using mediatization for empirical work systematically. Nevertheless, the multidisciplinary focus could be the key to overcoming some of those problems.

If mediatization is open to social theory and corresponding meta-theory as a complementary ontology to develop research, some shortcomings could be neutralized. That is why mediatization has been paired with structuration, fields theory, figurational sociology, social semiotics, and others.

However, the issue is not only about instrumentalism and choosing the "correct" meta-theory to do actual research. The question should be about under what type of ontology, mediatization research could reach plausible answers considering its implicit assumptions about reality, but also about the social and the media. Similarly, and as Carrigan (2010) suggests, "the important issue is not necessarily our adoption of Archer's concepts, but of the approach, her conceptualizations exemplify" (p. 395), and how the anticonflationary character of CR might help to reveal "the mediatory processes that are key to understanding social outcomes under conditions of nascent globalization" (Carrigan, 2010, p. 396). In those mediatory processes, media and technology issues could play an important role, I may add.

In this work, I have argued that the fundamental role of social ontology, present in CR, is especially relevant for mediatization studies, because some specific flaws and criticism aimed at it are related to the absence of an elaborated understanding of ontology issues, such as the tension between constructionism and realism, how to deal with causality, and the problematic stance in the agency/structure relation. Therefore, those features can be revised and tackled with specific elements of CR, such as the stratification of reality, analytical dualism, emergent properties, the morphogenetic cycle, self-reflexivity, and internal conversation issues.

Even when the arguments proposed here are aimed at mediatization research, CR, or elements of its ontology, has the potential to be used in other approaches in media and communications studies, especially for nonmedia centric accounts that deal with open systems centered on the social aspect of media-related practices, visions, and understandings.

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