

Mediatization of the political and image communication

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to bring closer and analyse the notion of mediatization in the scope of politics and image communication. It includes definitions of the term mediatization and encompasses approaches to mediatization analysis. The paper provides a brief history of the development of mediatization in stages called waves and discusses models of mass media communication. The article explains that society has been permeated by mediatization and that society and culture are in the process of progressing dependency upon mass media. It discusses the changes that have occurred within the character, function and structure in which social and cultural institutions operate. The paper also includes a study conducted on survey participants concerning their opinions on mass media and their influence on political messages, political image, and their reliability as a source of information. The results of the study have been presented and analysed in the article.

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie oraz analiza pojęcia mediatyzacji w obszarze polityki i komunikacji wizerunkowej. Zawiera on definicje terminu mediatyzacji oraz obejmuje metody jej analizy. Artykuł ujmuje krótką historię rozwoju mediatyzacji w etapach zwanych falami oraz omawia modele komunikacji w mediach masowych. Artykuł wyjaśnia, że społeczeństwo stało się przesiąknięte mediatyzacją oraz, że społeczeństwo i kultura przechodzą postępujący proces uzależniania się od mediów masowych. Praca ta rozważa zmiany, które pojawiły się w charakterze, funkcji oraz strukturze, w których działają instytucje społeczne i kulturowe. Artykuł zawiera badanie przeprowadzone na uczestnikach ankiety, dotyczące ich opinii na temat mediów masowych oraz wpływu mediów na wiadomości polityczne, wizerunek polityczny i ich rzetelności jako źródła informacji. Wyniki tego badania zostały zaprezentowane oraz przeanalizowane w tym artykule.

Key words: mediatization, mass media, politics, political communication, image communication, society

Słowa kluczowe: mediatyzacja, media masowe, polityka, komunikacja polityczna, komunikacja wizerunkowa, społeczeństwo

Introduction

The process of mediatization has been increasingly popular among researchers of human, political, and mass communication in the recent decades. Due to the fact that mediatization has had tremendous influence over various aspects of people's lives, it has become a significant area of study. Culture and everyday life has undergone the process of mediatization which led to changes in how elements of contemporary society function. It can be stated in a nutshell that the concept of mediatization has links to interpersonal communication, media development (with modernization of communication forms), media transformation, sending messages, information transmission, and last but not least political and image communication. Because mediatization of society, culture, and political and image communication is an ongoing process, there is the need for further study that ought to be upgraded due to quickly evolving means of communication and changes on the political scene.

Wojtkowski (2017:10) provides a general view about the notion of mediatization:

Mediatization seems to be one of the most stable, capacious, and significant concepts in the last twenty years. Its influence on sociology, media and communication studies, and cultural studies, is substantial and followed by strong critique¹.

Furthermore, Gomes (2020) claims that „The idea of mediatization, in general, is based on the assumption that in the contemporary world there are different social fields, on the one hand, and there is the communication field, on the other, both relatively autonomous and independent, but that they overlap, they are involved at different levels of interface and synergy and symbiosis patterns, since the distinct original fields need to reach society” (Gomes, 2020:13-14)².

Hepp stresses that „Mediatization, a concept often harnessed by the social sciences and cultural studies, refers to an experience everybody is acquainted with in his or her everyday life: technological communication media saturate more and more social domains which are drastically transforming at the same time” (Hepp, 2020:3)³. The scholar adds that mediatization has got ‘quantitative’ as well as ‘qualitative’ characteristics. ‘Quantitative’ characteristics is seen in ever-increasing proliferation throughout society and can be measured and accessed 24 hours a day. Whereas, ‘qualitative’ characteristics analysis of mediatization mainly focuses on various consequences of its saturation of people's

¹ Wojtkowski, Ł. 2017. *The Present Tense of Mediatization Studies*. *Mediatizations Studies*. 1/2017. Lublin: Publishing House: UMCS Lublin.10.

² Ferreira, J. and P.G. Gomes, A.F. Neto, J.L. Braga, A.P. da Rosa. 2020. *Networks, Society, and Polis: Epistemological Approaches on Mediatization*. Santa Maria: FACOS- Universidade Federal De Santa Maria.

³ Hepp, A. 2020. *Deep Mediatization*. London and New York: Routledge.

daily life by mass media and to what degree it influences social and cultural change⁴.

It can also be stated that „mediatization has been conceptualized as being on par with other major societal change processes such as modernization, individualization, and globalization” (Strömbäck and Esser, 2009:208)⁵. Mediatization is a process that either directly or indirectly affects all parts of society and that mediatization affects different societies in different degrees (Strömbäck and Esser, 2009:208).

1. The approaches to mediatization studies

Wojciechowski (2017) claims that the studies of mediatization can be encompassed in three dominant perspectives. These mediatization perspectives, called approaches, include:

- 1) the media-centric approach,
- 2) the institutionalist approach,
- 3) the culturalist approach.

The first perspective focuses on so called *the media-centric approach* which is linked to political communication and its mutual relations with media institutions. These relations can be seen as driving forces of mediatization process. The field of mediatization of political communication and politics in general emerged in the 1990s and gained vast interest of scholars which is still present nowadays. This approach is mainly concentrated on the case studies which describe the relationship of media and politics. There is the ongoing debate whether media ‘colonise’ politics or vice versa. However, this media-centric approach omits the presence of audience and its indispensable role in political communication (Wojtkowski, 2017:12-13).

The second perspective, which is called *the institutionalist approach*, has been developed by Stig Hjarvard. He analyses (in his studies) the institutional consequences of media position in society. He claims that media have attained not only an independent institution status but also provide the means through which other institutions and actors within the society can communicate (Hjarvard, 2008:115⁶; Wojtkowski, 2017:13).

The third mediatization perspective called *the culturalist approach* concerns media power and media hegemony as a way to comprehend the role of media in society. The aim of the culturalist approach is to analyse media power, hegemony,

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Strömbäck, J. and F. Esser. 2009. Shaping politics: mediatization and media interventionism. In: Lundby, K. Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences. New York: Peter Lang. 205-223.

⁶ Hjarvard, S. 2008. The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. Nordicom Review 29 (2008) 2. 105-134.

popular culture and cultural practices. Media institutions concentrate the symbolic power of ‘reality construction’. It is a social process that has its complexity and enables media institutions to ‘construct’ social reality (Couldry, 2001:4⁷; Wojtkowski, 2017:14).

2. Definition of the term ‘mediatization’

There are various definitions of the notion of mediatization. However, they seem to be different and define the term in very different ways. This is because various researchers describe mediatization from different perspectives. The notion of mediatization can be described as a phenomenon, a concept and as a process (França, 2020:23)⁸.

Another definition states that „Mediatization conceptualizes the effect and power of media in the political scenes, especially in European country” (Keplinger, 2002; Schulz, 2004)⁹.

What is more, mediatization can be defined as „an inherently process-oriented concept, focused on how media influence has increased in a number of different respects” (Strömbäck and Esser, 2009:208).

Guzek proposes that “mediatization is a concept used to critically analyze the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Guzek, 2019:57; Couldry 2001; Hepp, 2013:197). In order to conceptualize the term mediatization it is crucial to understand and analyse it as intertwined with factors such as time, technology, or theory (Guzek, 2019:57; Lundby, 2014).

Gomes (2020) defines that „The word mediatization refers to the function that the elements of communication fulfill in social chemistry, when the resources and means of communication, old and new, are combined with the elements of other social fields” (Gomes, 2020:14).

Hepp also states that „mediatization refers to the relationship between the transformation of media and communication on the one hand and culture and society on the other (Hepp, 2020:3-4).

Hjavard defines that mediatization is a „reciprocal process between media and other social domains or fields” (Hjavard, 2014:202; Wojtkowski, 2017:14).

Wojciechowski describes mediatization that „in general, it could be understood as a process of social transformation effected by media changes” (Wojciechowski; 2017:10).

⁷ Couldry, N. 2001. *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*. London: Routledge.

⁸ França, V. 2020. Scope and variations of the concept of mediatization. In: Ferreira, J. and P.G. Gomes, A.F. Neto, J.L. Braga, A.P. da Rosa. 2020. *Networks, Society, and Polis: Epistemological Approaches on Mediatization*. Santa Maria: FACOS-Universidade Federal De Santa Maria.

⁹ Nie, K.S., Kee, C.P. and A.L. Ahmad. 2014. *Mediatization: A Grand Concept or Contemporary Approach?* Elsevier Ltd.

3. The development of mediatization

The development of mediatization came in three waves. These include stages that are called: *mechanization*, *electrification* and *digitalization*.

The *mechanization* stage changed media practice and distribution through mechanical processes. This can be exemplified by the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1400s. Furthermore, more modern mechanical media such as typewriters and cameras were developed in 19th and 20th century.

The stage of *electrification* appeared with the invention of electronic media in 20th century. The examples of electronic media that came along are the phonograph, the telephone, radio, electric typewriter and television.

The latest stage of mediatization is called *digitalization*. Digital media are software-based and can operate automatically with the use of algorithms in computer programmes. Digitalization has emerged to the creation of so called *deep mediatization*, which „is an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures” (Hepp, 2020:5).

4. Models of mass media communication

Lewin's topological model of communication (1947) explains selection and control of information in mass media. Certain selectors are to select information that is appropriate for further management, dissemination and storage. The barriers through which information is passed are called *gates* and people who control the information are therefore called *gate-keepers*. Certain information is accepted and some is rejected (Goban-Klas, 1999). This model presents that information can be managed, tailored and deliberately prepared for certain audience. It also proves that it is a common procedure to manage information to yield certain reactions among message receivers.

Another model of interpersonal communication with the use of mass media for political reasons is Lasswell's persuasive act model (1948) also called propaganda model. This model analyses acts of communication that are used to influence the message receiver. Messages can be used in a particular purpose and instrumentally to have certain impact on their addressees. Lasswell's model of communication was created with the question of: what influence have mass media got on the receivers? (Mołęda-Zdziech, 2001:22-23¹⁰; Goban-Klas, 1999:57¹¹;

¹⁰ Mołęda-Zdziech, M. 2001. Socjologiczna problematyka komunikowania masowego. [In:]: Jung, B. (ed.). Media komunikacja biznes elektroniczny. Warsaw: Difin.

¹¹ Goban-Klas, T. 1999. Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu. Warsaw-Cracow: PWN.

Goban-Klas, 1996:95¹²). The model emphasizes the instrumental character of mass media communication. This linear model of communication works in one direction only, from the sender to the receiver. Lasswell's propaganda model can be used to describe mass communication and can be the foundation, and a starting point for mediatization analysis.

6. The mediatization of society and culture

Mediatization of society is the process in which dependency of society upon media and its logic is progressing. (Nie, 2014:364). Society in contemporary times is permeated by the media in such a way that they can no longer be treated as being separate from society or social and cultural institutions. The omnipresence of the media has changed character, function and structure in which social and cultural institutions operate. Mediatization of society has also influenced and changed cultural processes that take place within society. Therefore, the study and analysis of media's importance and the concept of mediatization in contemporary society can no longer rely only on models that perceive media as being disconnected from society and culture (Hjarvard, 2008:105-106). Mazzoleni notes that:

In brief, the concept of "mediatization of society" indicates an extension of the influence of the media into all societal spheres. Therefore, it is important to see what are the (main) domains that are influenced by the media system (remembering that the media system is both a cultural technology and an economic organization). In broad and general terms, all the main societal domains are affected by the connection between media and society[...]¹³.

Strömbäck and Esser (2009:209) suggest that „the media should rather be understood as an ever-present social and cultural system of production, broadcast, circulation, and dissemination of symbols, signs, messages, meanings, and values” and so are indispensable part of contemporary society. They also emphasize that „The various media companies, outlets, types, formats, and contents constitute the building blocks of this overall social and cultural system, but the sum is arguably greater than its parts, and the rules and norms that govern the media taken as a whole are often more important than what distinguishes one media company, outlet, type, or format from another” (Strömbäck and Esser, 2009:209; Mazzoleni 2008; Hjarvard 2008).

¹² Goban-Klas, T. 1996. *Public Relations czyli promocja reputacji. Pojęcie, definicja, uwarunkowania*. Warszawa: Businessman Press.

¹³ Mazzoleni, G. 2008. Mediatization of society. In: Donsbach, W. (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, vol. VII. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

7. The mediatization of politics and image communication

Nowadays, it is obviously not possible to run a political campaign without mass media and mediatization of political communication. Both, political communication and image of politicians, entirely depend on the way they are presented and transmitted by the media. So it depends on the media's approach to how and which political messages and images are going to be presented. It concerns obtaining, creating and managing political data in a broad sense.

There needs to be an agreement between promotional electoral action with realization of media practice. It can also be stated that „the opinion of electors on electoral candidates depends a lot on the information offered by mass means of communication” (Seceleanu, 2009:269).

Nowadays, so called social media and social platforms that have played increasingly important role in political and image communication and its distribution to the receivers. They are a part of digital mediatization of communication and can be accessible on almost any contemporary computer, tablet or smartphone via the Internet. These digital devices provide immediate dissemination of political and image messages all over the world and enable politicians to contact their electorate. Nie points out that:

The social media allowed personalization, interactivity and engagement of politics like never before. Social media also empowered the audiences where anyone with Internet access can make their voices heard. In other words, there is a revolution of what democracy constitutes now than last time. Political elites clearly have strong love-hate relationship with media whereby news of them can go viral at any time, be it good or bad. This is clearly proven when Barack Obama, the President of United States is one of the most highly followed figure on Twitter with around 7 million followers [...] He was deemed the new generation of presidents as he engaged with the society and makes known his policy using new media (Nie, 2014:364).

It can be noticed that political communicators are under constant pressure from the voters, the media and NGOs and have to reveal their mediating skills among these participants within the society. Politicians are expected to propose solutions to various problems that the society is aware of and in the best case put them to practice. „National political institutions and actors thus find themselves under increasing pressure from both citizens and the media, while the need to find solutions to major challenges such as global warming, rising inequalities, weak growth and increasing deficits appears both more urgent and more difficult to tackle” (Esser and Strömbäck 2014:3)¹⁴.

¹⁴ Esser, F. and J. Strömbäck. 2014. *Mediatization of Politics. Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seceleanu (2009) states that there are at least two conditions that make political message successful through mediatized channels of communication:

- a) when it is able to produce expected electoral effect,
- b) its proper adjustment to the media demands.

Strömbäck has proposed the mediatization of politics as a process including four dimensions. These four distinct dimensions are highly related to each other and have been exemplified below:

- *The first dimension* concerns the degree to which the media are the most important source of messages providing information about politics and societal life. This dimension reflects to what extent political communication has become mediated.
- *The second dimension* concerns the degree to which the media are independent from various social and political institutions.
- *The third dimension* concerns the degree to which the content included in the media, the coverage of political discourse and current affairs is led by media logic or political logic. In other words, this dimension is about whether media's own needs and standards of newsworthiness or the needs of political actors and institutions are decisive in the choice of what to cover and how to cover it.
- *The fourth dimension* concerns the degree to which politicians, political institutions and organizations are led by media logic or political logic. „This dimension deals with the very essence of the mediatization of politics, that is, the ripple effects of media in political processes and on political actors and institutions” (see: Figure 1.) (Esser and Strömbäck 2014:7).

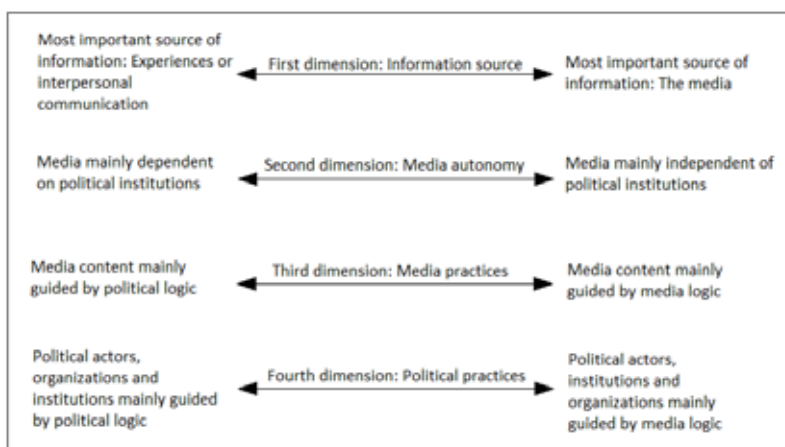


Figure 1. Four-dimensional concept of the mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömbäck 2014).

8. A study on mass media and political communication

A survey was conducted on a group of 60 university students in the city of Bydgoszcz, Poland. The survey, which was anonymous, took place in May 2024 at Collegium Medicum in Bydgoszcz (which is a part of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń). The participants in the study were asked to fill in a questionnaire that included seven questions concerning mass media and their influence on political messages, political image and reliability of source of information. The respondents of the questionnaire were asked to: mark Y – for ‘yes’ (if they agreed with a particular question), N – for ‘no’ (if they did not agree), or give no mark (if they were not sure about their answer). The questions included in the questionnaire were listed below the diagrams encompassing the participants’ answers. The data presented in each diagram is related to the particular question below it.

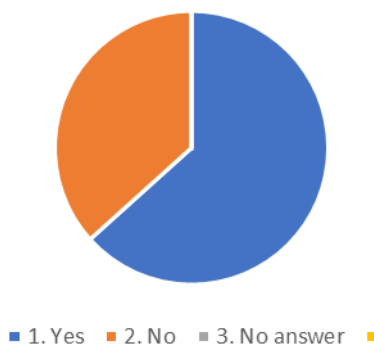


Diagram 1. Do you watch, read or listen to political communication in mass media?



Diagram 2. Does it seem right for you that a political party which wins the elections takes over public (state-owned) mass media (TV, radio, newspapers, the Internet websites)?



Diagram 3. Do the owners/controllers of mass media have an influence on political message?



Diagram 4. Do mass media manipulate political information?



Diagram 5. Do mass media manipulate the image of political communicators?



Diagram 6. Are Polish state-owned mass media a reliable source of political information?



Diagram 7. Are there enough independent mass media sources of political communication?

Conclusions

The data obtained concerning the first question (Do you watch, read or listen to political communication in mass media?) present that majority, which is 63% of the survey participants either watch, read or listen to political communication in mass media, whereas 37% marked the answer that they do not. This means that most of the 60 participants are conscious receivers of political messages.

The answers obtained from the second question (Does it seem right for you that a political party which wins the elections takes over public (state-owned) mass media (TV, radio, newspapers, the Internet websites)?) suggest that large majority (90%) of the survey participants disapproved of the idea of taking over the state-owned media by a party that wins the elections. Only 10% of the questionnaire respondents approved of this idea.

The data obtained concerning the third question (Do the owners/controllers of mass media have an influence on political message?) reflects that 96% agreed that who controls or owns mass media has got influence on what political information is disseminated. Mere 2% disagreed with that statement and 2% gave no answer.

The answers provided to the fourth question (Do mass media manipulate political information?) clearly show that 100% (all 60 respondents) agreed that mass media manipulate political information. No respondent disagreed. This means that all the respondents were aware of this procedure of manipulating political messages).

The data that was obtained from the fifth question (Do mass media manipulate the image of political communicators?) presents that 98% of the study participants (59 questionnaire respondents) were aware of the fact of political image manipulation by the mass media. No respondent disagreed, and 2% provided no answer.

Concerning the sixth question of the survey (Are Polish state-owned mass media a reliable source of political information?) 90% (54 participants) stated that Polish state-owned mass media were not a reliable source of political information, whereas only 10% agreed that they were.

Analysing the answers to the seventh question (Are there enough independent mass media sources of political communication?), it can be stated that 93% of the respondents suggested that there were not enough independent mass media sources of political communication, which opens the question of information objectivity. Only 7% of the respondents agreed with that there were.

The answers provided by the participants of the study presented that they were aware of manipulation of disseminated political messages by mass media owners and controllers and that majority of political information is not independent but influenced by other players or sides of the political scene.

The results of the study confirm the validity of Lasswell's and Lewin's models of communication, and the purposefulness of mass media communication in the scope of politics.

The study also suggests that independent media sources are very much needed and that they should be protected and supported to bring more objective and reliable political messages and political image communication to their receivers.

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