

Deep analysis of the relationship between politics and media

Profunda análise da relação política e media

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ABSTRACT

We present a critical review of the work *A mediatização da política na era das redes sociais*, recently published in Portugal. Following the author, we comment the book and its importance for studies on the process of politics mediatization.

Keywords: Mediatization, politics, social networks

RESUMO

Apresenta-se a resenha crítica da obra *A mediatização da política na era das redes sociais* recentemente lançada em Portugal. Tecemos comentários sobre a sua importância para os estudos nos processos de mediatização da política.

Palavras-chave: Mediatização, política, redes sociais

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¹ In Portugal, the term “media” is used to denote the plural form of *medium* (middle, in Latin). From this derive *mediatization*, *mediatized*. In Brazil, however, the term would be *mídia*, and the plural form, *mídias*.

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THE UNDENIABLE AND growing presence of media¹ in the communication practices of several social institutions (Science; Education; Politics; Family etc.), or in individual practices (group relationships; interpersonal relationship etc.), produced debates over possible social and cultural changes in both situations. In communication sciences, mediatization studies aim the understanding of such changes. The latest book by Professor Rita Figueiras², titled *A mediatização da política na era das redes sociais* [The mediatization of politics in the age of social networks], leads to profound reflections about the encounter and relationship of that institution, which is so important to our society, with the *media*.

The book is divided in three parts, the first being “The logic of politics,” followed by “The mediation of politics,” and last “The mediatization of politics,” which is by its turn subdivided into three sections: “The logic of media and the first mediatization order,” “The reflective mediatization,” and “On the way to politics colonization by the *media*?”

In the first part, “The logic of politics”, we are presented to the functioning of the political system, from an ample collection of bibliographical references (e.g., Meyer, 2002; Pennings et al., 2006; Esser, 2013). Thus, the logic of politics is discussed, as well as its system, its internal mechanisms, its stakeholders and institutionalized strategies over time, its events management time etc. We highlight that one of the main characteristics of this system, following this logic, is the quest for visibility in the public sphere. The author reports that, before the ostensible relationship with the media, there were more interest and ideology dispute perspectives to govern. Thereafter, the focus turned to a personality image within the party, and to the credibility, the reliability level to be a good politician. Given this context, a specific type of politics arise, according to the book, the “politics of trust” (Thompson, 2005). Henceforth, the political debates emphasize more the scandals and personal themes of politicians than the collective life in society, as it occurred previously. The proof of such fact is showed in the work, with the listing of several historical scandals involving politicians in diverse countries in Europe and the Americas. Being the scandals political or private, both are deliberately covered in intensity, during election years or not.

Continuing the discussion, professor Rita Figueiras proceeds to the second part, “The mediation of politics”. Here, she considers that happens the first form of relationship with the media (understood here as the traditional communication media such as printed journalism, radio, and especially television). At this point, they are seen as mediators between public sphere and politicians. Furthermore, researchers singled out by the professor believe in the neutrality of this politics mediation process, in which its *ethos* is transmitted without a strong medium interference.

Nevertheless, this relationship already produces some changes in the way politics is assimilated. If before it was possible to meet the rulers only in large public events, after mediation there is a symbolic interaction with their representation. In spite of the professor not mentioning Walter Benjamin (1994), we observed a correlation between the rulers “loss of aura” and the moment their approach with public occurs from mediation. As mentioned in the book, politicians go into the citizens’ houses, in their privacy, and have mediated talks with them. In addition to that, in this form of communication the information about politics becomes more and more mediated. In other words, people start knowing about politics almost exclusively by the media.

In the third part, the book addresses “The mediatization of politics”. In the first section, “The logic of *media* and the first mediatization order”, the author develops the idea that media approach politics in a character of “translator” of its logic, presenting this social institution with a more “familiar” appearance, following the journalistic activity procedures (Marcinkowski, 2014; Cook, 2005; Esser, 2013). At the same time, journalism becomes more interpretive and less descriptive than it was before. This is mentioned as a consequence of a greater activity professionalization with the elevation of educational level. Thus, a greater specialization of politics journalists arises.

As a result, the author believes a mediatized politics is configured, in which the search to inform, based on familiar characteristics (linked to the entertainment format), led to a high application of the media logic over the logic of politics. In this case, the ever-increasing presence of journalists in politics has increased the journalism intervention, with the politics presented not as it is, but under the reading held by the news media, especially television and its *sound bites* (quotes cut from the original speech). In other words, less and less the political discourse is televised in full, to fit on the media agenda and its own timing.

The author resumes that, due the politics of trust, already identified in mediation, in which the focus is more in the politician personalities and less in the ideological debate, drama scenarios are created to news pieces, with political and personal scandals, added to a saga narrative in the electoral dispute, in the clear intention to draw attention. It reduces, according to the book, the quality of politics presented in public sphere, promoting a collective lack of interest about this important social element.

Thus, trying to draw the attention of the public and ensure the so desired visibility, the logic of politics starts adopting the logic of the media, capitulating and shaping their practices to the media timing. Thereupon, many politicians turn into more public than political figures. It became more important to be an

attractive image to the media than to have a strong profile, and it opened space to a politics of spectacle. These are some of the topics covered in the second section, “The reflective mediatization”. In this scenario, also, the professor reasons the appearance of the *spin doctor* (Meyer, 2002), experts in the field of politics that analyze and comment on current events and their projections in other social contexts.

Moreover, this section briefly discusses the impact of internet on politics mediatization, producing some strong reduction in the already achieved intermediation by traditional media (Marcinkowski, 2014). Hence, the internet, with its various forms of logic and content production, is pointed as a supplement, especially when produced by the television media.

The next step pointed out in the book would be a colonization of political practices, as discussed in the last section: “On the way to politics colonization by the media?”. Here, a complete adaptation to the media logic is configured. It is not just about adopting the rules of the media to attract its coverage, but also about joining the media culture. If before the politician profile molded to the media logic, now this profile is born and built in television programs, for example. To the same extent, also the political decisions are increasingly taken at once, and their ways of presenting it are handled by media training professionals, in such a way that political speeches are better assimilated by the public in their interviews with journalists as well as in their oratory with the citizens. Otherwise, what the author says is that the politics is less and less a deep reflection, to respond to media timing.

Therewith, considering what we can extract from this work, politicians, taking into account their proximity to traditional media, have changed as much in their way of presenting (their image, their professional *ethos*) as in public speeches. Behind this, it is clear that all those changes are in order to survive, to get a media legitimation, which is seen as part of the public sphere.

The book concludes that, with the advance in politics mediatization, another way of doing politics can be highlighted: the pop politics (Mazzoleni; Sfardini, 2009). In this, the media performance is more important, giving a more popular image, close to the masses reality and tastes. The author also recalls that, nevertheless, much has been discussed about this type of politics motivating the lack of interest, and generating little credibility on political activity. This is a high price to pay for all the desired visibility.

There is also a warning that this process can be different according to various factors, such as democracy type and professionalism level in a given territory, showing that the permeability of mediatization is not as uniform as discussed by the author in her conclusions.

Furthermore, although the political system has done such a symbiosis with the media logic, there are internal points that are not completely revealed, for example, how the many parties act and organize themselves. This demonstrates that, somehow, the logic of politics still partly holds its identity.

However, putting aside the explanations in the book, we are led to reflect superficially on the relationship of media and politics in Brazil. Due to the growing media scandals, we can see more empathy showed by some communication means to certain political figures, and less to others when they also incur in conduct deviations. Which interests motivate such attention to some in spite of the others, if impartiality was supposed to be a characteristic of media logic? We must remember that, in Brazil, behind the relationship between media and politics are economic groups that finance the parties' election campaigns. Thus, when the aspirations of such groups are not met by the elected government, we verify what we could call a *media rematch*. That is, the scandal mediatization is purposely increased to make even more visible the conduct deviation cases, be them in private life, public or political scope.

Although we know that patrimonialism and corruption are for long recurrent practices in Brazil, media approaches do not collaborate to the population clarification about their role as citizens. On the contrary, it causes a lack of interest and a reduction in politics importance, derived from the media coverage (as seen in professor Rita Figueiras' book).

In addition, we emphasize that the political activities³ are not mediatized (made visible) on the news media agenda, because of interests of the mentioned groups. What remains then as alternatives to complement the visibility (mediatization) in force? In our doctoral thesis (in nearing completion), we observed the use of new media (online social networks) and recent technologies (tablets and smartphones) to complement the mediatization performed in traditional media. Even though we did not focus on politics media coverage, but in popular culture mediatization, we believe that there may be some resemblance to what we study. We say this because we see that politicians have increasingly used the new communication tools to perform the political debate with their peers and with the citizens⁴. Such citizens, in turn, have grouped in the online social networks to organize collective action plans. Thus, both seek a more plural dialogue, as it should be in the political system.

In short, in politics mediatization with new media and recent technologies, would it be possible to have some politics visibility and legitimacy? Would it be possible for the political system to act in conformity with its own logic of ideological debate, yet without losing so much to meet the mediatization? Well, these and many other questions cannot be answered here, because, after all, our purpose is focused on the presented book.

³ We think about *politics* as a recovery of the classic Greek thought, in which the word points to the term *polis* (collective interests).

⁴ We understand *citizen* as an active subject, aware of its role in society, and not passive or apathetic to collective life. In other words, its involvement with a particular *media* tool is not determinant in being a citizen, although is the mean to concretize its already initiated or latent off-line participation.

Therefore, this is certainly a major work for those who study the political communication, with a rich literature on politics *media* coverage of the northern Europe. Now, we can also consider it to be a recommended book to journalists themselves, for them to understand the system in which they are inserted and the logic that governs them before others, such as the system and logic of politics. And it sure is a work for politicians, so they also reflect on the alternatives to be really politicians instead of figures colonized by mediatization.

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