

Mediatization theory: a semio-anthropological perspective and some of its consequences

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Abstract

This article presents a long-term perspective, described as *anthropological*, about the *mediatization*, underlining that the media phenomena are a universal characteristic of all human societies, since a first stage of human semiosis, with its beginning at about two and a half million years ago with the production of stone tools. The consequences of the media phenomenon of mental processes externalization are discussed, having the mediatization crucial moments highlighted, regarding the *acceleration of historical time* and the *ruptures between space and time* produced by the technical devices. The media phenomena are a precondition of complex social systems and that is why the mediatization has so much importance as they do.

Keywords: Mediatization, media phenomena, semiosis, social systems

Timespan of mediatization

The (relatively) old problem of the relationships between media and the societies in which the expansion of the communication networks takes place, has received a huge impulse in approximately the last two decades and has consequently taken a new shape. In recent years, many research projects and theoretical perspectives around this problem have been loosely identified as belonging to the study of ‘mediatization’. As ‘mediatization’ is, linguistically speaking, a noun naming a process, the entities considered as being subject to such a process are in most cases the societies themselves or particular sub-systems of them.¹ Also in most cases, the historical period under scrutiny is that of modernity, and in some cases of late modernity, as expressed for

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¹ Concerning theoretical and research developments around ‘mediatization’ in Latin America, cf. Verón (1987, 1994a y b, 1995, 2001, 2004); Carlón (2004, 2006); Carlón and Scolari (eds.) (2009); Fausto Neto, Mouchon and Verón (eds.) (2012); Ferreira, Sampaio and Fausto Neto (eds.) 2012.

example in Hjarvard use of the concept: “Mediatization is no universal process that characterizes all societies. It is primarily a development that has accelerated particularly in the last years of the twentieth century in modern, highly industrialized and chiefly western societies, i.e., Europe, USA, Japan, Australia and so forth” (Hjarvard, 2008: 113).²

I will argue here almost the opposite view, in favor of a long-term historical perspective of mediatization. How long this perspective should it be? As we shall see, the longer the better, and this justifies the qualification of such a perspective as ‘anthropological’. Mediatization is certainly not a universal process characterizing all human societies, past and present, but it is, nevertheless, an operational result of a core dimension of our biological species, namely its capability of semiosis. This capability has been progressively activated, for diverse reasons, in a variety of historical contexts and has therefore taken many different forms. But some of its consequences were present in our evolutionary history from the very beginning, and profoundly affected the social organization of Western societies long time before modernity.

We need some conceptual tools to go further. The semiotic capacity of our species expresses itself in the production of what I will call *mediatic phenomena*, consisting in the exteriorization of mental processes under the form of material devices. *Mediatic phenomena are, indeed, a universal characteristic of all human societies.* The first stage of human semiosis has therefore been the systemic production of stone tools, beginning around two and a half million years ago. The stone industries, from a semiotic point of view, are secondary meaning-systems (compared with a primary meaning-system as language) in terms of the classical distinction proposed long time ago by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958). The perception, by a member of a primitive community, of a stone arrow head - a material element within the immediate psychological space of the community -, implied the activation of a semiotic process, properly speaking: backward, towards the sequence of technical behavior leading to its fabrication; forward, towards its use as an instrument to obtain food. Both mental movements are – following the dimensions of Peirce triad - *indexical* sequences (*secondness*) contained in the *iconic* configuration (*firstness*) of the arrow head. If in the

² In this respect, cf. also Thompson’s classic (1995).

community the perceiver is, say, a hunter, a mental movement concerning *the rules* for the correct use of the instrument (a *thirdness*) would probably also be activated.³ The ongoing vigorous discussion concerning the origins of language should take into account the underlying functioning of semiotic processes implied in iconic visual exteriorizations and in indexical sequences of technical operations of instruments' production, both processes preceding the appearance of language and qualitative different from it (Verón, 2013, ch. 11).

The central point here is that the mediatic phenomenon of the exteriorization of mental processes has a trifold consequence. In peircian terms again, its firstness consists in the autonomy from senders and receivers of the materialized signs, as a result of exteriorization; its secondness is the subsequent persistence in time of the materialized signs: alterations of space and time scales become inevitable, and narrative justified; its thirdness is the body of social norms defining the ways of access to the signs already autonomous and persistent. In other words: trifold creation of differences.

The conditions are therefore given for the history of mediatization to begin. Some of its moments have already been subject to historical scrutiny: the rising of writing; the passage from rolls to codices, i.e., the surging of the book; the “unacknowledged revolution” of printing, in the happy expression of Elizabeth Eisenstein; the proliferation of pamphlets and the subsequent rising of newspapers; beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, new technical devices allowed the appearance, for the first time, of mediatic phenomena consisting in the indexical production of time-framing and time-sequenciation of images and sounds, devices culminating, a century latter, with the invention of television (For all these crucial moments see Verón, 2013, and the bibliography there included).

In this context, mediatization is just the name for the long historical sequence of mediatic phenomena being institutionalized in human societies, and its multiple consequences. The conceptual advantage of a long-term perspective is to remind us that what is happening in late modernity societies began in fact long time ago.

The initial stage of each crucial moment of mediatization can be dated, because

³ As is well known, Peirce discussed his model of the three categories in many different ways all along his writings. One particularly interesting and clear presentation, probably composed in 1894, has been included in the selection recently published by the Peirce Edition Project : Peirce (1998) volume 2, chapter 2, pp. 4-10.

it consists of a technical-communicational device that has appeared and stabilized itself in identifiable human communities, which means that it has been, in one way or another, “adopted”. There is no technological determinism implied here: each time, the appropriation by the community of a technical device could take many different forms; the configuration of uses that becomes finally institutionalized in a particular place and time around a communication device (configuration that can be properly called a *medium*) needs only historical explanation.

Features of mediatization as a non-linear process

Let’s make three global remarks, clearly justified, again and again, by the nature of the consequences following these crucial “moments” of mediatization.

In the first place, the surging of a medium (or several media), operating through a new technical-communicational device, typically produces “radial effects”, in all directions, affecting in different ways and with different intensities all functional levels of society.

Secondly, the radial, transversal, character of the “effects” produced by mediatic phenomena are the result of their systemic nature, implying an enormous network of feedback relationships: *mediatic phenomena are clearly non-linear processes, typically far from equilibrium* (Cf. Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, Kauffman, 2000). I have tried to represent this non-linear character of communication with the distinction, within the frame of a theory of social discourses, between *production* conditions and grammars, on the one side, and *reconnaissance* conditions and grammars on the other: at the societal level, discourse circulation of meaning is structurally broken.⁴

Thirdly, remarks (1) and (2) explains the most important consequence of these crucial moments of mediatization: *the acceleration of historical time*. Each case of acceleration should be, of course, evaluated according to the rhythm characterizing the historical period we are talking about. In order to have here a minimal narrative (beginning, middle and end), let’s mention at least three points.

(a) When the cultures of the Upper Paleolithic appeared, the products of the

⁴ Non mediatic communication is also a non-linear process. Mediatization may be described as the macro-generalization of this condition of human circulation of signs, consisting in the structural gap between production and reception (*reconnaissance*). The conceptual development of these points exceeds the limits of the present paper; cf: Verón (1987, 2013).

stone industries passed from twenty basic types of tools to two hundred varieties and - Richard Leakey has judiciously remarked - the scale of change passed from hundreds of thousands of years to a rhythm of thousands of years (Leakey, 1994).

(b) Printing appeared in the middle of the fifteenth century; there is, I think, a large consensus among historians that during the two centuries following Gutenberg's invention, Europe has changed economically, politically, socially and culturally, more than in the previous one thousand and five hundred years (See Eisenstein 1979, 1983, 2011).

(c) In the last ten years, Internet has altered the conditions of access to scientific knowledge more than this conditions changed since the surging of modern scientific institutions during the seventeenth century.

Many other examples of this acceleration of historical time resulting from the rising of mediatic phenomena may be identified, of course, in a much more precise way, concerning practically any particular sector of social and/or cultural activities. The transformation of the musical world (in all its aspects: composition, performance and audiences), during the two or three decades following the invention of recording at the end of the nineteenth century, is incomparably more profound than what happened in that musical world during the previous three to four centuries (Philip, 2004). The invention of photography, and its consequences upon the traditional frontier between public space and private everyday life is another case worth mentioning (Verón, 1994).

Scale alterations

We have already underlined the fact that mediatic phenomena produce autonomy from senders and receivers, and persistence of discourses through time. The first consequence of autonomy and persistence is *de-contextualization* of meaning, which has marked from its very beginning the history of the localization, safeguard, reading and interpretation - first of the rolls and latter of the codices. De-contextualization opens the door for the multiple breaks of space and time produced by each technical device in a specific way, all along mediatization history. The invention of printing democratized, so to speak, de-contextualization, and made it available to all. From this point of view the history of mediatization can be told as the interminable struggle between confronted

social groups trying to stabilize meanings, struggle that becomes, all along the history of our species, increasingly complex and increasingly condemned to failure.

In the social sciences, interpersonal or “face-to-face” communication has been very frequently conceptualized as a ‘direct’, linear exchange, opposed to communication processes mediated by a technical device. In my view, human communication is entirely non-linear, at all levels of its functioning, because it is a self-organizing system far from equilibrium. The specificity of “face-to-face” communication is not its supposed linearity, but the absence of mediatic phenomena. As a consequence, in interpersonal exchanges the enunciation positions (enunciator, discourse and addressee) are localized at the same homogeneous space-time point. In this context, can de-contextualization take place in a non-mediatic level of communication? Yes, because oral language, in a human community before the appearance of writing, makes possible imaginary alterations of space and time, even if they are fleeting, fragile and have no material persistence: for example, an adult explaining to a group of children, in a illiterate society, how to behave during the ritual ceremony that will take place next day. We can consider this kind of situation as implying an imaginary distortion of space and time. Mediatic phenomena materialize the distortions and make them space-time breaks. The recently developed methodology of cognigram analyses of prehistoric tool behavior, formalize the distance between problem and solution: a given tool behavior is oriented to the material production of an objet, say a knapping tool, with material qualities *that will be meaningful in other places and/or at other moments* (Haidle, 2009). With the mediatic phenomena, the differentiation between social systems and psychic systems – in Luhmann’s sense (Luhmann 1995 [1984], Verón, 2013) may begin, and with no possible return: with writing, Homo sapiens definitively abandoned a certain kind of space-time structural location.

Let’s make a final phylogenetic synthesis. Mediatic phenomena are a precondition of the psychic systems of Homo sapiens? The answer is no. Inversely: Psychic systems of Homo sapiens are a precondition of mediatic phenomena? The answer is yes. Psychic systems are a precondition of social systems? The answer is yes, not in a linear way, but through the appearance of mediatic phenomena. Mediatic phenomena are a precondition of complex social systems? The answer is yes.

Mediatic phenomena, and therefore mediatization, are as important as that.

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