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“The medium of the media” in mediatized power

Both in academic and popular discourse, the power of media in current globalized and “postdemocratic” societies is often discussed with the notion of “mediatization”. It suggests that media institutions are increasingly influential because they dictate the way issues are framed for public discussion. Consequently, other institutional actors (politics, science, religion) have had to internalize a “media logic” in order to sustain their power and legitimate their actions. Recent studies of mediatization largely ignore Jürgen Habermas’ early use of the term “mediatization” for analyzing the relationship between system imperatives and lifeworlds. While this use may at first seem distant to recent concerns, a return to Habermas can enhance the theoretization of mediatization and analysis of media power in two ways. First, by underscoring the importance of a system-theoretic vocabulary it helps to unpack the notion of “media logic” and narrow down the specific power resource of the media (i.e. what is the “medium” of the media). Second, by articulating a fundamental criticism of system-theoretic vocabulary it opens a normative perspective for evaluation of media’s democratic function (i.e. the “quality” on mediatization). The paper highlights, elaborates and illustrates both of these two potential contributions.