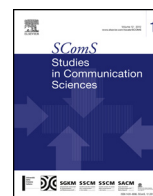




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The changing media environment and its impact on socialization processes in families

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ABSTRACT

The change of our media environment generates new topics for social research. Trends in media development like an increase in connectivity, mobilization and differentiation have far-reaching consequences for socialization processes: the blurring of social interactions, role shifts and spatial extension are only a few of them. In this article, we focus on consequences for media socialization in families and examine potential transformations of family as socialization agent against the background of mediatization. In a synopsis of theoretical approaches and empirical results, we want to give an overview of the current perspectives and discuss future challenges for research.

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1. Introduction

In this article we want to provide an overview of the current state of science regarding media socialization in families. Theoretical approaches to the relationship between media and socialization as well as empirical studies regarding this subject will be discussed. When examining processes of media socialization, social and cultural transformation as well as their respective social trends need to be taken into account. The article therefore starts with the question of how our media environment is changing and how our everyday life is becoming more and more mediatized. Against this background, we will first describe the theoretical approaches to media socialization and then systematize the wide field of empirical studies. Theory and empirical research cannot be considered as two completely separate areas, of course. Qualitative research, for instance, claims to generate theory from empiricism. However, since the focus in Section 3 will be on theoretical reflections, Section 4 will concentrate on offering a synopsis of specific empirically generated results of different studies. In conclusion, we will highlight central desiderata of theoretical and practical research on media socialization in the context of families and present an outlook on future research perspectives.

2. The changing media environment and the mediatization of everyday life

The media environment surrounding us is changing rapidly and in an ever-faster pace. People are confronted with innovative devices, software updates, technical possibilities and new media formats nearly every day. Different media merge together and become convergent (Schuegraf, 2010). From a technical perspective, we can use different media on only one device. Related to the content of media use, the same media offer can be accessed from a couple of different platforms. In other words, there is an increasing relevance of cross-media phenomena in media production and use (Bjur et al., 2014). Furthermore, devices are becoming smaller, easier to handle and more mobile. The best example for such trends in our changing media environment are smartphones which nowadays are much more than only phones. As multifunctional computers they can replace or even have replaced many different devices like watches, timers, calendars, photo- and video-cameras. Being small and mobile, they are ready to hand in nearly every situation in life, and their Internet connection allows constant communication and information (Krotz, 2014a).

Against the background of such changes, there are efforts to explain – or better to understand – the superordinate transformation process in theoretical terms. *Mediatization* is probably the most frequently quoted terminology in this context and can be regarded as a core concept in various research disciplines. The term mediatization has a tradition in communication and social sciences dating back to the pre-digitalization era (Averbeck-Lietz, 2014). However,

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systematic research on mediatization as a concept of changing society and culture has developed first in the 1990s, when digital media were on the rise and existing explanatory models were no longer working (Krotz, 2014b, p. 132).

Mediatization is generally understood to describe – despite different scientific positions – the “interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other” (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010, p. 223). It can be considered as a *meta process* which makes it not only relevant for actual identities and current generations, but also for society and culture in a long-term perspective. This process may vary depending on specific historical and cultural conditions, may take different – sometimes contradicting – directions, and certain changes may take place sooner or later (Krotz, 2014b). Furthermore, the concept has to be regarded in combination with other social trends, since different overarching transformations may gain importance simultaneously. We can therefore assume that: “(...) today the meta processes globalization, individualization, and commercialization together with mediatization are the movers of modernity” (Krotz, 2014b, p. 137). Mediatization implies both quantitative and qualitative changes. On a quantitative level, mediatization can mean that communication is more and more media related, that media are getting omnipresent in different spaces of our everyday life and that the times of media usage rise continuously. On a qualitative level, the focus is on the specificity of certain media within different types of communication. In this understanding, mediatization refers to the role of media for socio-cultural change (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 5).

There are several *overarching trends* which characterize this meta process of change: the use of (digital) media at an ever younger age, an increase in mobilization and expansion of spatial limits especially due to smartphones and tablets, and the progressing penetration of everyday life by media resulting in increasing times of usage. Furthermore, with regards to the growing relevance of interactive Social Media in the last decade, new patterns of media-related communication and information emerged. Social Media can be collectively defined as specific forms of digital connected media which facilitate online activities like publishing and editing content or sharing and communicating with others (Schmidt, 2013, p. 16), and which include different types of platforms like Social Network Sites (e.g. facebook), Sharing Sites (e.g. Youtube), Blogs (e.g. Tumblr), Microblogs (e.g. Twitter) or Instant Messaging Apps (e.g. WhatsApp). These new patterns of media usage are accompanied by an increasing importance of visual communication. Not only are journalistic images spread all over the world, but also private amateur photographs of adolescents and adults which are shared with others in enormous numbers every day. In addition, the opportunity for individuals and collectives to connect across long distances plays an increasing role. With this in mind, van Dijck (2013) refers to a transformation “from a participatory culture to a culture of connectivity” (p. 4f). While the expectations of the participatory and collaboratory potential of Social Media were quite high in its early days, these hopes proved to be justified only to some extent. Nowadays connectivity, on the contrary, is relevant in two respects: human connectedness and automated connectivity by algorithms. Hence, we have to reflect the role of data collection by companies as a byproduct of progressing connectivity in Social Media.

These trends of mediatization become relevant for *media socialization* if we question its consequences for individuals and their agents of socialization. When emphasizing family as the primary and central agent, new interesting questions arise like: *How is family development influenced by a changing media environment? How do roles within family shift due to media? To what extent are boundaries blurring? To what extent do adolescents use media for processes of belonging and distinction?* Research on these specific topics requires

an understanding of how media, individuals and society interrelate. Therefore, the following section provides an overview of different traditions and of the current understanding of media socialization in theoretical terms.

3. Theory of media socialization

Media socialization theory is part of a general socialization theory and therefore follows its traditions and paradigmatic shifts. The functionalist tradition of Emile Durkheim integrates positions regarding the extent to which media influences individual development. Socialization is considered as the process of becoming part of society. Societies reproduce themselves by shaping the personality of their members through social and economic conditions. If these societies are mediatized, it is part of the reproduction process to include their members in media communication processes. Individuals, by contrast, find their positions in society through negotiation processes of belonging and distinction. The tradition of functionalist theory in media socialization research follows the questions of media effect research on mass media communication: ‘What does media do to people?’ Media effect models tend to consider the audience to be determined. But since the 1940s, communication research also includes approaches that recommend to perceive the audience as active. The Uses and Gratifications approach asks ‘what do people do with media?’ and is based on a socio-psychological understanding of communication. Through interactivity and hypertextuality of digital media as well as through asynchronicity and individualization of media use, this approach gains relevance for understanding media communication in the 21st century (Ruggiero, 2000). The Uses and Gratifications approach proposes that “media use is motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audience members themselves, and that active participation in the communication process may facilitate, limit, or otherwise influence the gratifications and effects associated with exposure” (Levy & Windahl, 1985, p. 110). From the perspective of socialization theory, this proposition (the needs and goals of individuals as part of media communication research) needs to be placed in a clearer ecological context. In order to understand the needs and goals of individuals and to estimate their influence on media use, it is necessary to take a closer look at individuals’ life courses and living conditions. Especially when focussing on the media use of children and adolescents, this image of self-determinate and self-responsible media use needs modification. When children use media, they can choose from a media ensemble that was preselected by other family members. Parents are usually the ones that give access to media, regulate media use and act as role models, co-users or respondents (Spanhel, 2006, p. 113). Individuals in general, and especially children and adolescents, are not always conscious of the objectives inherent in actions. According to socialization theory, for instance, interaction rules – including the rules of media communication – may be internalized but not necessarily available as objects of strategic thinking. Following the psychological concept of developmental tasks as tasks in a particular life-period that need to be solved to develop personality, such tasks have to be considered as “midway between an individual need and a social demand” (Havighurst, 1972, p. vi). Accordingly, it is neither justified to model individual media use and its influence as user-motivated independent action, nor as successfully determined behavior. Thus, media socialization theory sees it as an advancement to analyze the interplay between individual and social conditions for media activities.

Aiming at this, studies which are based on the theory of symbolically mediated interaction follow two traditions: the one builds on Alfred Schütz’ phenomenological conception of the social world, and the other on Georg Herbert Mead’s theory of subject and society

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