INTERVIEW WITH GÖRAN BOLIN

A Holistic and Techno-semiotic Approach to Mediatization

Un enfoque holístico y tecno-semiótico de la mediatización

Uma abordagem holística e tecno-semiótica da mediatização

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Focusing on the analysis of information management, datafication processes, digital markets, and the challenges posed by communicative Artificial Intelligence (AI), Göran Bolin's research has become a central reference point for understanding the current communication and political landscape. In a dialogue with *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, he outlines his research perspective and warns about the "oligarchization of Western politics," which threatens the democratic system and marks the fusion of political, economic, and symbolic power.

MARIO CARLÓN (M.C.), JAIRO FERREIRA (J.F.) & GUILLERMO OLIVERA (G.O.): Dr. Göran Bolin, in your book *Media Generations. Experience, Identity, and Mediatised Social Change* (2016, Routledge), and in the text "Generational Analysis as a Methodological Approach to Study Mediatised Social Shange", published in the book *Digital Technologies and Generational Identity* (2017, Routledge), you have highlighted the importance of analyzing mediatization as a social and historical process that interacts in specific ways with the development of generations. What analytical tools did you use to move from 'micro' analysis (a family photograph, for example) to others at the 'meso' and 'macro' levels? How do you currently view the relationship between generations and mediatization? Are there any new processes to consider?

GÖRAN BOLIN (G.B.): First of all, generational theory in the wake of Karl Mannheim, José Ortega y Gassett and others, is about societal change —similar to mediatization theory—. So, in that sense the combination of the two, especially if one focuses on generations and media, is complementary. When this was operationalized for empirical research, I chose a mixed-methods approach, combining national surveys with qualitative focus group interviews. Here, I also want to acknowledge the work by my then PhD student Signe Opermann, who was part of the project and helped both with data collection, and analytical processing. Since I have always found comparative research rewarding —national or cross-cultural comparisons make you see things in relief and in relation to one another— the data was collected in both Sweden and Estonia. And since I cannot speak or read Estonian, I needed to work together with someone who had those competencies, and that also had contextual knowledge of the Estonian cultural context for the analysis. Hence, for this project I recruited Signe Opermann. Signe was, and still is, much more advanced than me in statistical analysis, so we had a cooperation that I believe was for our mutual benefit. The statistical analysis gave us an estimate for when media use changed in the two countries, and based on that, we singled out three generational cohorts, that we then used to construct our focus groups. So, the statistical analysis could give us rough ideas on when breaking points in media use appeared, and helped us construct the "objective media landscapes", that is, the material structure in which both the Swedish and Estonian generations were inhabiting,

that we then analyzed qualitatively via our focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are great for provoking generational belonging, and you can really see how a generational identity comes into being when people confirm media memories common to all FG members —specific news events (the moon landing, the death of Brezhnev), or popular culture such as children's television or radio programs.

That I have used family photographs has been more of an illustration to my arguments, and through these you can connect individual memories, and private conditions to wider societal contexts. However, they are also good for illustrating generation as kinship. In my opinion, it is important for a full analysis of generations to work with the dual perspective of generation as social formation, in the wake of Mannheim, and generation as kinship, similar to how Margaret Mead (1970) worked with the generation gap in her time.

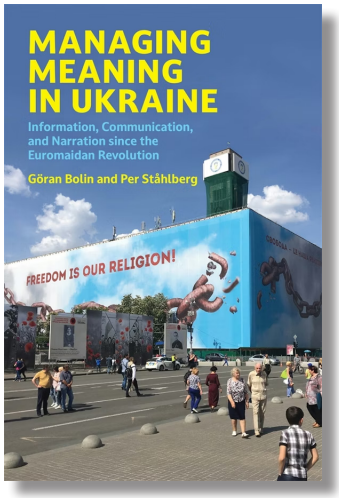
M.C., J.F. & G.O.: Due to your experience and knowledge of the field of mediatization studies in the North and South, you occupy a privileged position for observing both developments, as evidenced in texts such as 'We Have Never Been Mediatised: Reflections on the Relations Between Latin American and European Approaches to Mediatisation' (Bolin, 2024). Do you believe that attention to 'processes' is an approach shared by both perspectives? Do you think it is fruitful to think about dialogues based on this common ground as a proposal?

G.B.: Yes, I believe that the process perspective is one of the things that we have in common, especially those of us who have longer historical perspectives, and I find that Latin American scholars often have much longer historical perspectives than most European mediatization researchers who typically discuss mediatization as something occurring after the Second World War. Another distinctive feature I like about Latin American mediatization researcher is the focus on semiotics and post-structuralist approaches. These approaches are seemingly disappearing in much European research, and I think that is a pity. But I think it can be attributed to the popularity in Europe of the institutional approach to mediatization, which follows more the US tradition of "media logics," as famously theorized by Altheide and Snow.

Now, a peculiarity of the media logic theory is that when it was incorporated into European mediatization theory, it was reduced to the focus on institutions –most often the two societal institutions of politics and journalism. As a person trained in textual analysis, I find this unfortunate, since Altheide and Snow in their book *Media Logic* (1979) actually focus on the "grammar" of the media, the textual forms, and the ways in which content is organized. This part of the theory got lost in the transfer to Europe to the benefit of the media as institutions. This may be because when mediatization appeared in Europe, and maybe especially in Sweden and the Nordic countries, it was first taken up by journalism researchers who were more interested in the role of the journalistic institution, and less so with other parts of the media. Moreover, many of these journalism researchers had backgrounds in Political Science, which meant that they had a keen interest in the institution of politics, and —voilà!— the relation between journalism and politics, and journalists and politicians and their power relations, became the focus.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: Attention to semiotics and the processes of production and circulation of meaning is a characteristic of Southern studies, especially of the school based on the work of Eliseo Verón, who drew on the perspective of Charles Sanders Peirce. You have proposed the development of an approach based on the work of Jean Baudrillard and the theory of simulacra, which you call techno-semiotic and which also addresses meaning. For these reasons, you are probably an exception, a researcher whose work engages in dialogue with both perspectives from a specific standpoint. Could you summarize some of the central points of your proposal and comment on the extent to which both 'semiotics of mediatization' can 'engage in dialogue', if indeed they can?

G.B.: Yes, this is true. And while my training in semiotics is more in line with the Saussurean legacy, which is also prominent with Baudrillard (and Barthes and other French scholars from around the 1960s and the surrounding decades), this is not incompatible with the Peircean legacy, represented by Verón and others. Both approaches are centered on signs and structural analysis. What is added in the Latin American approach is circulation, which I have found useful as a concept, although I realize that my interpretation of it does not always do justice to its richness. Now, from Baudrillard, I have tried to develop his techno-semiotic approach, since there are some limitations to Baudrillard's theory. For example, although Baudrillard (1972) was a pioneer in launching the concept of "sign value", pointing to the increased importance of (de)sign qualities of objects and commodities since the 1950s —building heavily on ideas from John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), paving the way for analysing the immaterial, or better, intangible commodities we have today—, he was paradoxically stuck with material commodities in his examples (fashion, for instance,



or the design of cars). I think that his techno-semiotic approach, as I tend to call it, actually fits much better for an analysis of contemporary commodities, which are entirely freed from material and tangible qualities —computer programs, music, moving images that flow through fiber optic cables and circulate in WiFi-systems—. These commodities all have a fluidity that previous commodities did not have, and they all need what I call "means of consumption" to be consumable (mobile phones, laptops, iPads, etc). In fact, they only exist as sign structures, something I tried to address in my book *Value and the Media* (Bolin, 2011). So, I tend to think that in the era of data capitalism that we live in today, Semiotics becomes increasingly important. More and more commodities are entirely made from signs, produced through signifying practices and result from the work of signification. Such commodities have qualities that differ radically from previous commodities. This is why we observe the emergence of slogans such as "data is the new oil" and similar ones. The analogy between data and oil, is however flawed in many respects, not least because oil is a natural resource that can be exhausted, whereas data is endless as it is produced through human activity – a kind of labor, if you will. And as long as there is human activity, data will not end. Furthermore, oil is the source of energy that makes production possible, but you still need energy to produce and circulate data –mainly in the form of consumption patterns of the "digital consumer". This energy might stem from hydropower, oil, solar, nuclear or wind power, but these are all energy resources, not end products. Data, instead, is the raw material tooled into the intangible commodity of, for example, the digital consumer, which is a semiotic construct composed out of a combination of signs. What the advertising business is buying, then, is not any specific social media user but an abstracted sign structure that represents a consumer profile whose attention the advertiser (or other agent on this market) wishes to catch.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: In your book with Per Ståhlberg, *Managing Meaning in Ukraine. Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution* (2023, The MIT Press), you developed an analysis of major narrative changes that took place over time based on an analysis of key events that were considered revolutionary at the time. What, in your view, characterizes contemporary events? How does media coverage influence their development?

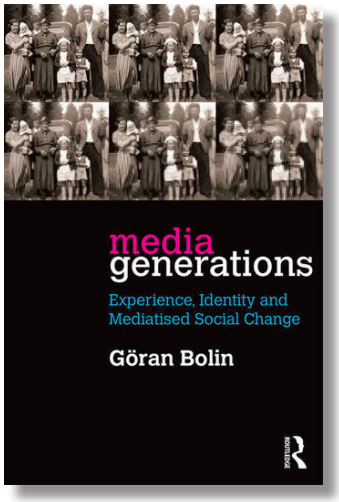
G.B.: Oh, that is a tricky question, and one that I am not sure I have a definite answer to. But we can conclude that today's events differ from the events that Dayan & Katz theorized, which were centered on mass media, and specifically

television. Current events —our example is the Euromaidan revolution in the winter of 2013-2014— are a bit different, since images and narratives circulate between niche, mass media and social media. Furthermore, the mass media had become differentiated, so images also circulated between streamed services such as Hromadske, a TV channel entirely based on streaming, and international news media such as CNN and BBC World, plus of course also national mass media. Dayan & Katz (1992) also insisted in their original work that media events were "preplanned" and cut through all channels. For sure, the Euromaidan revolution cut through most mass media channels, but also more intensely in Europe than, for example, in Brazil, which Camila Hartmann showed in her PhD thesis where she compared the coverage in the Swedish press with the news coverage of the war in the Brazilian press. But it can hardly be said to have been preplanned. It rather follows the unfolding of "disruptive events", as Katz, together with Tamar Liebes, later theorized it (Katz & Liebes, 2007). So, the media events theory is illuminating, although one has to tweak it a bit for the multiplatform world we live in today.

Another important issue that you point to in your question is the narrative sequencing of media events, which is not always emphasized in the various analyses in which media events theory has been utilized. Dayan & Katz (1992), having founded their theory partially in structural anthropological ritual theory, emphasized the scripted nature of these events: they followed a specific sequential order, just as various archaic rites do. In that sense these events are transformative, and just as in any rites of passage, when you exit the ritual, you have become transformed. Daniel Dayan was indeed trained in Anthropology and Semiotics (under Roland Barthes), and this underlying structuralist epistemology is always present in his thinking and analysis. Hence, his emphasis on the narrative unfolding of events bears this mark.

Having said that, I think one can observe some confusion today around the concept of narrative, which is used very frequently in relation to the war in Ukraine and the aggression from Russia. Especially in the fields adjacent to Political Science and International Relations, the concept of narrative is used in an imprecise way, most often equal to "discourse", since it lacks the temporal structure and emphasis on emplotment that I think is necessary for the understanding of what constitutes a narrative. It is, for example, often referred to as "the Russian narrative" etc., which most often simply means "the Russian worldview". However, a worldview does not necessarily have narrative form. To me, this type of use strips the concept of narrative of its analytical power, it flattens and disarms it. I am sure I am fighting a losing battle here, since this way of using the term is so well established in contemporary journalism, which contributes to the confusion. We can see this in the way in which it is used by students today, for example. This is a pity, since I believe that proper narrative analysis can unpack media events and explain their unfolding in

interesting ways —especially the dialectics of how social reality on such occasions follows the narrative patterns of fiction and ritual.



M.C., J.F. & G.O.: At the 2025 International Seminar on Mediatisation and Social Processes (Seminário Internacional de Pesquisa em Midiatização e Processos Sociais, held in the city of São Paulo, Brazil), you presented a preview of an international research project you are conducting on authoritarianism in today's societies (in Sweden, Estonia and Portugal). This research is being conducted in different social segments —young people on the one hand and older people on the other— and focuses on each segment's tolerance of authoritarianism in the private sector (large companies) and the public sector (the state). What does this research tell us about contemporary society and its future? How do you currently view the relationship between authoritarianism and mediatization?

G.B.: This research focus is actually quite new for me, and springs out of work I did with Veronika Kalmus from Tartu University in Estonia and Rita Figueiras in Lisbon, Portugal. Our focus was on state and corporate surveillance, and the extent to which ordinary media users are willing to give away private information and acknowledge data extraction of their media use by states and companies. A side result of this research was that we found a sort of revival of what Adorno and his colleagues in the 1950s called "the authoritarian personality", a personality that is conformist, willing to obey authority, and that, as Adorno and his colleagues argued, paved the way for the rise of fascism. I think this is an important research area, since we can see autocratic tendencies in many countries all over the world, and autocracies cannot exist without the willing submission of the people. We are seeking funding for a larger project that also includes researchers from Brazil, the United States, and many European countries, and if we get funding, we will collect data on this. But the talk I gave in São Paulo will also be featured in the proceedings from that conference. This is an important topic, since we can see a backsliding of democracy all over the world today, where autocratic governments and political leaders are clearly on the rise.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: All political leaders?

G.B.: Well, not all political leaders, of course, but many. In Europe we can see political leaders and political parties on the far-right end of the political spectrum gaining larger followings and entering into parliaments in many

countries. In Sweden, the far-right Sweden Democrats party is now the second biggest party after the Social Democrats. There are also worrying tendencies in terms of political opinion formation, and it is of utmost importance to understand the role that the media have in these developments. I think, for example, that we can see new forms of alliances between the so-called "Big Tech" and political power, most obviously at the inauguration ceremony of Donald Trump's second term as president of the *United States of America,* where there was a circulation of photos showing him surrounded by the owners and CEOs from the largest United States tech companies: Zuckerberg, Bezos, Musk, and others –people who have both enormous economic resources and control some of the largest communication platforms in the world (along with their Chinese counterparts). This "oligarchization" of Western politics where there is a strong overlap or merge between political, economic and symbolic power is clearly something new, and a development that is not really in favor of democratic rule. I think it is important to try to understand why this rise of authoritarianism is happening at this specific historical moment. Many point to the similarities with the historical events in Europe in the 1930s, but I think that we should be cautious of making too strong analogies, although we should also be observant of the parallels between these two points in time. My good friend and fellow scholar at Södertörn University, philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback (2022) has written insightfully about this new "fascism of ambiguity" where she seeks to understand both its roots in bygone versions of fascism, and the new techno-mediatic fascism of today. Also others, such as cognitive scientist Gary Marcus, have discussed the relations between new AI technology and fascism. I think this is a discussion we need to engage in as intellectuals and scholars —especially as media and communication scholars we should have a lot to say in this matter.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: You have reflected particularly on the need for "holistic" approaches to the study of mediatization. Could you please explain what you mean?

G.B.: I have always been directed by a certain curiosity of big questions, and the one on the rise of autocracy is of course one such big question that requires a holistic approach. I have also been working with a lot of methodologies, and I find this inspiring, although it also poses some epistemological problems of its own (all methods are not really compatible). But I am also a strong believer in mixed-methods approaches, which I think has to do with my interest in ethnographic approaches which by themselves are holistic, in the sense that they try to oscillate between the micro level of observations and the macro or meso level of explanation. Big questions per definition end up in philosophical problems, so if one nurtures such interests, these philosophical issues will pop up in the end. I also think that the complexity of the problems we are facing

today —the climate crisis, the rise in authoritarianism and neo-fascism, etc.— requires holistic thinking.

As scholars, we are in a way caught between the drive for specialization within delimited domains, which is indeed necessary for developing deep knowledge, and the context in which these delimited problems are situated. But we need to oscillate between these two states of reflection and make the connections between the micro processes that are at the core of the macro developments of the world. In that sense we need to respond to the call once made by Pierre Bourdieu (1996), when he asked for the development of an "Internationale of intellectuals", a collective action of scholars and intellectuals to defend reason and the autonomy of our thinking institutions, of which the university is an important one. As we are today seeing attacks against academic freedom and freedom of expression spreading rapidly all over the world —the press conferences that President Trump is giving are but the most extreme example of these attacks—, there is a strong need for these institutions to defend themselves and their autonomy. This is a work that lies ahead of us, and one —here I fully agree with Bourdieu— that needs to be collective and universal.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: What contributions do you consider have been made from the perspective of the study of mediatization to the understanding of the contemporary era that could be considered from other approaches (semiotic, cyberculture, political economy, culturalist, sociological, philosophical, etc.)? What contributions should be made?

G.B.: I think that the most important contribution of mediatization perspectives is the focus on process, on the role that media and communication technologies have in relation to wider social and cultural processes. Sometimes, the media have a transformative role in these processes, and it is important to see what role the media have. However, sometimes there is also a danger to uncritically reproduce the media's function in social and cultural processes. As you rightly indicate, there are also other processes in which the media —as technologies, institutional forms, and sign systems— are embedded or entangled, or interacting with. So, I would say that there is no "pure" mediatization approach that can explain all processes. We need to continue to see the mediatization processes in light of political-economic developments, in relation to wider cultural and social dynamics, as well as in relation to the more fundamental philosophical questions of existence, being and belonging that also form the totality of the worlds we inhabit. This is what I mean with a holistic approach. Traditional political economy, for example, has largely underestimated the role of our tools of communication, and a mediatization approach can help shed light on such societal processes.

However, we should also acknowledge as media and communication scholars that the opposite is also true: we should not delimit our analysis of

mediatization processes without taking into consideration other processes; the environmental problems that follow from the exponential growth of big tech, for example, need to be understood in the wider context of global warming, where the consequences of the enormous energy consumption of large-capacity server farms and AI training add to other detrimental practices such as global deforestation and global warming. So, again, I would advocate for these more holistic ways of approaching the scientific and philosophical problems of today.

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* Note: The journal's Editorial Board approved the publication of the interview.

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