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Mediatization as a Framework for Social Design: For a Better Life with Media

André Jansson

ABSTRACT Through the appropriation of new media people can extend their capabilities as autonomous human beings. At the same time, however, mediatization means that new forms of social and technological dependence emerge, accompanied by experiences of frustration, stress, and anxiety. Such experiences can be identified above all within the realm of mediatized work/life – an increasingly blurred social terrain where the prospects of media-enhanced, flexible working conditions easily evolve into further socio-technological entanglements with media. Against this background, this article assesses the prospects of employing mediatization theory as a framework for developing better-informed social design practices. It argues that social design should have as its goal to enhance the capacity among social agents to maintain a sense of autonomy in relation to mediatization. Following a cultural materialist view of mediatization, the article
introduces a two-dimensional matrix for systematizing (in terms of objects and objectives) how social design may address the social consequences of mediatization. The practical implications of the suggested framework are discussed in relation to empirical examples taken from the realm of flexible work.

KEYWORDS: mediatization, social design, social change, social power, mobility, work, everyday life

Introduction

One of the major advantages of new mobile media technologies is the growing possibility to negotiate the boundaries of time and space. Consider the following example from an interview conducted in 2014 with Peter, a Scandinavian man working as a portfolio manager at an international development organization in Geneva:

When I drive home from work, that’s when I call my friends most of the time, in Sweden or wherever ... That’s when I feel that I have that time and I’m not doing something else or there are other things going on just around me. When I’m at home it’s more difficult ... In the car, I just give a call to people I come to think of in the moment. That’s how it works.

In this example, the mobility of new media devices in combination with lowered costs for staying connected is a key asset for sustaining a mobile lifestyle where family life can be combined with an international career. Commuting routines as well as longer journeys open up time-spaces for managing private and professional relations, leading to a growing sense of control and self-realization, even liberation. As Elliot and Urry (2010, 28–33) argue, mobile media technologies provide resources for the containment of emotion, making a life on the move increasingly sustainable and desirable. This is also the predominant way in which such technologies are promoted and marketed; studies of corporate discourses in the realm of mobile media show that “connected lives” are regularly associated with successful careers, flexibility, and global mobility (Fast 2018). There is thus a mutual interplay between technological affordances and dominant discourses, which spurs the growing reliance on new media in social life and promotes connectivity and flexibility as desirable social norms.

A useful term for describing this process of normalized media reliance is mediatization. At the core of the mediatization approach is an understanding of media appropriation as a double-edged sword, implicating a dialectical form of social change. Inasmuch as media are normalized in everyday life, every new degree of heightened freedom is paralleled by some kind of social and material dependence or adaptation (Jansson 2018). Precisely those affordances of media that make
them attractive to people — sustaining self-expressivity, the micromanagement of everyday life, and the overall realization of life-changing plans and projects — may also lead to experiences of stress, frustration, and diminishing control over one’s life. As Elliot and Urry (2010, 42) put it, “mobile technologies can switch from containment to engulfment.” The following quote is taken from an interview with Ruben, a Scandinavian man holding an expert position within a United Nations organization in Geneva:

When I started traveling in 1989 traveling was much more pleasurable. In 1989 we made a program via letter-writing or using telex, and then there were always a few meetings that actually didn’t take place, and in the evenings I was free, didn’t have any mobile, no laptop. If I was away for two weeks I phoned the office perhaps once a week asking if everything was ok. But now, one is expected to do the same work while traveling as one would have done if still in the office. That’s a bit strange.

The above interview excerpts are taken from a recent research project on media use and mediatized life conditions among internationally mobile white-collar professionals. The ambiguous findings are far from unique. Much previous research shows that the social normalization of new media technologies in everyday life is rarely experienced unequivocally as a good, or pleasant, thing (e.g. Hirsch 1992; Jansson 2003, 2013; Hall and Baym 2012; Su 2016). Still, the case of mobile white-collar professionals is unique because this group is also the one that from the outset seems to benefit the most from the affordances of new media. While media are indeed good for sustaining expansive life-worlds and privileged forms of mobility, they also create new entanglements that make it questionable whether user autonomy is actually growing, especially if we take into account the dissolving boundaries between professional work and private life (see, for example, Gregg 2011; Broadbent 2011; Fast and Lindell 2016; Jansson 2016). In short, the appropriation of new media paves the way for increasingly liquid work/life conditions; the notion of “work/life” referring to how “working life” expands into “social life” at large, and vice versa.

There is surprisingly little research on how design practices play into this development. The expanding body of mediatization research is devoid of any explicit and systematic consideration of the role of design (whether materially or socially oriented). Similarly, design research has overlooked the ongoing debates on mediatization. While there is a significant body of work addressing the altered status of design practices in an era of interactive, collaborative media (e.g. Balsamo 2011; Löwgren and Reimer 2013), especially in terms of emerging forms of participatory design and do-it-yourself (DIY) citizenship (see Ratto and Boler 2014), the more fundamental connections between mediatization and design processes remain less explored. Design is probably one of the most important lubricating factors in mediatization processes. Various forms of industrial design,
from hardware to graphics to customized services, contribute to making the process of media appropriation smoother: making the product easier and more efficient to use; more attractive as an accessory within the consumer’s lifestyle; and adapted to the spatial and temporal dynamics of the contexts of use. Efficient design thus meets the material, social, and cultural needs of potential users, making the commodity seem indispensable.

What is more, mediatization does not only rely on design processes; it also produces needs for design that can contribute to the handling of the socially problematic consequences of the mediatization processes. These consequences are typically linked to negative experiences of media dependence (e.g. feelings of media addiction and stress) and associated problems of maintaining spatial and temporal boundaries and a sense of autonomy, as noted above. How can design contribute to a better life with media?

This article addresses the second aspect of the mediatization–design nexus: social design. The article is an attempt to provide an overview of what kinds of design-related challenges arise in the wake of contemporary mediatization processes, focusing especially on the realm of work/life. The aim is to explore the prospects of incorporating mediatization theory as a critical framework for social design and thereby establishing a bridge between academic approaches to social change and the ethical agendas of design practitioners. Social design is here broadly understood as design practices with the ambition to make life better for ordinary people (see, for example, Papanek 1984; Margolin 2015). The article shows how mediatization theory, and associated empirical analyses, can make visible the inherent ambiguities of increasingly connected lifestyles, identifying emerging objects and objectives of social design. More specifically, mediatization theory can provide a conceptual framework for what has recently been termed sociological social design, a particular sub-form of social design that applies theory as a reflexive tool for making sense of social change, thereby defining the purposes and shape of social design (Koskinen & Hush 2016). Ultimately, the mediatization framework should pave the way for better-informed social design processes.

The article begins with an assessment of the field of social design, highlighting especially the sub-field of sociological social design, which is followed by the introduction of a cultural materialist approach to mediatization. The third part brings together the two perspectives in an attempt to point out emerging design problems related to the area of mediatized work/life. The article concludes with a call for collaborative projects where mediatization researchers and designers work together under a shared, socially informed agenda.

Towards Sociological Social Design
What is social design? Charting what has been written about social design one observes four characteristics, all suggesting that this is
rather vague terrain. First, social design is a relatively new term. With a few exceptions (see, for example, Margolin and Margolin 2002), there are no references to this concept prior to the last five to ten years. Some argue that the term is of “uncertain origin,” but gained popularity after the financial crisis of 2008 (Koskinen & Hush 2016, 65).

Second, while the concept seems to be quite broadly debated within the more practice-oriented settings of the design field, there are few academic articles trying to define the term or implement it in a systematic manner. Social design has so far been more frequently discussed in blog posts and professionally oriented reflections than in academic journals (e.g. Antonelli 2012; Burkett 2016). To the extent there are research articles, these have mainly been published during the last few years (e.g. Janzer and Weinstein 2014; Margolin 2015; Chen et al. 2016; Koskinen and Hush 2016).

Third, there is no firm definition of the term. Rather, there is a set of intersecting characteristics that together make up a loosely integrated field of social design theories and practices. Many blog entries and journal articles set out to discuss precisely what social design is, thus underscoring the area’s ambiguous status (e.g. Antonelli 2012; Chen et al. 2016).

Fourth, it is obvious that social design is acquainted with several other areas of design theory and practice, such as participatory design, social innovation, empathetic design, and design for social change (see, for example, Brown and Wyatt 2010; Cipolla and Bartholo 2014; Wang, Bryan-Kinns, and Ji 2016; Yang and Sung 2016). It shares with these other approaches, in different ways and to different degrees, a focus on bringing about social change that makes a difference to “ordinary people.”

There is not enough space in this article to go deeper into the various backgrounds of social design and the ways in which social design overlaps with other design approaches. The aim here is rather to advance a particular way of thinking about social design; one that makes it possible to distinguish how social design is different from other “socially oriented” forms of design and (eventually) to link social design to the critical framework of mediatization. An overview of the social design literature suggests that there are three crucial criteria for establishing such a perspective.

First, social design should be understood as design for the social, rather than design that occurs through the social and merely involves social interaction and/or the engagement of social actors. The “social” in social design thus refers to its objectives rather than to its methods. Social design is “design for social change,” whichever method is used. In the introduction to a special issue of the International Journal of Design, Chen et al. (2016) try to pinpoint the key characteristics that mark out “the social” in the emerging field of social design. Their overview reveals that most uses of the term “social design” refer to design practices that entail some kind of intervention into social contexts or the construction of “real life” social
situations for enhancing the design process as such. Such methodological strategies are commonly referred to as *co-creation*, which “usually happens in workshops enriched with various types of design elements and tools” (3), and *participatory design*, which “combines fieldwork with real users and a variety of things and a variety of things such as paper prototypes and cardboard mock-ups” (3).

Clearly, these ways of working may be characteristic of a great deal of social design, but they should not be seen as defining criteria of social design. The main objective of co-creation and participatory design is not necessarily to bring about social change. Rather, these design approaches should be seen as socially informed ways of generating design solutions that fulfill any type of stipulated goal, for example, the functional usability of a particular media device. Such developments, in turn, are key to the lubrication of mediatization processes, as mentioned above, whereby media technologies become part of people’s everyday media environments and ultimately “withdraw” and are barely noticed by the users (Ihde 1990, 73; see also Jansson 2014).

Second, the point that social design refers to design for the social does not imply that social design is always design of the social per se. As Margolin and Margolin (2002) argue, social design may focus on things and material environments as well as situations, services, and policies, inasmuch as these design initiatives aim for solutions that are defined in terms of social conditions and processes rather than just practical, aesthetic, or commercial development. Not everyone would agree on this approach, however. Janzer and Weinstein (2014, 328) argue that one of the key features of social design is that it aims to design social situations rather than objects: “Social design must reorient its theoretical philosophy away from traditionally human-centered priorities (which tend to be object centric) and shift instead toward new situation-centered (social centric) priorities.” This view of social design corresponds in most respects with what is suggested in this article, but with one important difference: Janzer and Weinstein do not maintain any clear demarcation between the objects and objectives of design. This demarcation is important. The premise that social design is governed by social objectives should not imply that its objects only include social situations. As shown below, the social consequences of mediatization provide good examples for discussing how the invention, or re-designing, of material objects may respond to, and potentially change, social environments and situations.

Third, social design refers to design practices that sustain a certain kind of social change, or try to solve problems of social change in ways that follow a certain vision of the “good society” rather than the logics of commercial markets (Margolin & Margolin 2002; Margolin 2015). This means that social design is ethically or ideologically driven. Its modes of operation are framed by particular visions of how design might shape social situations and/or society at large in a positive way.
This does not mean that social design should follow any particular vision of the “good society”; there are indeed a great variety of such visions and many levels on which the “good society” could be defined and debated. In this regard, Koskinen and Hush (2016) show that the origins of social design (while difficult to delineate in a precise manner) probably can be traced back to the radical, anti-commercialist design agendas of Victor Papanek (1984), who in his book *Design for the Real World* argued that design projects should aim to support the weak (see also Margolin 2015). At the same time, however, Koskinen and Hush (2016) reckon that the term social design has also been appropriated in settings that are driven by plainly commercial goals, especially linked to the field of contemporary service design (see, for example, Yang and Sung 2016). The boundaries are thus not easy to establish and one might have to accept that there cannot be any final consensus as to what qualifies as social design and what does not.

The three points can be summarized in the following working definition: social design is a design approach that takes its point of departure in real-world social problems and justifies its practices in relation to an overarching ontological understanding of the social world paired with an ethically or ideologically grounded orientation as to how society should evolve.

But what are these “orientations”? Where do they come from? As Koskinen and Hush (2016) argue, social design projects evolve in different ways. To systematize the manifold relations between visions and practices, they propose three ideal types of social design: utopian social design, molecular social design, and sociological social design. The difference between them, they stress, “is not so much in the actual design work, but in the conceptual and motivational scaffolding of the work” (65). This typology is useful for making sense of how social design is produced in relation both to conditions in the “real” social world and to particular agendas for social change. It also provides a starting point for specifying how mediatization theory may provide a relevant framework for social design projects, conceptually and practically.

**Utopian social design** is based on radical visions of how society might improve through design and how designers could provide open-ended solutions to pressing problems like climate change, population growth, and inequality. Koskinen and Hush (2016) associate this movement mainly with the anti-capitalist works of Victor Margolin (2015), whose claims, in turn, resemble earlier utopian traditions in Western thought, as found for instance in art and architecture (e.g. the Situationist International and the British Archigram group of the 1960s and 1970s). Utopian social design initiatives gain their influences from a variety of intellectual sources, including Marxist ideology and existential philosophy.

**Molecular social design** raises more modest claims. Rather than aiming for large scale, revolutionary social transformations it takes as
its point of departure the identification of specific dilemmas in the ordinary lifeworlds of people. Molecular design typically revolves around concrete projects that aim to bring about social improvements to basic, everyday life. Here, the driving force of social design is often the desire to reshape material conditions by, for example, improving the accessibility to key infrastructures in underprivileged regions. Still, as Koskinen and Hush (2016, 68) stress, this does not rule out that “certain theoretical readings may also be behind this ethos” and that under the right conditions, transformations at the molecular level may lead to massive changes.

Sociological social design, according to Koskinen and Hush (2016), is characterized by its dependence on sociological theory. Sociology can help social designers find conceptual tools for understanding the nature of social forces and processes of change that often go otherwise unnoticed by social actors. People tend to be unaware of the structures and dynamics that (re)produce the circumstances of their everyday lives. “Sociological social design affords designers a critical stance and investigation of the presently pertaining social relations, allowing a more explicit critique than that of molecular design and a more theoretically grounded position than utopian design” (68). Design developed in close dialog with sociological theory and research may either constitute direct responses to critical issues or work as “a means of visualizing normative beliefs, shared experiences and power structures, and a means of making these available for critique” (68) In other words, sociological social design unfolds through the interplay between sociological inquiry and design processes.

This is where mediatization theory – understood as a critical sociological approach for conceptualizing media related social change – becomes relevant to social design.

A Critical Bottom-Up Perspective of Mediatization

Mediatization is a concept that has gained increasing academic attention since the late 2000s; there have been numerous books (e.g. Lundby 2009, 2014; Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013), special journal issues (e.g. Couldry and Hepp 2013; Hjarvard and Petersen 2013), conferences and symposia, and even the establishment of a special section of ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) in 2016. As several scholars have argued (e.g. Hjarvard 2013; Couldry 2014; Lunt and Livingstone 2016), mediatization has the potential to contribute a social theory of how media influence culture and society on a broader scale, in contrast to isolated “effects.” This is also why it is worthwhile exploring the prospects of adopting mediatization as a framework for social design.

In spite of its growing prominence as a research field it is difficult to speak about “one mediatization theory.” Mediatization is surrounded by debate (see Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Deacon and Stanyer 2015; Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2015; Lunt and Livingstone 2016;
Ekström et al. (2016), which reveals that there are still contradictory interpretations of the concept. To some extent, this can be explained by the concept’s complexity. Mediatization should be understood as a long-term meta-process of social change, on a par with other meta-processes like commercialization, individualization, and globalization (Krotz 2007, 2014). Mediatization is thus not a uniform development but involves a great deal of internal contradiction and tension. Mediatization processes may take on different shapes and expressions in different times, in relation to different media, and under different social conditions.

At the same time, mediatization theory presents two challenges that must be addressed before mediatization can be applied as a meaningful framework for social design. First, there is the problem of delimitation. What kinds of change qualify as mediatization? As some critics have argued, research on mediatization has often applied rather open-ended definitions, making it difficult to see what mediatization is not. Ultimately there is a risk that mediatization turns into a “concept of no difference” that “encompasses and conflates a vast range of media and communication structures, processes and practices” (Deacon and Stanyer 2015, 657). Second, there is the problem of operationalization. How is mediatization to be studied empirically? Because of its complexity, mediatization cannot be taken as a single research subject; rather, it needs to be broken down into more concrete elements that are then reassembled to achieve a fuller understanding of the general nature and consequences of mediatization.

These problems may be tackled through a critical bottom-up perspective of mediatization, based on the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams (1974, 1977, 1980) and Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984). These theories do not deal with mediatization per se. What makes them relevant to mediatization research, still, is that they share a conception of culture as the “ordinary” structures of meanings, feelings, and practices through which material relations in society are mediated. Today, media are, to an unprecedented extent, part of such material relations as well as the cultural processes through which people define their lives and make sense of the world around them. Following such an interpretation, mediatization refers to the growing indispensability of media (technologies, texts, and institutions) within expanding areas of social life, which brings about qualitative alterations within the regimes of the ordinary. As so conceived, one can speak of mediatization only inasmuch as media are naturalized as cultural forms (Williams 1974), that is, when media are appropriated, taken for granted, and become indispensable parts of the lifeworld (Jansson 2014, 2018; see also Andersson 2017).

The cultural materialist approach is thus good for working out a theoretical distinction where mediatization “begins” and, correspondingly, where it “ends.” In the realm of mediatized work/life, for instance, mediatization cannot refer to single acts or expressions of media use that crisscross the boundaries of work and
private life, but only to those broader transformations that modify people’s everyday lives, including expectations of media access and certain forms of use.

Bourdieu’s (1997/2000) notion of “doxa”, and what in a more confined and adapted sense can be referred to as communicational doxa (Jansson 2015, 2016, 2018), offer a particularly fruitful concept for analyzing such transitions. Doxa basically refers to the accepted norms and logics of practice that characterize a certain social domain or field and that agents must obey in order to gain recognition as members of that particular community (be it an organization, a professional group, or any other kind of social institution or community). Within such bounded realms of social recognition there emerge informal prescriptions regarding how to interact and communicate, including how to use various media and to what extent. When media technologies become part of communicational doxa, then it is also relevant to speak about mediatization, because it means that media have become closely embedded within ordinary practices, which are at the same time qualitatively transformed. During the last decades, for instance, teaching practices have changed in tandem with new digital presentation techniques and email has led to the formation of new norms and behaviors for professional communication.

The normalization of new media enhances opportunities for flexibility, for instance when it comes to the regulation of working hours, the possibilities to stay in touch with people while on the move, and the chances to make oneself and one’s achievements visible to others. But it also brings about various forms of media dependence, which can thus threaten a sense of autonomy. Gradually, the uses of media are no longer seen as optional, or an added value, but taken as mandatory. As shown in the second introductory example, mediatization implies that media appropriation is no longer a matter of individual choice. It also implicates that other forms of practice are reshaped in relation to the affordances that media provide. A business trip may involve less and less “free time,” since media makes it possible to conduct ordinary office work while on the move. Similarly, research has shown that while family life and other social relations are increasingly distributed in time and space (e.g. Christensen 2009; Fast and Lindell 2016), work too is distributed, tending to move into the domestic home (as well as other spaces) (e.g. Gregg 2011), especially among white-collar workers. As Sennett (1998, 46–63) argues, flexibility per se should be seen as a double-edged sword, entailing a peculiar dialectic between individual mastery and submission to structural demands, ultimately making everyday work/life a rather ambiguous experience.

Consider another example: Leena, who works as a technical officer in a UN organization in Geneva, describes an ordinary situation in which her boss used WhatsApp for overcoming a spatio-temporal gap in communication:
So he wrote to me on WhatsApp during lunch, which is actually leisure time, “Where are you and when are you coming back?” and I answered that, “I’ll be back in ten minutes,” and then went directly to him and wrote that, “I’m here now” … But I hadn’t read, he had sent me an email during the lunch break, which I hadn’t read, and I just went straight to him and said, “I’m here now, what do you want to talk about?” and he said “Ah, didn’t you read my email?”

This episode illustrates the floating boundaries and informal expectations on connectivity that tend to accompany the current stage of “multi-platform mediatization.” It also testifies to the importance of studying mediatization in an empirical and situated manner, that is, to look at how media reliance emerges and what it means in particular areas of activity and/or sociocultural settings. In order to do so, it is fruitful to specify the more precise nature of media dependence.

Previous research has identified three levels, or forms, of media dependence, which can also be seen as a way of operationalizing mediatization (Jansson 2014, 2018). First, there is functional dependence, which occurs under conditions when a certain practice cannot be carried out without the support of media technologies. For example, online connectivity has diminished the number of bank offices and reduced service offerings in those offices that remain. Computers and Internet access have thus become mandatory functional requirements for accessing these types of basic services, regardless of whether single individuals prefer this or not. In the wake of the new “sharing economy” there has also emerged a new sector of casual/precarious labor entirely reliant on mobile apps (such as Uber, Gigstr, and Instawork).

Second, there is transactional dependence, which refers to the fact that media dependence often emerges through the negotiation of potential gains and costs of a certain media form. As social beings, people tend to adapt to various requirements, like continuously upgraded software and hardware systems and commercial demands on information disclosure (leading to privacy constraints), that ultimately make them dependent on these media forms, in order to achieve various benefits in terms of, for example, social recognition, status, or a sense of control over everyday life. For example, the normalization of social networking tools has led to qualitative changes in many work environments where employees are increasingly connected at the cost of extended monitoring.

Third, there is ritual dependence, which refers to the more floating condition of getting used to various media as natural parts of one’s everyday life, up to the point where certain activities become almost unthinkable without media. The social normalization of smartphones implies that the amalgamations between media practices and “other” social practices multiply, involving anything from cooking, exercise, and other leisure practices to political activism and professional self-branding.
In concrete cases it is often difficult to single out one particular form of dependence as the supreme one. The episode recounted by Leena, for example, contains aspects that correspond to all three forms. In Leena’s organization, email has become a functional requirement for carrying out professional correspondence. Leena has also adopted WhatsApp, mainly for staying in touch with other family members, in spite of the obvious risk that it may also be used as a tool for work monitoring (thus a form of transactional dependence). It is also clear that the inclusion of connective media within communicational doxa has fostered routinized ways of negotiating spatial and temporal boundaries at work. In this case, Leena’s boss uses WhatsApp as a ritualized (albeit still contested) shortcut for speeding up the handling of email communication.

Ultimately, the cultural materialist approach provides a critical way of conceptualizing mediatization, as well as a bottom-up way of understanding how mediatization unfolds in different social settings by way of normalized forms of media dependence and adaptation. The remainder of this article will discuss how this approach can be further elaborated into a framework for guiding concrete projects of social design.

Social Design in Mediatized Work/Life – Objects and Objectives

Based on the two previous sections it is now possible to express in just one sentence how mediatization may operate as a framework for social design: mediatization theory and research can inform social design that (re)shapes media technologies and their cultural-material integration within communicational doxa in ways that either contribute to the day-to-day handling of (or compensation for) the negative consequences of various forms of media dependence, or directly promote a growing sense of autonomy on behalf of social actors. Mediatization theory may thus help designers both to address the problems and discomforts of modern life and to work in prescriptive ways in relation to ongoing social change (based on established knowledge about the dialectic of mediatization). The overarching objective of social design is thus to find ways of preventing the emergence of negative forms of functional, transactional, and ritual dependence, and in cases where such media dependences are already in place, to work out design alternatives or solutions that eliminate, disrupt, or compensate for social, psychological, existential, moral, and other kinds of costs.

What constitutes a “negative consequence,” a “problem,” or a “cost” is, of course, debatable. However, one of the characteristics of social design is that it is grounded in real-life experiences of social problems and guided by an ideological or ethical view of social change. The contribution of mediatization theory is not to provide such a view, or to make any absolute value judgments, but to
provide a framework for empirically grasping the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of modern life.

The objects of social design, in turn, can be very multifaceted. Social design is not just a matter of designing “the social” itself. Rather, social design interventions may range from material hands-on projects that modify the functionalities of media technologies to more culturally oriented projects that address communicational doxa through, for example, organizational cultures or policies. In-between these extremes – ranging from the particular to the more general – one can locate initiatives that in various ways intervene in the cultural-material environments and communicative situations of media use and dependence (see Figure 1). Mediatization theory and research can play an important role in thinking these realms together, crystallizing how they are mutually dependent.

The concrete implications of this model can be demonstrated in relation to mediatized work/life, and the cases of Ruben and Leena. What could it mean to conduct social design projects as a response to these cases of media dependence?

The salient problem in both cases is that the boundaries between work time and “free time” have become increasingly porous, and that physical/geographical absence from work does not result in lowered demands on availability. This leads to a diminished sense of control. One way of regaining control, obviously, would be to get rid of certain media technologies or platforms altogether so as to eliminate pressure. However, it is also obvious that, among mobile professionals, the price for making such a decision is often regarded as too high. It is a decision that would affect both family life and professional opportunities negatively. As shown, Leena adopted WhatsApp mainly as a means of family communication. Only at a later stage was it integrated into the ensemble of professional communication channels, thus becoming a reproductive mechanism within the doxa of her organization. Similarly, Ruben used to travel with a mobile telephone – which was his own (as he firmly points out) – partly because

![Figure 1](image_url)

Social design objects in contexts of mediatization.
he wanted to stay in touch with his wife and children. Gradually, however, the mobile was absorbed into the communicational doxa of his work, and eventually the situation reached a tipping point in which the benefits of a traveling lifestyle did not match the social costs.

In both cases, it is thus obvious that the affordances of mobile, networked media correspond with, and reinforce, an organizational culture that was already, from the outset, marked by high demands on mobility, flexibility, and availability. However, the prospects of growing flexibility – basically driven by a desire among social agents to gain positive recognition within their field of occupation – bring about further entanglements, manifested through increasingly complex media environments (including not just the material “stuff” of media, but also the online environment) and ambiguous communicative situations, such as those described by Leena and Ruben.

What emerges here is a typical problem for social designers. It is a problem that highlights the complex interplay between media technological affordances, communicative situations, environmental constructs, and communicational doxa, and which entails intertwined forms of media dependence (functional, transactional, ritual). Working through this problem by means of sociological social design would, first of all, involve a careful mapping of the problem – much more detailed than the overview provided here – grounded in mediatization theory. Such a mapping would result in a systematic description of how the problem unfolds in its various aspects, pertaining to the dimensions discussed above (the objects and objectives of social design). Figure 2 presents a theoretically informed matrix that could be used both to identify the internal dynamics of mediatization and to present possible solutions to be tested in concrete situations (small or large scale).

A key point here is that social design needs to sustain an approach that is at the same time systematic and holistic (for an analogous approach, see Margolin and Margolin 2002). It should be
systematic in the sense that designers should follow a theoretically informed logic of practice, such as the model presented here. It should be holistic in the sense that designers should account for the complex cultural-material relationships that together shape social conditions and their problems. For example, while a particular design project may aim to develop alternative, or even disruptive, technological solutions (e.g. Markussen 2013) to assist social agents in their handling of work-related communication (such as mobile add-on applications or modified functionalities), it should also be based on in-depth understandings of how a particular communicational environment works (i.e. which demands, expectations, and overarching goals govern its reproduction) and how technological change may impact that environment. Similarly, a project targeting the social textures of a particular organization or professional sector – possibly in order to rework media environments as well as typical communicative situations through participatory design experiments (e.g. Carroll and Rosson 2007) – cannot overlook which communicative functionalities are actually demanded by social agents in relation to their work/life, and why.

The purpose of this article is not to provide the solutions, since that is precisely what constitutes the task of social design. Furthermore, the article does not suggest that social designers should be capable of developing solutions that serve everybody in all ways. What the article does suggest is that social design can provide well-informed, and thus realistic, alternatives that encourage social change in ethically prescribed ways. In the context of mediatized work/life it would ultimately mean recasting that the uneasy relationship between (the mythology of) flexibility and techno-social entanglement and challenging the fundamental dialectic of mediatization.

Concluding Discussion: Towards Collaborative Social Design Projects

This article has assessed the prospects of employing mediatization theory as a critical framework for social design. Following Koskinen and Hush’s (2016) view of sociological social design as a theoretically informed sub-form of social design, the article has explored how the expanding field of mediatization research could be helpful in identifying and systematizing contemporary areas for social design. It has been shown how social design projects can benefit above all from a cultural-materialist approach to mediatization (Jansson 2018), one that analyzes and problematizes the normalized reliance, and thus dependence, on media in everyday life.

Following from this approach, the article has introduced a two-dimensional matrix representing the objects and objectives of social design in contexts of mediatization. The matrix constitutes a concrete and constructive bridge between mediatization research and social design practices. The objectives of social design should be to find solutions to the negative consequences of mediatization in terms of
functional, transactional, and ritual dependence. Social design projects should have as their goal to enhance the capacity among agents to maintain a sense of autonomy in relation to mediatization. The objects for social designers to work with in order to achieve social change are media technologies, communicative situations, media environments, and communicational doxa. The implications of this framework have been demonstrated through empirical examples taken from the realm of mediatized work/life – an increasingly complex social terrain where the prospects of media-enhanced flexibility and autonomy easily evolve into further socio-technological entanglements with media.

There is also a greater mission. Mediatization can basically be seen as a hegemonic form of social change whose social consequences largely align with the interests of capital and power. The role of social design, accordingly, is to intervene in the dialectical movement of mediatization in order to counter-balance or eradicate those forces that exploit, marginalize, or annihilate certain social groups and their needs. This article has pointed especially to the realm of mediatized work/life and the problems to stay in control of time, space, social relations, and media. But there are also many other questions, or pathologies, of mediatization that would deserve further attention among social designers, such as dependences and exploitation related to interactive surveillance, online narcissism, and gambling cultures.

Against this background there is a growing need for collaborative social design projects that bring together theorists and practitioners with different kinds of expertise. Such projects should work as a critical, counter-hegemonic force, taking their energy and direction from the lived experiences of individuals and groups in mediatized societies. In line with the ideal of collaboration they should formulate alternative solutions that challenge the dominant directions of mediatization. In these endeavors it is important to account for the already organized voices of ordinary people, as expressed by, for example, artistic cultures, social movements, labor unions, and communities driven by political, religious, or other ethically and ideologically grounded missions. Besides this, mediatization theory and research should be acknowledged as a viable mediator between everyday lifeworlds and the field of social design – a way of gathering and organizing a multiplicity of common thoughts and feelings into a more coherent and structured framework that can assist social designers in their mission to create a more livable world.

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1. These interviews are part of the research project *Kinetic Élites: The Mediatization of Social Belonging and Close Relationships among Mobile Class Fractions*, funded by the Swedish Research Council (2012–15). Thirteen interviews were conducted in 2014 with Scandinavian expatriates working for international organizations, mainly within the UN system, in Geneva, Switzerland. The author spent two periods of fieldwork (altogether six weeks) in Geneva. All respondents quoted in this text are anonymized.

References


