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### **Mediatization and sexuality:**

An invitation to a deep conversation on values, communicative sexualities, politics and media

Sander De Ridder

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## **Mediatization and sexuality:**

An invitation to a deep conversation on values, communicative sexualities, politics and media

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### **Abstract**

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This working paper aims to start a conversation in media and communication studies on the study of sexuality. Therefore, it argues the crucial role of media in changes of sexualities; it is argued that media are playing a key role in the history of the social construction of sexuality, people's current everyday sexual life-words and sexual politics. The paper explores the concept of mediatization and its potential use for the study of the role of media in changing sexualities in modernity. While there is no focus on bringing evidence for the mediatization of sexuality, the paper argues the field needs to be committed to exploring the mediation of sexuality in various forms, particularly exposing the most recent socio-technological transformations, and the role of media power (technological, symbolical, institutional) in and around sexuality.

Three main arguments are developed and explored. First, it is argued that the role of media in the history of changing sexualities remains rather invisible; little is known about how media have come to matter overtime in people's sexual life-worlds and sexual practices. Media and communication studies have been narrowly focusing on the circulation of sexuality in mass media culture, without having much attention to people's social life-worlds and sexualities. Second, it is argued we should see media as infrastructures through which people live their sexualities, mainly because of technological changes in media and communication infrastructures. Third, it is argued that the study of sexuality, media and communication studies needs to be committed to a project of democratic sexual politics, referred to as supporting communicative sexualities in a global context.

This working paper argues for a commitment to explore the role of media as much closer to the life-worlds of people: why do media matter to people's sexualities? How do people value their sexual lives in, with or around media? Media and communications are crucial for preserving human connections across sexual variety and the support for sexual rights. Understanding changing sexualities because of media, needs to be committed to a flourishing communicative sexualities.

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## INTRODUCTION

we are *beings whose relation to the world is one of concern*. Yet social science often ignores this relation and hence fails to acknowledge what is most important to people (Sayer, 2011: 2).

A key to living with human variety lies with good communications and relationships: their breakdown can lead to the squandering of much of human life (Plummer, 2015: 155).

In this working paper, I aim to explore the relationship between mediatization and sexuality. Rather than presenting evidence for the mediatization of sexuality (or even claiming that the mediatization of sexuality exists), I see this working paper as an invitation to start looking for such evidence. Further, I will argue why we need to start looking: there is an urgent need for a commitment to understanding what I will refer to as *communicative sexualities* (Plummer, 2015), an exploration of *people's values related to sexuality and the media*. Many aspects of people's sexual lives in the West are now *mediated*, meaning they are made into symbolic content by using technological and institutional tools for communication (Silverstone, 2002). Mediation has since the early 1990s played an important role in media research. Roger Silverstone referred to mediation as an 'unevenly dialectical process' (Silverstone, 2002: 762), thereby aiming to capture the complex and multidimensional way in which media may be transforming society.

Mediatization is a much more recently 'emerging paradigm' in media and communication studies (Livingstone and Lunt, 2014); the *mediatization of sexuality* points towards the historical transformation of sexuality *because of* media. Mediatization analyzes the 'interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other' (Couldry and Hepp, 2013: 197). As such, mediatization can be seen as a more linear process than mediation. As noted by Andreas Hepp (2013: 38), both concepts are related as 'mediatization *presumes* mediation through media communication'. We can think about myriad sexual practices related to media, from consuming internet porn and looking for information about non-normative sexual identities to sharing sexy selfies and webcam and telephone sex. While they are all examples of mediated sexual practices (some from the recent past and some contemporary), each of these practices—individually—do not tell us much about changing sexualities related to the presence of media; mediatization is a metaprocess, denoting processes of change in modernity. As mediatization as such is difficult to grasp, it is 'sensitizing in nature' (Lunt and Livingstone, 2016). Therefore, it relies on a certain level of theoretical abstraction.

While we may doubt the mediatization of sexuality, we certainly need a deeper commitment to understanding the *mediation* of sexuality in various forms, particularly exposing the operations of recent socio-technological transformations, thereby relating such transformations to the politics of sexuality. Such an accumulated, situated knowledge of the mediation of people's sexualities in modern life-worlds, combined with a historical knowledge of the social construction of sexuality, may provide us with insights on the mediatization of sexuality. Such combined efforts to understand the bigger picture of the changing dynamics of the most intimate aspects of the human condition are what I refer to as *intimate media cultures of mediatization* (Hepp, 2012; De Ridder, 2014).

Writings critically exploring the recent history of the social construction of sexuality argue that considerable changes have occurred in the last decades concerning how sexualities are lived since 1945 (Weeks, 2007). Such changes relate to the everyday lives of people, but they are equally supported by changing social and institutional structures. The prominent social historian on sexuality Jeffrey Weeks (2007: 3) refers to these changes in sexual life-worlds as *a world we have won*; 'a world of transition, in the midst of a long, convoluted, messy, unfinished, but profound revolution that has transformed the possibilities of living our sexual diversity and creating intimate lives.' In his reference to 'we', he states that 'the sexual and intimate revolutions of our time are largely the result of grass-roots transformations – literally the world *we* have won' (Weeks, 2007: 4). Weeks talks about more self-conscious lives, reflexive selves, global and local dynamics and 'linking sexuality and intimacy to issues of rights and responsibilities' (Weeks, 2007: 4-5).

Weeks' account explores a range of metaprocesses indicative of changes in modernity, situating the world of sexual diversity and reflexive intimacies we have won; his writings explore the role of democratization, individualization and globalization. While Weeks frequently refers to the importance of media in exploring his arguments,<sup>1</sup> there is no particular attention paid to the institutional and technological processes of communication and how they relate to the changing sexual life-worlds of people. The role of media in changing sexualities has been more explicitly explored in relation to the sexualization of culture (Attwood, 2009) and the pornographication of society (McNair, 2013; McNair, 2002; McNair, 1996). Brian McNair has, since the 1990s, thought about the relation between media,

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., referring to the increasing emphasis on sex in the media (Ibid., 2007: 42), the role of media panics on AIDS in spreading homophobia (Ibid., 2007: 41), the global media flows spreading sexual information, news, stereotypes and sexual lifestyles (Ibid., 2007: 207), and so on.

change and sexuality, arguing that mediated sexual expressions, pornography in particular, have contributed to ‘a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture’, which he refers to as ‘a democratization of desire.’ According to McNair, a ‘revolution in the means of communication has fanned the growth of a less regulated, more commercialized sexual culture’ (McNair, 2002: 12); he argued mainly about the importance of sexual and pornographic representations flowing outwards in culture and society, both in mass media (McNair, 1996) and in the digital sphere (McNair, 2013).

While McNair’s writings have been significant and pioneering in leading the way toward a study of sexuality and media outside of language that emphasizes deviance and harm related to the effects of sexual content, I argue that the role of media and communication in people’s changing sexualities remains—despite being deemed important by many observers—invisible. While scholars and commenters have provided insights into how sexuality is represented *in* the media, we know little about the past and current role of media institutions and practices on people’s everyday sexualities and on broader sexual politics. In part one of this working paper, I will further introduce *the invisible histories of sexuality and the media*. In part two, I argue that media, because of radical changes in technology and new media institutions, are now increasingly becoming *infrastructures through which sexualities are lived*; as such it becomes important to look for evidence on the mediatization of sexuality. The primary reason, so I argue, is that we need to better understand how media matters to people’s sexualities, with specific attention to sexual diversity and the creation of *good* intimate lives. The last part, *Intimate Citizenship, Politics and Media in a Global Context*, will further explore why understanding how media matter to people’s sexualities is crucial for sexual politics. In a global world order where many new sexual conflicts are emerging around the various ways in which people live their intimacies, sexualities and genders, media spaces are creating new sexual geographies: there is a need for media and communication studies to be committed to the role of media in supporting communicative sexualities (Plummer, 2015), which means arguing for human connections across sexual and gender varieties and supporting sexual rights and responsibilities.

## **THE INVISIBLE HISTORIES OF SEXUALITY AND THE MEDIA**

The more ubiquitous sex became – in the media, on television and on the Internet – the less political power it seemed to carry. [...] it became less rather than more likely that a politician would address the issue of sexual pleasure to make a political point (Timm and Sanborn, 2016: 250).

Exploring the recent history of sexuality is crucial to understanding the social construction of sexuality and current sexual politics (Seidman, 2010). A crucial moment for the history of sexuality and media can be situated from the 1970s onwards, as historians began to argue that sexuality is ‘socially constructed’ (Weeks, 2016). The argument developed here is that such recent histories are largely invisible when it comes to their relationship with media. How are media institutions and practices contributing to the social and cultural evolutions of sexuality in everyday life and politics (currently and in past decades)? The changing social history of sexuality, sexual practices, politics and institutions has received only a little attention in media and communication studies while, remarkably, social historians studying sexuality have argued media are crucial in the so-called ‘long sexual revolution’ and broader sexual politics (Schaefer, 2014; Seidman, 2010; Timm and Sanborn, 2016). Much has been hypothesized about the role of media in the process of changing sexual life-worlds, but little evidence has been provided. Studies on people’s sexual practices as related to the media, interests in the sexual life-worlds of audiences and users, and actual research on the ways sexual practices may be reorganized or shaped by technologies and institutions are currently scarce.

A ‘critical sexual history’, as Jeffrey Weeks (2016) argues, is not a straightforward enterprise. Sexual history is unavoidably intertwined with power, domination and oppression; sexuality took different shapes in societies and often remained hidden. Therefore, as Weeks asks; ‘if we cannot really know the past, is it really worth to do sexual history?’ (Weeks, 2016: 13). A sexual history is often based on individual sexual archives, representations and experiences. When studying the changing conditions of sexuality because of media, it may be possible to give some structure to recent changes and current histories in the making, but we must accept it will always be provisional.

## **Representing sexuality in the media: A look at recent history**

Inquiries on the relationship between media, sexuality and social change have a strong focus on representations of sexuality in the media. Sexual content, in many different media forms, from magazines such as *Playboy* to cinema, cable television, advertising, cyberporn, confessional talk shows and reality TV, and so on, are all seen as crucial in sexual transgressions and in the development of sexual lifestyles and identities. Sexual content in media is seen as ‘proof’ of the sexualization and pornographication of culture and the commodification of sex (Plummer, 2003; McNair, 2002; Weeks, 2007; Seidman, 2010; Streitmatter, 2004; Arthurs, 2004). It is argued that media’s role in representing sex and sexuality played a role in the democratization and individualization of intimacy and sexuality (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Weeks, 2007). Media are deemed important for the emergence of a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture (McNair, 2002; Streitmatter, 2004). Remarkably, media went from repressing sexuality (e.g., through censoring, symbolically annihilating sex and sexual minorities, or framing AIDS as a ‘gay plague’) to eventually pushing the sexualization of culture (Attwood, 2009). McNair (2002), for example, emphasizes the importance of ‘changes in the social relations of capitalism’ in the 1960s and 1970s; such changes, he claims:

have economic and political effects which are reflected in culture, generating media images and discourses which inevitably feed back into the political, social and economic environments, generating a virtuous circle of media-driven change in attitudes to sexuality and gender (McNair, 2002: 11).

While some scholars (McNair, 2002; McNair, 2013; Streitmatter, 2009) claim that media representations have played a particularly positive role in producing more diverse and pluralistic sexual life-worlds, thereby mainly reacting against societal fears reproduced through moral panics about sex in the media, many other scholarly contributions on the issue are much more ambivalent in their conclusions. They claim sexual content found in media introduced a social and cultural normalization of what good sex should be; sexual content is said to cultivate the pure heterosexual, the normal homosexual and stereotypical gender relations (Seidman, 2010). As such, media introduced a hierarchical system of sexual value; popular mass media’s symbolic politics have, since the sexual revolution, been fiercely criticized for introducing a system of taken-for-granted heteronormativity. The role of media in the sexualization of culture and the spread of pornography has led the way to a democratization and diversification of sexuality for some (McNair, 2013), while others have



pointed to the negative consequences of the recent 'resexualization', especially of young girls' bodies, and a 'resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference' (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 4) in contemporary digital culture. Recent research focusing on analyzing the internet and sexuality inquires into sexual representations as *self-made* by people using various semiotic tools and platforms. Such tools are found in the digital sphere, the interactive web and mobile media. These networked technologies have opened the way for self-representations and storytelling. Practices vary from producing and circulating amateur internet porn (van Doorn, 2010) to using dating apps to find love (Blackwell et al., 2015) and young people sharing sexy pictures online (Dobson, 2011; Crofts et al., 2015). Research on sexuality and the internet explores in many ways the very same struggles and dynamics as those of mass media culture: are digital media either contributing to a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture or, quite the opposite, are they limiting the sexual and diverse intimate life-worlds of people? This question has become complicated in the digital sphere by the possibilities for self-representation. Those possibilities for self-representation are thought to open up a 'democratic voicing of difference' (Thumim, 2012: 125).

### **Sexualities and mass media culture: Incorporation vs. resistance**

Understanding key features of modernity such as individualization, democratization, sexualization and commodification are crucial for understanding Western cultures. As I have shown in the previous part, they are relevant to the exploration of the relationship among media, social change and sexuality. To explore such changes, scholars have mainly referred to visible changes in media texts: how sexuality is currently represented and how it has been represented in past decades in the context of mass-produced media and popular culture. Intellectual developments playing a significant role in critically analyzing media as texts, including in understanding media texts representing sexuality, follow on from Marxist theorizing.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944/2002), as prominent figures of the Frankfurt School, have been particularly important in showing how culture is a product guided by a cultural industry. Consequently, the dominant ideologies produced by the cultural industries have become increasingly intertwined with the subjectivities on which we rely to produce our own selves and identities, and this is being reflected in how most of the research makes sense of the ways in which media is important in people's everyday sexual lives. Media are seen as co-constructing sexual subjectivities and identities, which is a process of continuous struggle. Cultural media studies have been important in explaining how our identifications with

popular culture have become related to our identities in more nuanced ways; audiences in particular are thought of as active players, negotiating with the products of the cultural industry or developing tactics to make those products their own, instead of being blindly dominated by the ideologies of cultural industries (Fiske, 2010; Hall, 2006). Combining Frankfurter School reasoning and cultural studies, Douglas Kellner (1995: 3) argued that media culture should be seen as inducing

individuals to identify with dominant social and political ideologies, positions and representations, while at the same time audiences may resist the dominant meanings and messages, create their own readings and appropriations of mass-produced culture and use their culture as resources to empower themselves and invent their own meanings, identities, and forms of life.

Current research on the role of social media in the sexual life-worlds of young people is a key example of such complex sites of struggle. Self-produced intimacies in social media are seen as reflections of and struggles with the meanings produced in mass media culture. The products of mass media culture are either being *incorporated* into young people's sexual self-representations (e.g., young people produce highly objectifying sexualized self-representations) or *resisted* by producing alternatives to mass media culture (e.g., young people sharing on YouTube the difficulties of coming out as gay). Competing theoretical insights and ideological frameworks are key to understanding many of the ambivalent arguments made in this kind of research: Marxist materialist feminism (Jackson, 2001), post-feminism (Gill, 2007) and heteronormative criticisms (Gómez, 2010) are coming to conclusions that contradict those of scholars celebrating resistance and using post-structuralist queer perspectives on gender and sexuality (Jagose, 1996); such research focuses on performativity and subversive pleasures that resist heteronormativity (Butler, 2006; van Doorn, 2009; Gómez, 2011). This incorporation/resistance paradigm (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998) and the analysis of media texts has been (and to a large extent still is) dominant in analyzing how media are working in the context of changing sexualities.

My argument is that such a narrow research focus on ideology leaves us guessing about the social change, sexuality and media; *we still know very little about how media practices and institutions have come to matter—over time—in people's sexual life-worlds and sexual politics.*

The incorporation/resistance paradigm has a history of being been criticized in sociology and media studies<sup>2</sup> mainly in so-called ‘second-wave’ audience research that focuses on media use as a social and cultural practice (see Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), in feminist media studies (Fenton, 2000) and in the study of gay and lesbian identities in the media (De Ridder et al., 2011). The incorporation/resistance paradigm in media studies usually draws conflicting results, arguments and conclusions without making clear the power of media and people’s sexual practices as increasingly related to media and thus the mediated and mediatized contexts surrounding sexualities. A way out of the incorporation/resistance paradigm is a commitment to exploring how people’s sexual practices have become related to media (Couldry, 2010). The study of sexuality from a media and communication studies perspective should come to terms with the idea that *media culture is not equal to a mass media culture* as it was defined by Kellner (1995) almost twenty years ago. Kellner’s insights were heavily related to one-to-many media, such as television and film. The incorporation/resistance paradigm does not address the technological, institutional, societal and cultural evolutions of communication processes, neither does it include an understanding of people’s social worlds. I agree with Andreas Hepp (2012: 8), who argues media culture is ‘omnipresent, but not a mass culture.’ Media culture is *not only* about making sense of representations produced by the media (Couldry, 2012) or making sense of mass produced standardized popular culture; media culture is much more complex. Media culture is lived in everyday life-worlds (Williams, 1958/2002). Therefore, as Hepp (2012: 11) notes, media are constitutive of the realities in which we live:

Comprehending media culture is a much more complex enterprise, since our construction of reality is increasingly effected through media. This is what we have to address, and it has always proved a major challenge to define what media culture really is.

Thomas Johansson (2007), author of *The Transformation of Sexuality: Gender and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture*, presents a rigorous study on Swedish youth’s sexualities. In the epilogue, Johansson highlights the importance of media in understanding young people’s changing sexual life-worlds. He explains how ‘the media sphere’ is often ignored but should be seen as key to young people’s ‘identity-formation’ and sexualities. Not considering ‘the

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<sup>2</sup> However, the incorporation/resistance paradigm has also been an important critique on post-structuralist theories of sexuality such and queer theory. David Ruffolo (2009), author of *Post-Queer Politics*, talks about the queer/heteronormative dyad as problematic, which is also pointed out by Max H. Kirsh (2000), who critiques queer theory for not being able to develop insights on processes of social change.

media sphere' is, according to Johansson, 'an effect of the difficulties inherent in detecting and studying media influences' (Ibid, 2007: 111). The difficulties of studying 'media influences' are well-known. However, the complexity of such study should not prevent us from studying the mediation of sexuality. Thoughts on the mediatization of sexuality should not be left outside the sphere of media and communication studies. As noted by Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (2014: 704):

Mediatization research, we suggest, is precisely concerned to bring together our knowledge of the history of media and the history of mediation across diverse fields so as to attempt a distinct account of the changing role and significance of the media in society, even while recognizing that such an account will be far from simple, linear, or self-sufficient.

## **MEDIA AS INFRASTRUCTURES THROUGH WHICH SEXUALITIES ARE LIVED**

As a way forward, I suggest we start with a better understanding of how media matters to people's sexualities in the context of rapid transformations of media, thereby looking at technological, social, political and economic changes. Media have become infrastructures through which people's sexualities are lived, which presents a radical ontological change in how we look at processes of communication, mainly mass communication and culture. The idea that *media matter* in the context of people's sexualities argues that we should look at people's evaluations and values of living diverse aspects of their sexual lives with media. Here I follow Andrew Sayer's (2011) statement that a focus on people's evaluations and values is a crucial project for the broader social sciences—research has disregarded the idea that people are evaluative beings; as researchers, we must see that people's worlds are of concern. Much could be said about the study of sexuality in media and communication studies in relation to Sayer's broader comments on the social sciences. As such, it becomes crucial to explore media as much closer to the life-worlds of people, how media 'are embedded in practical activity as people move through the environments, of which they too are part, and how media are thus part of our experiential worlds in ways that account for, but go beyond, content' (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013: 689).

Seeing media as infrastructures means seeing the role of media in society and everyday life as to 'run underneath, through and in the background of social structures'; as such, media sometimes disappear from 'direct awareness' (Deuze, 2012: 40). While some components of

media as infrastructures are visible, such as the artifacts and devices people use for communication, it is much more difficult to see practices as related to media and ‘the social arrangements or organizational forms that develop around those devices and practices’ (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006: 2). Exploring the mediation of sexuality then, is to precisely expose what role media are playing in the background. Within such moments of exposure, ideological criticisms of the social and cultural organization of sexuality still have a primary role to play, especially when we want to make arguments for sexual diversity and reflexive intimacies. Exploring the mediation of sexuality means starting with examining how people value their sexualities in relation to media practices and institutions. Values should focus, among other things, on people’s concerns, hopes, pleasures, fears, fantasies and judgments related to sexuality and the media. We should start from people’s sense-making and not from a particular ideology by criticizing how *it is*, based on how we as researchers think it *ought* to be (Sayer, 2011), as is often the case in research on sexuality and media today.

An example of media and communication studies approaching sexuality and media starting from a critical ideological standpoint is research on the reproductions of heteronormative ideologies in people’s self-representations on social media (Gómez, 2011; Cover, 2012). Ideology in the study of media and sexuality is essential but also tricky. While it is crucial to explore the violence produced by heteronormative ideologies, it makes no sense to argue for a resistance to heteronormativity, thus telling people how to behave while making sense of media or when representing themselves using media. Rather, we should try to understand why so many people value reproducing heteronormativity as the standardized way of representing sexuality in mass media or of representing the self in social media; why does it feel right, good, safe, or natural? How do these values fit within media’s power, symbolic, technological and institutional?

To end this argument: I do not mean that research aiming to look for and describe resistant practices in or around media makes no sense. Resisting heteronormativity as a media practice has the potential to be politically significant; it has the power to make people question why they value heteronormativity so much, and it could help to question why people think heteronormativity is natural in the context of media representations. However, I do feel we need research on *why* it matters for people who resist heteronormativity to do so. Such insights could add to the current research on media and the violence of normative sexual ideologies.

## **Intimate media cultures of mediatization**

As Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone (2016: 467-468) argued, designating particular aspects of society as being mediatized is an ambitious task. There needs to be *evidence* ‘that media change has substantially contributed to societal transformations across several domains’ and evidence ‘countering the claim from *parsimony* that already well-established theories of societal metaprocesses are sufficient in explaining how this has occurred.’ Lunt and Livingstone also argue that ‘the relation between mediatization and other metaprocesses in charting the transformations of modernity’ need to be *explained*. I believe it is only through an accumulation of knowledge, exploring so-called ‘small mediatized life-worlds’, that proof of structural changes can become concrete (Krotz and Hepp, 2011). As I have argued in the previous section, such an exploration of small mediatized life-worlds needs to focus on the broad question of how media matters to people’s sexualities and to broader sexual politics, with regard to the processes of media power: institutional, symbolic and technological. Reflecting on the bigger picture, on the structural conditions of changes in media in the most intimate aspects of the human condition, falls under the umbrella of a process that I have described elsewhere (De Ridder, 2014) as the unfolding of *intimate media cultures*, as *cultures of mediatization* (Hepp, 2012). Such a focus on media cultures makes sense of how sexualities and intimacies are lived in everyday life with media, how particular affordances structure social traffic, interactions and communication, while equally focusing on broader media ideologies (Gershon, 2010); these are beliefs about media, beliefs that shape how society thinks people *should live* their sexualities, genders, desires and relationships, beliefs about who should have a voice to tell intimate stories in media and who should not, beliefs about who should be allowed to consume what kind of sexual content, and who should not, and so on.

Such an approach focuses on how everyday intimate and sexual rituals, practices and meanings are becoming media-related when they were not related to media before (Couldry, 2003). Media cultures are therefore constitutive of changes in our perceptions of realities. Media transform because, first, they are converting ‘lived tradition’ into ‘symbolic content’ (Hepp, 2012: 31); second, they are reorganizing places as media spaces (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004) and groups of people as audiences, users and publics (Livingstone, 2012). Such an approach returns to Raymond Williams’ (1958/2002) words; we should understand media cultures *as lived*. Culture, in a wide sense, is the ‘sum of different classificatory

systems and discursive formations' (Hall, 1997: 222)<sup>3</sup>, producing knowledge; this cultural approach explores the discursive meanings of practices. Media cultures contextualize media practices, which is crucial for understanding their role in everyday life. For example, mobile media such as smartphones are used by some people to 'be seen as sexually attractive', find dates and maybe have sex (Blackwell, et al., 2015). Therefore, people are using dating apps such as *Tinder* and *Grindr*. The popularity of smartphones and location-aware apps through which random people can be connected comes to stand for something other than their technological affordances (du Gay, et al., 2003); the popularity of smartphones and dating apps are driving nagging anxieties about current societies obsessed with casual sex. Especially in relation to young people, digital media and sexuality, devices such as smartphones and practices such as sexting have come to stand for a society losing control over the actions of young people and the morals by which they live their sexual lives. The mediatization of intimacy becomes concrete in such moments of sense-making, which constitute a broad collection of *unfolding intimate media cultures*, ways of sense-making of intimacy and sexuality through or around the media. This sense-making 'molds' (Hepp, 2012) the way we live genders, sexualities, relationships and desires in mediatized worlds. As such, media are structuring sexual life-worlds and politics.

### **Mediatized sexualities and other metaprocesses**

To describe the changing conditions in which sexualities are lived in modernity, established scholars studying sexualities and intimacies have pointed towards different metaprocesses. Usually, these writings see a significant role of the media *within* those well-established concepts describing structural changes in people's sexual life-worlds. As discussed in the introduction, Jeffrey Weeks, an eminent voice in these debates, has written on the social history of the 'remaking of erotic and intimate life since 1945', thereby referring to individualization, democratization and globalization (Weeks, 2007). In each of these different processes, the role of media is frequently used as an illustration of changing social conditions, but it is also seen at moments as driving these changes. Media as driving changes in sexual life-worlds is prominent in the work of Brian McNair, who argues that the commodification of sex is to a large extent media-driven (McNair, 2013). He sees the media playing a central role in what he refers to as 'the democratization of desire' (McNair, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall argues that these discursive formations become meaningful through language. However, following practice theory, discursive meaning is produced through practices. Language is important, but only in its routinized use (Reckwitz, 2002).

Another key example is the ‘sexualization of culture’ or so-called ‘cultures of sexiness’; sex has come to play a key role in all kinds of cultural outlets, and again media are seen as central (Attwood, 2009).

Exploring the mediatization of sexuality should mean seeing the conditions of media-driven change in relation to these already well-established meta-theories. However, mediatization could add something particular; much of these insights are hypothesizing about the history and power of media, but not much is known about the role mediation is playing in the background, the particular symbolical, technological and institutional dynamics that are running through sexual media practices, and how these come to matter for people’s sexualities. An example here is how Eva Illouz (2007) inquires into how capitalist culture is changing how we make sense of love and intimacy. The key example Illouz (2007: 88) addresses is internet dating sites, exploring how the ‘Internet structures the search for a partner in the form of an economic transaction’. By asking people questions in interviews about how dating sites matter for them, how they value dating sites, she provides readers with convincing insights into the commodification thesis. The point is that while Illouz’ arguments give us some insights into the mediatization of intimacy, studying the role of change because of media would mean a different point of entry. Many more important questions could be asked: how should we see internet dating sites within the broader symbolic politics of media and intimacy (e.g., how does it fit within reality TV formats such as the long history of dating shows and current game shows such as *Temptation Island*), how are internet dating sites’ political economies related to people’s values on internet dating, and how do people value different kinds of technological affordances such as liking, swiping and algorithms organizing data and connection when looking for a date?

## **INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP, POLITICS AND MEDIA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**

The nomadic vision of the subject as a time continuum and a collective assemblage implies a double commitment, on the one hand, to processes of change and, on the other, to a strong ethics of the ecosophical sense of community – of “our” being in this together. Our copresence, that is to say, the simultaneity of our being in the world together, sets the tune for the ethics of our interaction with both human and nonhuman others (Braidotti, 2011: 131).

This final part will argue that the study of media and communication requires commitment to a project supporting democratic sexual politics, sexual diversity and reflexive intimacies.



By showing in the first part of this working paper how the histories of sexuality and media have remained largely invisible, I critiqued what kind of sexualities we have been studying in relation to the media and media history. A better understanding of such recent histories and current histories in the making is crucial, as media are playing a significant role in the social construction of sexual realities. Moreover, media contributes to the current state of sexuality in the world and to sexuality as an object of study; *sexuality has become a global and multifaceted part of humanity*. The study of sexuality has become associated with citizenship questions, ethics, rights and responsibilities (Weeks, 1998; Plummer, 2003). To support such a democratic global project, I see it as crucial that we understand why media matters to people's sexualities and how people value their sexual lives with media. While listening to people's values, we should not see them as opposed to rationalities or facts (Sayer, 2011). However, values are open to *evaluation*, which means they are open to an ideological and/or ethical critique when they are being researched. Values matter in understanding how people live together with a plurality of sexualities and genders in, through or around media. It is crucial to critique how such values are made and contested in people's media-related practices and through media's institutional, technological and symbolic powers. Supporting a democratic sexual politics means a critical understanding of how sexual values are placed in hierarchical systems, of how certain intimate sexualities are respected and valued while others are stigmatized (Seidman, 2010: 55). Crucial here is that a focus on *value pluralism* does not mean validating or creating *value relativism* (Berlin, 1969). As Rosi Braidotti describes in the quote at the very beginning of this part, it is about 'our' being in this together, together within processes of complex change, together with human and nonhuman others.

A democratic sexual politics in a global human context needs a deep commitment to 'communicative sexualities', as argued by Ken Plummer (2015). Communicative sexualities support the project of what Plummer refers to as 'cosmopolitan sexualities', which is about bringing together the many sexual pluralities by which people live and relating them to a human solidarity and common humanity. Cosmopolitan sexualities are connecting differences and values, a uniqueness with multiple group coherence. When power relations in communication become one-sided, such a project becomes impossible. Mediated communicative sexualities are thus crucial in globally connecting sexual narratives and life-worlds. Media are crucial communicative infrastructures for sharing basic human values, including the flourishing of sexualities. If we agree that media are communicative infrastructures through which sexualities are lived, then supporting a democratic sexual politics means understanding and critiquing how media may or may not contribute to thriving communicative sexualities in a global context.

## **Regulating media, regulating sexualities**

A concern with communicative sexualities brings forward questions on sexual well-being and the presence of media. Sexual well-being encompasses many aspects, such as recognizing that sexualities are playful, fun and experimental, including the senses and imagination, while it is also about caring for people's bodies, integrity and dealing with vulnerable and violent aspects of sexualities. However, the many systems regulating sexuality do not always show an interest in preserving this careful balance, a balance that embraces sexual plurality and diversity while also finding some common human ground against violence, harm and vulnerability. Sexuality is regulated through various systems, from religion, medicine, governments and politicians to discursive systems of regulation. The regulation of media is coming to play a significant role among these various systems. As infrastructures through which people live sexualities, the regulation of media is gaining a new momentum: the regulation of sex and media goes beyond the discursive (censoring sexual content, symbolic annihilation of sexual identities, etc.). A key example is the current discussion around children, young people, sexuality and the internet: to what extent do we allow children or young people access to information about sex or online pornography, to what extent do we allow interaction with mobile dating platforms, and do we need to prevent them from participating in online sexual activity (e.g., different forms of cybersex)? The internet is a space where communicative sexualities could flourish, but it demands a continuous and careful balance between embracing sexual plurality and rebuking violence, harm and vulnerability. *When such a balance is lost, good communications are lost.* Ken Plummer (2016: 155) situates the importance of 'good communications' by referring to the alternatives: 'there is no dialogue, no self-awareness, no empathy, no reflexivity, ultimately no compassion'. In relation to media, sexuality and the internet, much is guided by the moral panic of the day, leading to little but easy gains for conservative politics. As such, digital media have become crucial battlegrounds on which sexual politics are negotiated.

The study of the mediation of people's sexualities, further contextualized within the history of the social construction of sexuality and the history of media practices and institutions could therefore be crucial in contributing to good communicative sexualities and sexual well-being with media. A focus on changes in the mediation of sexualities and how they relate to cultural shifts through which people make sense of how sexualities are lived could mean, for example, critical exposure of the current media ideologies that make sense of young people, with their intimacies and sexualities in social media, as being at risk, in need of more self-control and

self-management (De Ridder, 2014). As such, we become aware in this particular example that the politics of intimate media cultures, as intimate media cultures of mediatization, have introduced a cultural shift towards more control, regulation and management of sexualities. Young people are patronized by pundits, teaching them how to behave the right way online. When there is no dialogue with young people themselves, this means good communications are lost. Such insights help to make clear that, in order for a democratic project for sexual politics to proliferate, communicative sexualities should be supported by questioning how young people's experiences and practices of intimacy and sexuality through social media are currently dominated by control, regulation and management. Reconstructing communicative sexualities would then mean *restoring the balance of the good communications that are lost*; it would mean arguing for the reconstruction of a young, passionate life that includes social media; passion includes emotions, feelings and affects. It would mean that, as a political project for research, we reorient from panics to ethics: social media are places where we should be able to experience diverse tastes, sentiments and subjective experiences instead of being guided solely by risks and limited discourses on self-management and self-control.

### **Global sexual conflicts: Media, sexuality and cosmopolitanism**

Focusing on global sexual conflicts means that we cannot understand the mediation and mediatization of sexuality without taking into account the profound inequalities of lived sexualities worldwide, in different societies and communities. Flows of media content, digital networks and platforms are travelling to globally networked contexts, going beyond Western liberal capitalist systems; thus, the internal politics of mediated sexualities matter a great deal to the outside world. Western life-worlds are recognizable by a relative sexual diversity and intimate pluralism, which becomes concrete in the products of media such as sitcoms with popular gay characters and social media platforms with options to identify as 'straight', 'bi', 'gay', or 'other'. Because such media products are travelling worldwide, they are creating new sexual geographies, spaces for interpretation of and practices surrounding these media products. Sexual information, news, sexualized (self-)representations, etc., have a global visibility that matters in people's everyday sexual lives far beyond the Western contexts in which they were produced; they are visible in global activist networks and international and transnational politics of sexuality. As such, mediatized sexualities are intertwined with the globalization of sexuality. Dennis Altman (2001: 1) defines the globalization of sexuality as 'changes in our understandings and attitudes to sexuality [that] are both affected by and reflect the larger changes of globalization. Moreover, as with globalization itself, the changes are simultaneously leading to a greater homogeneity and greater inequality'.

An awareness of the global and cosmopolitan conditions in which sexualities are lived deserves to be taken into account when studying media, communication and sexuality. Good communicative sexualities can only be maintained through sensitivity toward global sexual conflicts and cosmopolitan realities and politics. One example of how media operate in global sexual conflicts may be found by looking at the popular American television teen series *Glee*. *Glee* is seen as authoritative in its unapologetic representation of gay teenagers (Dhaenens, 2013). Therefore, *Glee* is often seen as representing a celebration of progressive queerness and social change (Johnson and Faill, 2015); the show's representations create identifications with LGBT people, as some scholars have found by looking at reactions on the microblogging site *Twitter* (Marwick et al., 2014). In contrast, some scholars argue *Glee*'s representations still rely on some very blatant heteronormative ideologies (Dhaenens, 2013), and others showed that young audiences were not necessarily accepting the non-heterosexual characters and identities represented in *Glee* (Meyer and Wood, 2013). These highly ambivalent scholarly responses to *Glee* all make their arguments with a Western framework in mind. However, as the show travels, it gains complexities. While it is valuable to understand how the show could contribute to social change and positive identifications, when *Glee* is watched in countries where profound inequalities in the human rights of sexual minorities still exist, some of the in-depth readings and analysis of audience interpretations may become very detached from non-Western contexts, leading to unforeseen consequences. As LGBTQ activists know, activism is an adaptive process, and often media play complex roles in activists' political goals:

Most international LGBT organizations are aware that promotion of marriage equality can provoke a backlash, but the emphasis on marriage as the ultimate goal of the movement is strongly emphasized in television shows such as *Glee* and *Modern Families* [sic]. This in turn creates an easily appropriated scapegoat for conservative politicians and preachers in places where homosexuality is an unfamiliar, western identity (Altman and Symons, 2016: 151).

Sexual politics, the role of activism, the role of gay marriage and its reproductions in and around media are only one example where it makes sense to look from different, and often competing, global political angles. While representations of same-sex intimacies and gay marriage may matter for a number of LGBT people, it may not for all of them. Whether it concerns small-scale examples such as *Glee* or the sexual identity politics of the social media platform *Facebook* (now used by an ever increasing number of people around the world to communicate sexual identity by categories defined by the software platform), the sexual

politics inside media travel far. Taking this for granted may naturalize the increased homogeneity and inequality media can produce. Those who are studying media and changing sexual life-worlds, should be vigilant for both the relations between mediatization and globalization; a sensitivity to global issues could be a very first step.

## CONCLUSION

In this working paper, I have presented some thoughts that are still very much in process. The primary goal was to invite media and communication scholars to start inquiring into the mediation of sexuality in the context of the history of the social construction of sexuality and the history of media, practices, institutions and technologies. By doing so, we may be able to see how (if?) mediatization works in the field of sexuality. While very significant work has been done on sexuality and media, the breadth of what it means to study *the media* in the context of sexuality has changed dramatically because of technological, social and cultural changes in modernity. As a consequence, the study of media and sexuality encompasses much more than looking at representations and interpretations of sexuality in mass media and popular culture.

A study of sexuality and the media should engage with the question why media matter to people's sexualities, and how people value their sexual lives in, with or around media. Such a focus has become crucial as media are now infrastructures through which people live many aspects of their sexual lives. In consequence, the study of media, communication and sexuality cannot but inscribe itself into a project that supports a democratic sexual politics, an understanding of changing sexualities because of media. In a world of ever growing complexity and new sexual geographies generated by media, such a democratic project can only exist with sensitivity toward global and cosmopolitan contexts, balancing human rights, sexual diversity and reflexive intimacies.

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