

Mediatized Contexts and the Construction of Global Events: Mobile Media Habits, Data-Driven Platforms, and Rituals

Andrew Arthur Fitzgerald

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (USA)

Fitzga2@rpi.edu

Abstract

This paper examines the spatio-temporal contexts wherein mediatized (Couldry and Hepp, 2016) global events are received by mobile and platform users. Taking inspiration from the Birmingham School's approach to studying television audiences (e.g., Morley, 1992)—particularly the emphasis on micro-social environments and how they mold the construction of media's meanings as text and technology—I examine how situated meaning making during the construction of mediatized events re-articulates temporalities and territorialities as observed in continuously collected screenshot data from participants' android devices (Reeves et al., 2021). Attending to mediatized micro-social environments requires looking at the screens, networks, and interfaces where audience practices occur (Kormelink and Meijer, 2018). This includes analyzing users' micro-actions that require little thought yet nevertheless are discursive practices e.g., liking or commenting, sharing or reacting. Attending to these contexts reveals how users and platform-dominated media systems co-construct events in mediatized rituals (Fitzgerald, 2024).

Two examples reveal how the US-based participants' mediatized habits and the interface and algorithmic design of platforms co-construct a recurrence of traumatic accounts of the Stockholm Truck Attack. One participant witnessed a Swedish Facebook friend "tag" others who hadn't declared themselves safe and other users' responses to the post. For the participant, the actual attack is over, and their Facebook friend already knows their loved ones are safe, but the participant—who presumably does not—scrolls the whole thread from the original post, through periodic check-ins by their friend over several hours, to a final note that everyone was safe, all in a little under a minute. This condenses what for the other users was a longer period filled with uncertainty, fear, and relief, into a much shorter experience for the participant. It also draws the participant into an affect and temporality of immediacy in relation to the distant event. In the second example, through a chain of data-producing engagement and curation (particularly through positive reactions to another user in their network "checking-in" to say that their family is safe) and this participant's habit of checking their Instagram "activity feed," the Stockholm attack reverberates in their mobile screen the morning after. Like the first case, the specific conditions of datafied

mediatization—algorithmic curation designed to boost engagement and its intertwining with rapid, fragmented use and everyday barely-thought habit—leads to the recurrence of responses to the attack including rejoicing in the original poster’s family being safe, expressions of condolence or solidarity with the attacked nation, and lament at the traumatic event. Global mediatized events are co-constructed through the circulation and platform-driven recurrence of witnessing texts and their reception in intimate spaces of often “distant” mobile and platform users, and their diverse localized and layered temporalities. Mediatization, including the intertwining of user habits, socialities, and algorithmic curation, reconfigures the spatial and temporal contexts in which global events are constructed, making the anxieties of distant attacks proximate and folded into spaces where, for increasing swaths of the global population, discourses are articulated, views of the world are formed, and political subjects are mobilized or de-mobilized.

Keywords: Mobile Media, Mediatized Rituals, Habit, Datafication, Audience & User Studies

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BIO

Andrew Fitzgerald is Assistant Professor of Communication & Media at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His research focuses on mediatized violence, particularly terrorism, and the global resurgence of far-right authoritarianism. Fitzgerald is the founding director of Rensselaer’s Mediatization Lab, which explores how the interweaving of data-driven social media platforms and mobile devices across categories of life and social action shapes users’ construction of their digital lives and realities, and our broader political climate in turn. His work has been published in peer-reviewed journals including *Communication Theory*, *Journal of Media Ethics*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, and *Human Computer Interaction*.