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Friedrich Krotz is an outstanding expert on communication and media studies focusing on social communication and mediatisation research. He is a member of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the International Communication Association (ICA), the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the German Society for Sociology (DGS), the German Society for Journalism and Communication Research (DGPuK), the Society for Media Science (GfM), the Association of the Institute for Youth, Film, and Television in Munich and many other associations, committees and editorial boards of scientific journals. In his research, he focuses on theories of media and communication science, culture and communication sociology, cultural studies, media change and mediatisation, on reception studies and problems of media research, politics and society as well as on qualitative and quantitative research methods and theory of science.

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MEDIATISATION OF COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Interview with Friedrich KROTZ

ABSTRACT:

The interview focuses on Friedrich Krotz's views on the mediatisation of communication and culture and its consequences for daily life and social relations, culture and society. While discussing the topic Friedrich Krotz mostly addresses the negative aspects of mediatisation and outlines possible solutions to counter them. The given topics also refer to technological and cultural development of the society in the light of the influential notions proposed by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer or Marshall McLuhan as well as from the viewpoint of specific traits of today's communication via cyberspace. The interview therefore covers the issues concerning Internet security and privacy. The discussion specifically reflects on our dependence on online search engines, especially *Google*, and Internet social networks such as *Facebook* or *WhatsApp*.

KEY WORDS:

communication, media, media culture, mediatisation, social networks

Hana Pravdová (H. P.): *The so-called new media force us to live a new form of totality; they control us. In Slovakia, there is a saying: "The one who does not work, should not eat." But today, we start to replace it with: " The one who does not communicate, does not exist." The processes of mediatisation, globalisation, individualisation, and mainly commercialisation cannot be stopped. The borders between the individual and the public have been eliminated. Everyday life is commercialised. Cultural and economic processes are legitimised through political concepts. Isn't it time to come back to Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique?*

Friedrich Krotz: Nowadays, we cannot refer only to Adorno's and Horkheimer's conclusions, as things have changed in a fundamental way. Because of this, we must start with our own critical studies. What we can learn from Adorno and Horkheimer, is about their methodology: "critique" for them is coming up from comparing the existing conditions of human life and culture with the potential conditions for human life and culture. This is what we can also do today. For example, today there is no data privacy on the Internet, but the Internet with data privacy would be possible. Thus, we can ask what decisions were relevant for the disappearance of data privacy, what interests are behind them and how we can change that. The rules on how to develop critical insights are as crucial now as they were before. We have to remove the ballast, we have to start thinking in a new way and we have to apply rules for critical thinking in a new way. Moreover, we should integrate the upcoming new generations in our critical discussions.

Ľubica Hulajová (L. H.): *Do you believe the situation will improve? Do you think we will manage it?*

Friedrich Krotz: In my mind, today there exist a lot of interesting conclusions of critical studies, a lot of good ideas and a lot of concrete proposals how to change the situation. We must now bring all these things together,

develop convincing programmes, and start changing the situation. Moreover, we must create specific political concepts and apply them to the community we live in.

If we want to understand contemporary media development, we should not only consider what we can do with the upcoming and changing media. To understand the digital media of today, we also have to take into consideration that they have a long historical background: for example, the invention of the Internet, or the fact that a lot of specific hard- and software for communication has military roots with constraints and dominant structures. The same is true with robots, satellite communication and so on. Nevertheless, in the time of the development of the nets, there have also been periods of time when nets have been quite free – for academic work, for use of all, and in those times, many new ideas had come up. Nowadays, economic interests dominate the Internet. Thus, the digital media of today are the result of complex social processes, of social and political negotiations in culture and society with reference to economic and other powers.

At some point in time, for example, so-called hackers played an important role in trying to create the Internet that allows access for all, independent of power and income. However, they did not succeed. Today, many people recall hackers as those who wrote the first software and computer programmes for all, without demanding money and control. However, the term "hacker" is currently used for criminals, and their historical role is forgotten. For example, most of my students do not know anything at all about these issues. Instead, they just use the Internet for everyday purposes; it has become part of their life. Our reality of today came into existence as a product of prior developments, decisions and negotiations, and if one wants to understand what is taking place, it is important to understand the basic developments and to be able to think critically in the sense of Adorno's and Horkheimer's thoughts. Thus, the most crucial step we need to take is to make people aware of these issues, to talk to them about that, to ask people not only to use those technologies but to find out what they want and how we all can succeed in creating free and democratic media, deprived of any influence which follows the economic interests of great enterprises. Thus, we together must find out, what can or must be done for a democratic future. I believe that even today there are ways to handle it and to influence the paths of media development and mediatisation, which are not natural, but which are the results of human decisions and practices.

If one looks at actual developments, it will be clear that they follow mainly the interests of economy and technology, and this frequently generates problems for democracy and human rights. For example, I did some research about robots, and about the whole technology concerned with that. I do not know whether you have an idea what an AIBO is: it is a Japanese robot and an everyday companion of the people. We studied 10 years ago how people communicated, played, worked and lived with them. The AIBO was an invention of the 1990s; it had an Internet connection, but did not collect data about the human beings. However, the robots of today, the dolls and artificial animals for the children collect data and send them to the producer. We see that the control and exploitation of appliances is growing. In addition, most robots of the 21st century, including self-driving cars and similar machines, are designed to make money and to reduce salaries, as they should bring income to the producer. Though robots and the Internet services like *Facebook* or *Google* may help people, today they are in each case organised to exploit and control the clients they work for. If we do not stop these huge capitalistic enterprises, then we will become more and more dependent on them. As the AIBO is showing, other robots as human companions are possible.

Similar processes had already happened after the invention of the periodical press, but at a slower pace than today. It caused many conflicts in Europe, there were farmer wars, the Reformation took place, there was the Thirty Years War in Europe and later the French Revolution creating a new form of political culture. At the end, everyday human life, economy and culture, forms of living and political conditions have changed radically, not only because of the press, but also because of mass media in general. Today, those media developments, which are basic for human life, as they may change communication, are taking place much faster, but are also demanding radical new forms of life and politics. We or at least our children will experience a lot of upcoming unrest, wars and social movements, until the digital media and especially the nets of computers are integrated into culture and society in such a way that it will be good for all.

L. H.: *So you are optimistic.*

Friedrich Krotz: I am working on that and you are working on that as well, otherwise you would not have asked me. We are at least two optimists and I hope many people have the same opinion. According to Habermas, any civil society, to which we belong, must learn to control government and bureaucracy, and the economy, too – this is the goal, which we must fulfil.

H. P.: *It becomes evident that McLuhan with his ideology concept of technological determinism was right. Taking into consideration this assumption, what are the limits now, in your opinion? Will robots replace homo sapiens or do we have any other means at our disposal to prevent that development?*

Friedrich Krotz: With the mediatisation approach, we of course refer to McLuhan. Nevertheless, I do not think McLuhan was right with his theory. Let me say, he described long-term technological development and he described it in a very creative way but he was not a researcher who did empirical studies. Instead, he created concepts, ideas and theoretical pieces. In addition, if one reads his texts in a careful way, it becomes evident that McLuhan presented many contradictory statements, e.g. once he proclaimed teachers were the most important people in the world and teachers would exist forever and then he stated that even teachers would also at some point be replaced by other forms of learning. Of course, I would not blame him for that, as thinking may change over time, but this is often difficult to understand.

Researchers of the mediatisation approach learned a lot from McLuhan, but we also tried to avoid some faults of McLuhan. For example, McLuhan's way of theoretical thinking was mono-causal and reduced to technological developments. Like Innis, he considered only one cause. To explain the development of the world by considering only one cause is difficult. The mediatisation approach considers many more contexts. Another open question is what are the differences between human-based and robot-based communication. The idea of the mediatisation approach here is that robots and humans communicate in different ways, but that robots are able to translate their conclusions into human language. Robots thus will play an important role, but they will not substitute human beings – at least, if the economy and military industry will stop producing robots that kill humans.

The mediatisation approach starts with the study of media changes – from mass media to more and more other media like individually produced ones, interactive ones, like human communication with machines and computers, and so-called social media. Mediatisation research then asks for changing forms of communication, changing forms of everyday life, economy, culture and society. The problem here is that all these processes depend on the respective culture and on social, political and economic influences and must be studied in a reconstructive way – nobody knows today where and when these processes may end. As soon as mediatisation research consists of historical research, the actual developments also depend on former developments; in actual research it is necessary to reconstruct the actual developments and in critical research to support democratic and human rights based development of media. All three forms of research are necessary.

Consequently, we can learn a lot about the actual developments. For example, if we would go back in time we would realise that up to the 20th century all the knowledge of humankind was stored either in a spoken or written language or in the heads of people. Hence, all kinds of knowledge were accessible for humankind, i.e. for every human being who could read and talk, and then learn from others. However, today this has changed. In what way? Today all the human knowledge is not saved in books or language, but rather in digital databases. In addition, we as human beings are not able to read the data stored in these databases; we cannot use them without a computer, hardware, software, providers. We always need a computer that collects the answers to our questions from the databases and translates them for us. In this way, we are becoming dependent on the organisation of data stored in computers and the owners of it, in a new way, compared with former times. If we for example want to know something we go to *Google* or any other search engine and they give us around 560.000 responses. The first five responses of *Google* are not answers, but paid advertisements. The real answers, which we need and want, come much later in the list, and often it is difficult to find them. Thus, *Google* with its algorithm is a machine in order to confuse and to manipulate people – but again, in a critical sense other developments are possible. In fact, we must bring this under control, as it is unacceptable that

one enterprise manages all human knowledge. Similar problems take place with *Facebook*. It is unacceptable that an algorithmic business manages social relations for a billion people and deals with it in any way it likes. Therefore, we are committed to say: we do want to change that.

However, we are coming to a further problem. Today we cannot say anymore, as we did before, that the Government and bureaucracy should help us and that such important services should become nationalised; Government and bureaucracy are also part of the problem, as the NSA and other secret services do the same as huge enterprises: they collect data and manipulate the people.

What we need instead are cooperative solutions, like those through which civil society in the understanding of Habermas controls the conditions under which monopolies operate. An example: Today, the monopolist is *Facebook*. Ten years ago, there were many such networks in Germany, regional ones, for example in Munich, or topical ones like *SchülerVZ* for pupils. They all cooperated, but then *Facebook* appeared and it got a monopoly, as it does not cooperate with others. Instead, *Facebook* did not allow its clients to communicate with members of other networks. *Facebook* did so from the very beginning, and then the former existing networks disappeared over time and *Facebook* got its monopoly. This gives the power to manipulate and that is the point, which we must take into consideration. Consequently, we must avoid such monopolies, and to be able to fight against them we should try to establish responsible committees of elected people independent of political parties who can be trusted by most citizens. They must represent civil society and they cannot represent the Government or the economy.

L.H.: *Do you mean academics, for example?*

Friedrich Krotz: For example, academics, as far as these people are independent, but also other independent people. These people should be experienced within this field and come from different perspectives: for example, a hacker from the German Chaos Computer Club, who is popular and who has criticised upcoming monopolies based on her or his experience, also people engaged in NGOs working against data misuse, academics, etc. The committees task would be to force *Google* (or *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*, etc.) to disclose all the internal information and the rules *Google* uses and follows. That would be the first step. From that point, civil society and all users of *Google* would really get access to every piece of information. Afterwards, these issues should be discussed and if it is necessary, changed. These are the processes I have in my mind. Consequently, we must choose the means to compel *Google* and other great enterprises to accept that. Boycott could be one of them in order to force *Google*, for example, also by boycotts against advertising enterprises. Such processes work often in the United States, as there is a broad movement of community communication and it can make processes like this happen. In former history, such processes took place also in Europe. Thus, our task is to build something like European community communication, or other types of community networks from the bottom up that would be able to cooperate.

L. H.: *So the process can be started only from the bottom. We should defend ourselves only from the bottom.*

Friedrich Krotz: Only from the bottom. There is no other way.

H.P.: *Media vs social reality, the social reality will be replaced by media and modelled by so-called new media. What impact can this reality have on the forms of political campaigns?*

Friedrich Krotz: Social reality and media reality are interlinked together. We see what we know and we know what we see. Thus, with the development of the media our view of the world is also changing. The problem here again is, who or what organisations and institutions are relevant for shaping media reality. Is it a democratic process controlled by civil society or is it determined by economic and power relationships? At the moment, this problem seems to be the case, and this is what we cannot tolerate, what we must change. We must fight against rules we cannot accept. For example, if I want to become a member or a client of *Facebook*, I can do it only as an individual. You can never access *Facebook* as a group. You can only form a group

of members of *Facebook* without any further members from outside of *Facebook*. This is what *Facebook* enforces, as *Facebook* wants to know everything about its clients and wants to get everyone as a client. However, such processes should be prevented, as it is in the interest only of *Facebook* and not of the people. It should not be possible that a programme can establish such rules. At the same way, we have to fight for our individual rights in the area of privacy, data protection, network neutrality and all those areas that are relevant for the forms of our communication. Similar problems come into existence for example with *WhatsApp* – it started as a new software, it was successful and then it was bought by *Facebook* that started collecting data about all these hundreds of millions of users against all other promises. Perhaps, this may be generalised. Nowadays, if an entrepreneur wants to be successful, she or he must not use any content, but has to construct a new medium where certain forms of communicative acts may take place: communication with friends, communication by pictures in the case of *Instagram*, communication for the moment as with *Snapchat*. It is very important to inform people about all these issues and to talk about them with them. In this way, all people become more and more aware of the fact that actual forms of life will change rapidly, and that they should not just follow what happens, but search for what they need and are interested in. I think, we are in the very early stages of this process and people do not know exactly what is going on.

L. H.: *But there are people who say Facebook should be boycotted in case they undertake steps people do not agree with.*

Friedrich Krotz: Sure, there are such people. Again, there is a problem; in this case a generational one. It concerns mostly elder people who have problems with *Facebook* and these problems usually are of such a kind: we do not need that, it is nonsense to use that. There are discrepancies between the different age groups and generations. The elder ones refuse to see the advantages; the younger ones just use what appears to them to be useful. The elder people do not see that such forms of communications may be helpful and sense making, and the younger ones do not see that centralised forms of communication as on *Facebook* may generate serious problems. Between these different groups, there are no close contacts. In addition, here I would like to mention the critique concerning parents who always say that they do not need these IT technologies, that they are not interested in all modern appliances and their possibilities. As parents do not have any experience with them, they do not know what can be done with them; and then they can even not speak to younger people about that, as they will not take them seriously. Then five years later the parents use these media too, but the opportunity to get into contact with the younger generations is lost. We must do something to change the situation, as elder people and younger people need an exchange.

H. P.: *Who decides on the standpoints and ideas in the wholly centralised Internet? Who are the forces behind the Internet? Does the medialisation of social reality, in your opinion, represent a danger for humankind, or not?*

Friedrich Krotz: Mediatisation in general is not a danger for people. Only specific paths and decisions of mediatisation may be dangerous for human rights and democracy. The forms in which new media are implemented and controlled may also be dangerous. The process of mediatisation includes chances and risks, and it is the job of academic research to find out: risks for whom, chances for whom? Software for being in contact with friends such as *Facebook* or *WhatsApp* – this may be organised as a chance for people and an enforcement for democracy, but at the moment *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* are against human rights and democracy, as they try to control and exploit human communication. This is what we must change.

In order to change that we must do everything possible, I guess; it may even be necessary to break the rules set by *Facebook* or *WhatsApp* and similar portals. Let me explain that. *Facebook* wants to sell our communication to advertisers, and thus they try to collect all data they can get. In order to evaluate her or him, *Facebook* wants every person to have only one account. I, for example, have two accounts; thus, *Facebook* cannot put different data about me together. These are effective forms of civil resistance, and such forms are necessary. Hence, in order to get ownership of our data back, it would be good if many people would do that or start with similar activities of civil resistance.

H. P.: *What is in your opinion the meaning of the term "media culture"?*

Friedrich Krotz: There are many types of culture: anthropological, aesthetic, philosophical, etc. For the purposes discussed here, the answer is simple. Everything that belongs to, let us say, the production of meaning and that belongs to symbolic forms of interaction is what people understand under culture, and media culture today means that culture is heavily influenced by media. This in addition is the reason why the former media culture more and more becomes a mediatised culture, which consists of a computer-controlled digital infrastructure of communication and symbolic interaction. That is why I use the term "mediatised". Without referring to media, it is impossible to explain what is going on with culture. Therefore, we live in a mediatised society and when we do not consider media then we cannot understand and explain anything. Media are not at the periphery of society, they are at its core and everywhere. This is what we must explore and this is what we must change in order to support human rights, democracy and the interests of a civil society.

H. P.: *Do you mean culture in general?*

Friedrich Krotz: Yes. Even the church has become in-between a part of media, the TV set in the church, media calling Islam believers to pray. Even schools and parliaments are mediatised. All fundamental parts of society are mediatised. And our task is to regulate this process.

L. H. and H. P.: *Thank you for the interview.*

The interview was given at the international conference Megatrends and Media that took place on 19th – 20th April 2016 at the Smolenice Castle and elaborated on the base of the verbal version.

Prepared by Hana Pravdová and Ľubica Hulajová