Considering religion and mediatisation through a case study of 
J + K’s big day (The J K wedding entrance dance):
A response to Stig Hjarvard

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This article reviews the strengths and weaknesses of Hjarvard’s theory of the
mediatisation of religion. By suggesting actor-network theory as a
methodological approach to the study of the mediatisation of religion, this
article proposes a case study of the viral wedding video, J K wedding
entrance dance, to highlight problems with the assertion that the media are
replacing or displacing religion’s authoritative role in society. Drawing upon
recent theories of how digital and mobile media are reshaping society by
enabling participation, remediation and bricolage. I suggest instead that
the media do not bring about secularisation, but rather that the media are
contributing to a personalisation of what it means to be religious (or not).
This article thus introduces an alternative definition to the concept of
mediatisation: that mediatisation may be understood as the process by which
collective uses of communication media extend the development of
independent media industries and their circulation of narratives, contribute to
new forms of action and interaction in the social world and give shape to how
we think of humanity and our place in the world.

Keywords: mediatisation; personalisation; secularisation; actor-network
theory; wedding; viral video

Introduction

Sociologists have long grappled with the questions of how to understand the role of
human actors and social structures in change. As we see in his article, Hjarvard’s
(2009) work on mediatisation aims to address the role that media play in relation to
the long-term transformative processes of high modernity. He wishes to identify
how media operate in ways that are interdependent with, yet also distinct from,
processes such as individualisation, urbanisation, globalisation and secularisation.
He argues that this question of the role of the media in social change represents a
break from the more dominant thrust within media studies towards a focus on
media messages, the institutions that create them, and the people who serve as their
consumers and audiences, although as I have noted elsewhere, questions of the
media’s role in social change have long been a focus among those within the field

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of medium theory and among media and cultural historians (Clark 2005). However, Hjarvard is to be commended for the efforts to develop precision within a theoretical approach regarding how media participate in social change, particularly in relation to religion.

This article begins by addressing the three main points of Hjarvard’s theory of the mediatisation of religion, highlighting what I believe are the theory’s weaknesses and strengths. I then introduce the empirical example that will illuminate my arguments concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the mediatisation argument: an analysis of the viral wedding video, the *JK wedding entrance dance*. I conclude with suggestions regarding future directions for the development of what Hjarvard has termed the ‘meso’ level theorising of mediatisation.

Hjarvard makes three arguments regarding how the mediatisation of religion may entail the transformation of religion. First, he argues that the media have become an important source of information about religious issues and have become a platform for the expression of beliefs. Second, he argues that religious information and experiences inevitably become subsumed within a ‘media logic’, with religious experiences and information coming to resemble forms borrowed from popular media genres. And third, he argues that the media have ‘taken over’ many of the cultural and social functions of institutionalised religions. Ultimately, he argues that the processes of mediatisation are, therefore, contributing to the secularisation of western societies.

To begin with the first point, there is little doubt that many people are able to rely upon communication media for information about religion that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, as people have greater access to information about a wider variety of topics now than ever before. Hoover (1997, 1998, 2006) has traced the ways in which the US news media have come to define and frame religious issues and has also noted that the rise in independent media institutions in late modernity has signalled an intensification of media’s role in giving shape to contemporary religion. This part of Hjarvard’s argument is thus well supported in the existing literature.

In his second point, Hjarvard argues that all institutions of society are subsumed within a ‘media logic’, a concept borrowed from Altheide and Snow’s (1979) analysis of how the rise of the broadcast industry enforced new ways of telling stories that enabled some institutions to receive greater visibility than others in the realm of television. He relates this to a rise of what he calls ‘banal religion’, a concept that aims to fuse what Bellah (1967) termed ‘civil religion’, referring to religious practices fused with nationalistic identity (prayer and flags at civil events, political leaders participating in religious services, etc.); and what Primiano (1995) termed ‘vernacular religion’ and Lippy (1994) termed ‘popular religion’, each referring to elements associated with folk religion that enter circulation through popular culture. His argument that media borrow from religious and folk religious narratives that are then articulated through the genres of popular television echoes my own analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the representation of religion in horror films and video games (Clark 2005).
tural historians (Clark 2005).

Yet Hjarvard goes on to argue that when the producers of such popular media as the *Twilight* or *Indiana Jones* series make ‘implicit’ references to religion or utilise religion as a ‘backdrop’, this ‘challenges the authority of existing religious institutions’. I question whether this is indeed an instance of how the media diminish the authority of religion. It may be, as I have suggested elsewhere, that what we are witnessing with the popularity of fictional storylines involving death, the afterlife and the supernatural is not an example of the increasing power of the media replacing the power of religion to tell stories, but an example of how the media are *mediating* rather than *causing* secularisation (Clark 2005). The issue is not that people are taking the stories of the media more seriously than the stories of religion, but that the stories of religion (especially of folk religions) are taken *less* seriously and hence can enter the realm of fictional representation unproblematically. Thus, some stories that have to do with religion – namely, those that are delegitimated – are ripe for borrowing, whereas other religious symbols still hold the power to generate controversy when referenced in ways deemed inappropriate by powerful religious communities (the cartoons of Muhammed and Serrano’s *Piss Christ* are two infamous examples).

Moreover, borrowing the tropes and themes of religion for dramatic effect is not a new process of late modernity, but dates at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which was one of the first mass-produced books in US history. And, in fact, religious narratives have long borrowed from the genres of drama and entertainment, notably in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards in the dramatic preaching of the First Great Awakening (Clark 2005). The borrowing of religious narratives as sources within the genres of entertainment produced by the fictional book, film, television and gaming industries over the past 200-plus years demonstrates that mediatisation does not bring about secularisation so much as it gives to secularisation a particular structure of feeling for our age; in other words, the media mediate secularisation, as trends of secularisation and mediatisation (e.g. the increased circulation of stories and interpersonal communication through independent industries) interact to enable certain cultural meanings and reinforce the delegitimation of others.

Hjarvard’s third point that the media have ‘taken over’ some of the functions of religion and that media contribute to the development of secular views and practices is, therefore, the most problematic of the three points. I will argue instead that communication media, as well as other forms of cultural mediation, may be better understood as contributing to different ways of being religious (or, conversely, to differing ways of being not religious). I will further argue that in the contemporary period, the processes of mediatisation are contributing to a *personalisation* of what it means to be religious (or not). To make this argument, I propose extending the mediatisation argument to include the consideration of the emergent theories of how digital and mobile media are reshaping society by enabling participation, remediation and bricolage in cultural production in ways that seem more accessible now than in the past (Deuze 2006). Thus, I suggest
a new definition for mediatisation: that mediatisation may be understood as the process by which collective uses of communication media extend the development of independent media industries and their circulation of narratives, contribute to new forms of action and interaction in the social world and give shape to how we think of humanity and our place in the world.¹

There is a particular strength to mediatisation theory that needs to be highlighted before moving onto this discussion, however. This involves an aspect of how Hjarvard conceptualises the role of humans and communication media in relation to social change. Unlike much of the social movement theory that focuses on how certain actors intentionally seek avenues to bring about social change, mediatisation theory as outlined here is especially interested in how actors, institutions and technologies participate in bringing about social change less intentionally. In other words, mediatisation theory can be taken to imply that change occurs when various constellations of factors come together rather than when a set of stakeholders seek to mould cultural artefacts to the ends they seek. This, in turn, is consistent with approaches growing out of actor-network theory, as I have argued elsewhere (Clark 2009). Thus, I propose that actor-network theory can offer important insights into how we might develop the theory of mediatisation and how we might explore the processes of mediatisation as it relates to various aspects of social life.

Actor-network theory emerged in the early 1990s in response to the concern that sociologists had a tendency to attribute agency only to ‘a small number of powers—human powers’ (Latour 1993, 138). Yet things like diseases have effects, Latour noted, looking into the medical sciences as an example. It is not the thing (the disease), the technology (the medical treatment) or the human that has agency; it is the network as a whole that acts, effects and determines what is possible. Humans are involved in ‘local interactions’, but they are not the agents that create the networks and are, therefore, not solely responsible for what is possible. Actor-network theory has been criticised for not attending to the way the historical organisation of power can shape and limit contemporary actor networks (Alexander and Smith 2004). Yet when Latour argued that social action results from interactions between humans and non-humans, he allowed space for considering how technologies ‘act’ as elements distinct from individual human agency, in a more contingent way than is suggested within earlier models of ‘hard’ technological determinism (see also Winston 1995). The point of connection between Hjarvard’s theory and that of actor-network theory then is that both acknowledge that communications technologies are material phenomena, able to engender change in particular social practices. This is a point, Lister et al. (2002) also underscore in their book New Media: An Introduction, when they write:

New technologies do produce highly tangible changes in the way everyday life is conducted: they affect the way in which labour power is deployed, how money is invested and circulates, how business is done, how and where identities are formed and so on. In such ways, technology, both in its forms and its capacities, profoundly affects human culture…. (289–90)
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Hjarvard, like Lister and his colleagues, seeks to avoid technological determinism. Lister and his colleagues argue that cybernetics offers a helpful way to think about the role of technology in social change and this suggests an important insight for mediatisation theory as well. Cybernetics is a field of science, mathematics and engineering that is interested in prediction and control of possible outcomes. It is based on a system of negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback can be understood in relation to the example of an automatic thermostat that, to avoid overheating, turns heat off when a certain temperature is reached. Positive feedback is akin to the feedback that occurs when a microphone is too close to a speaker in an audio system; it keeps building pressure until the system (in this case the speaker) is destroyed. Cybernetics argues that all change is the product of positive feedback and thus the goal of controlling a system lies in ensuring its predictability by maximising negative feedback. Alternatives need to be eliminated, which means they exist in some sense as potential outcomes. As Lister et al. (2002) explain, ‘Cybernetic control works by eliminating possible actions rather than promoting particular ones’ (371; see also 353ff.). This introduces what Lister and colleagues, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1986), term the ‘cybernetic circuit’, which is meant to point to the lack of a beginning and end point in a system that is explained not only by interactions between humans and technologies, but rather in addition by a continuous, co-creating exchange. To put this in the terms of media cultural studies for the sake of mediatisation theory, we might say that humans and technologies are both simultaneously actors and acted upon, even if only momentarily and occasionally with unpredictable results. They operate in a relationship that is not so much collaborative (in terms of equal measures of power) as constructional (the role of power within the interaction is not always able to be disaggregated and understood).

What I am suggesting, then, is that a process of social change occurs within the network of humans, technologies and cultural practices. This change is nonlinear and is not predictable. The particular affordances of a technology play a role in shaping its possible uses and outcomes. And the actual collective human uses of technologies, in concert with the financial interests that shape their availability, cohere to amplify certain uses over others. This, in turn, shapes a cultural environment that then lends itself to a new physically rendered technology and to new ways of thinking of ourselves and our humanity (Hayles 1999). ‘Technique engenders technique’, as Eliot (1954, 87) put it; yet in this case, we might say that technology, human and culture are all co-constructed, constituting and mediating each other in ways that open up new possibilities for thinking and acting. This insight lies at the heart of mediatisation theory, as I would reconstruct it, as I will note below.

Following efforts in cultural sociology, those seeking to develop a theory of mediatisation may best avoid the temptation of media determinism by paying attention to specific case studies, for theoretical precision grows out of close attention to the details (Alexander 2008; Goffman 1956, 1974, 1979;
Griswold 2008a). Focusing on a case study, of course, risks moving from a ‘meso’ to a ‘micro’ level of analysis. Yet such a move is necessary, for theory must build from an understanding of how human actors play a role in ‘translating cultural structures into concrete actions and institutions’ (Alexander and Smith 2004).

In seeking to understand the role of media in social change, the question is how are we to understand the interlocking mechanisms – human, technological and institutional – through which particular change has come about? A case study has the benefit of providing a specific storyline, a narrative through which we might interrogate particularities within a more general theory. Case studies also have the benefit of bringing to the fore the need for definitions and further questions of the general theory, such as, in this case: whose religion are we talking about? Which media do we have in mind? And what do we mean by change? We turn now to our case study to shed light on these questions.

The J K wedding entrance dance

Like many contemporary brides and grooms, Kevin Heintz and Jill Peterson of St Paul, Minnesota, secured a videographer to record the proceedings of their wedding on 20 June 2009, including their procession down the aisle. But the bride, groom and wedding party had planned a surprise entrance for their wedding. Once the ushers closed the church doors to signal the beginning of the procession, Chris Brown’s 2008 release Forever began to play on the church’s speakers and the ushers joyfully threw into the air the printed programmes they had been handing out to wedding guests. The ushers, groomsmen and bridesmaids then danced in pairs down the aisle to the music, employing lightly choreographed dance moves. The procession culminated as groom Kevin Heintz tumbled down the aisle, followed by a solo danced entrance by bride Jill Peterson.

People attending were so enchanted by the spontaneity and joyousness of the wedding march that they encouraged Kevin and Jill to share the recorded dance with others. So, on 19 July 2009, Kevin’s father uploaded it to YouTube – or at least, so the story goes. Within 11 days of that upload, the video had a view count of 13 million views. Ashton Kutcher claimed that his 23 July tweet about the wedding march 4 days after its initial upload had increased the views from 12,500 to 1.2 million views 12 hours later (Fou 2009). Then, ostensibly as a result of the inordinate number of views the video had received, on 25 July, NBC’s The Today Show hosted all of the members of the wedding party on the programme to recreate the dance, which in turn further drove up the views for the video on YouTube.

Soon, the dance became a media phenomenon of its own and was widely copied in a variety of venues both professional and informal. A group of television news anchors at Columbia, South Carolina’s WIS-TV imitated the dance after reporting on the wedding party’s visit to The Today Show earlier that day. By 29 July 2009, a mere 10 days after its upload, the video had inspired
a parody in the form of a divorce entrance dance, professionally produced by a New York City production company as part of a promotional effort they launched to demonstrate their prowess in producing a viral video. The popular Dancing With the Stars programme on Australia’s channel 7 featured cast members recreating the dance on their television programme the following week. Within several months, someone with the YouTube channel name Brag Pitt had posted a lego-version of the dance. In early October 2009, the dance made an appearance on Jim and Pam’s wedding in the popular NBC programme The Office. Within a year of its original upload, the JK wedding entrance dance had reached nearly 52 million views.

By the fall of 2009, wedding planners reported that couples referenced the JK wedding entrance dance when discussing their own plans for wedding processions and entrances to wedding receptions (Smith 2009). Experts studying wedding rituals noted that whereas creating a dance for a couple’s entrance to the reception was not new, the danced procession in a church setting was fairly unusual (Smith 2009). Throughout the summer and fall of 2009 as evidenced by excerpts on YouTube, couples were designing, rehearsing and uploading their own wedding and wedding reception entrance dances. Some found that dances they had recorded earlier were suddenly easy to find as they were linked with the JK video through YouTube’s recommendations feature. Elana and Simmy’s wedding entrance dance (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty6o452DKvA&feature=related), for instance, set to the Black Eyed Peas’ I Gotta Feeling and taking place in the Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah Hebrew Congregation outside Baltimore in fall 2009, had been seen by more than 100,000 viewers within a year of the JK video thanks to its recommendation status. Other couples, such as Bryce and Amie Kensington, who posted a recording of their own 1980s-themed danced entrance to the Black Eyed Peas’ Boom Boom Pow mere weeks after the JK posting and whose video was similarly recommended, had to endure hurtful comments under their YouTube video that implied that they were ‘copycats’. Older wedding dance videos, such as a 2007 reception entrance danced to Michael Jackson’s Thriller, enjoyed a resurgence of interest once linked to the JK video on YouTube. These older, revived wedding videos as well as more recent renditions immediately before and after the JK video signalled that the JK phenomenon was not new, but was rather tapping into something that had been going on for a long time: the personalisation of wedding ceremonies and the use of videotape to record and preserve those experiences.

Actors in the actor network

The humans and the technology

Jennifer and Kevin were reportedly as surprised as most members of the public when they learned of their wedding video’s viral success. To them, it was not at all unusual that they would videotape their wedding ceremony and then seek to share it with friends and relatives. Indeed, one survey found that 55% of brides
noted that they believed that it was important to have their wedding videotaped and that figure jumped to 75% of those who spent more than $30,000 on their wedding, indicating that videotaping a wedding has become an accepted practice even among the well-to-do (WEVA 2005). The practice of videotaping wedding ceremonies had first become popular 30 years earlier, when home video recorders first became inexpensive and widely available. Yet in the 1980s when first introduced, videotaping a wedding was fairly controversial. Many viewed the practice as more intrusive and commercial than the standard wedding photographer, who usually only took limited shots during the actual ceremony but confined most of the photographing to before and after the ceremony. The common use of videotaping within wedding ceremonies today is one indication of how recording technologies have become acceptable, or ‘domesticated’, in today’s context of a popular ceremony (see Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, on the domestication of technologies). Videotaping a wedding has also become a way in which brides and grooms can produce a cultural text about their union and thereby document its uniqueness through personalisation.

Religion and personalisation

Weddings are rites of passage, defined by Grimes (2002, 2) as ‘a symbolic action intended to mark a transition in the human life cycle’. Such rites are not necessarily first and foremost ‘religious’ activities, although around the world religious often provide the contexts and structure for such rites. Although religious authorities have long had a hand in the institution of marriage and in the marriage rite, today’s western wedding ceremony with its celebration of grandeur has its roots as much in Victorian traditions and fantasies as in a religious rite. Smith (2009) notes that prior to the Victorian era, few people had weddings in religious settings. Relocating weddings from other public or private places to religious locations was less an evidence of increased religiosity among the populace during the Victorian era than a measure of the desire to capitalise on an available and convenient space that lent majesty to an event (Mead 2007; Pleck 2000; Ottes and Pleck 2003; Coontz 2006). Yet, since weddings bring into religious buildings the people who would otherwise never enter them save for a funeral, they are perhaps an apt example of what Hjarvard terms as activities of ‘weak’ religion, when what Davie (1994) characterises as the ‘believing without belonging’ populations of western Europe participate in religious events.

Interestingly, although religious leaders have long had differing reactions to the extravagances of the western wedding, over time it has become more acceptable to be a participant in, rather than censor of, the extravagance. In 1966, for instance, a pastor of a large Presbyterian church in Atlanta was quoted in the Saturday Evening Post as saying:

I constantly preach that simplicity in weddings is in good taste. I tell the parents of brides that their daughters would rather have love than a lavish display of wealth. Protestantism has given way too much to individual whim and pomp and ceremony
their wedding videotaped for more than $30,000 on their home video recorders in the 1980s when first versial. Many viewed the standard wedding ceremony as a ‘domesticated’, in its celebration of grandeur tastes as in a religious rite. People had weddings in public or private places to express religiosity among the desire to capitalise on an event (Mead 2007; 1966, in Atlanta was quoted in the wedding video. I tell the parents of a lavish display of wealth, trim and pomp and ceremony and this is eroding away any meaning the church should have. (Davidson 1966, 34; Mills 1969)

Nearly a half century ago, Mills (1969) documented that other clergymen were similarly banning floral displays and encouraging frugality, suggesting that people should have receptions in the parish hall or forego them altogether. Some churches even sent out printed instructions for prospective brides, including information such as which musical selections were appropriate within the ceremony and which were not.

This historical example offers an interesting contrast to today’s growing industry of professional wedding planners, some of whom, like the Rev. Tomkin Coleman, identify themselves as a ‘wedding minister and ceremony designer’. Coleman notes on his website that he aims to work with couples to design a wedding ‘personalised, customised and coordinated with great care and attention to detail, perfectly fulfilling your dreams and beliefs’, offering the slogan: ‘A love like no other. A wedding ceremony to match’ (see http://www.mnweddingminister.com/). Similarly, on their website Pastors Bob and Barbara note that they want to ‘create a wedding ceremony just for you – a beautiful, unique and romantic wedding ceremony that reflects your personal style’ (http://www.weddingministerct.com/). More typical are the clergypersons called upon to officiate over wedding extravaganzas who do so with some measure of ambivalence, offering and sometimes strongly encouraging premarital counselling as a condition of officiating as a means of helping participants to focus on the marriage rather than solely on the wedding.

The point that the J K wedding entrance dance raises is that relevant for the development of a theory of the mediaisation of religion is this: adherence to religion, or even the more bland decision to allow religion to play a symbolic role within the important events of one’s life, is about much more than ‘information’, belief systems, institutions and religious leaders. As Lovheim notes in her article in this issue, the notion of lived religion encourages us to pay attention to how people and groups attach religious meanings to practices that are embedded in the contexts of their life-worlds. Lived religion proponents remind us that religious institutions themselves were never the sole or even the primary sources of ‘information’ about what it means to act in religiously meaningful ways, but rather these actions were learned from people who are important to us within our personal networks and they are always enacted in specific contexts. This is why I stress that a theory of mediatisation must recognise the power in collective actions that contribute to social change.

What I am arguing here, then, is not that the J K wedding entrance dance is the mark of a religious ritual changed by media; in fact I am not arguing that such rituals are always or even primarily ‘religious’, as I have noted. However, I believe that the J K wedding video is an example of a media phenomenon directly contributing to the personalisation trend in American weddings and other similar religiously inflected rituals. The personalisation trend within such rituals requires
a form of what I have elsewhere termed emotional work, often on the part of women who negotiate the 'moral economy', or the space between domestic concerns and public life and who utilise communication technologies in this process (Clark 2010). Whereas the general trend towards personalisation in various avenues of life is well documented, the connection between this trend and contemporary arenas of media and cultural production is not. Thus, mediatisation theory might be helpful in getting us to raise questions that are more subtle than whether or not media are or are not participating in social change, focusing our attention on how media are contributing towards social change that is already underway as enacted collectively and how the media may be facilitating cultural production that, in turn, contributes to, extends and intensifies such existing social trends.

**The media and the marketplace**

Several marketing analysts have suspected that the speed at which the *J K wedding entrance dance* video went ‘viral’ was not completely organic, but was rather helped along by Sony, holder of the rights to Chris Brown’s song *Forever* (see Fou 2009; Harloush 2009; Van Buskirk 2009; Virzi 2009). There is little doubt that the song and singer have benefitted from the free publicity since the video’s release. What many may not realise, however, is that as the copyright holder, Sony would have immediately discovered the unauthorised use of the Chris Brown song, as they are participants in Google’s automated ContentID feature that is designed to spot such copyright violations (Oshiro 2009). At some point early in the video’s circulation, therefore, Sony, or perhaps Chris Brown and his people, chose to capitalise on the *J K* video rather than block it. A *Wired* magazine writer commented that in this move, Sony demonstrated that it had learned from the prior success of viral videos and seemingly decided to monetise the success of the video for themselves. Rather than demanding that the video be taken down for infringement of copyright, Sony started running text ads and click-to-buy links under the video shortly after it began airing on 19 July 2009 (Van Buskirk 2009). Someone from Sony PR may have also adjusted the viral video’s soundtrack, as the music on this video sounds as if it has been dubbed or added after the original video had been shot; as one commentator noted: ‘the sound is too consistent in volume and loudness to have come from a built-in, on-camera microphone’ (Fou 2009).

Sony had much to gain in the rehabilitation of its former star. The song *Forever*, which had originally debuted in July 2008, had peaked in popularity that summer, but Brown had spectacularly fallen from favour after he was charged with domestic violence in a high-profile February 2009 incident involving his then-girlfriend R&B star Rihanna just before that year’s Grammy celebrations (Cruz 2009). With the circulation of the *J K* video in July 2009 and after, Brown’s song surged to the number 4 spot on the iTunes chart and number 3 on Amazon by the end of July. Any search for the *J K wedding dance* on YouTube
now includes advertisements, ‘buy now’ options and an autoplay box that enables the viewer to listen to the next song in what came to be titled the ‘Chris Brown Mix’.

Few analysts have doubted that the video itself was the authentic product of a creative act on the part of Jill and Kevin and their entourage, but digital analyst Augustine Fou posted what he termed a ‘digital forensics’ exercise that identified 13 points of evidence suggesting that the video’s viral circulation was manufactured rather than something that had developed naturally out of human interest and sharing (Fou 2009). Most tellingly, he traced measures of ‘social intensity’ in Technorati, Delicious, Reddit, Digg and other sites that track social sharing and demonstrated that there was ‘not enough organic sharing to support a view count of 13 million views in 11 days,’ noting that bit.ly, the site that offers shortened URLs, showed only 463,000 clicks on its shortened URL rather than the reported several million. Fou also documented that after 3.5 days of retweets, the ‘twitter intensity’ related to the wedding dance died off, which would not have happened in the case of a video genuinely circulated among people rather than one promoted by music execs. He further pointed out that the video did not make Twitter’s list of ‘trending topics’ within the two weeks following the video’s uploading, another measure of how often people are sharing the video. It could be that Sony execs, Chris Brown’s representatives, or others were simply pulling up the video multiple times to heighten the view count, but Fou argued that the key turning point for the video was when Chris Brown and Sony made the decision to promote the video on YouTube. That pushed the video to the front page of YouTube where it remained in a spot that is viewed by 30 million unique visitors each day. Visitors clicked, numbers increased and once the major media began to spot the high view counts, they amplified the effect by reporting on it, which then triggered more sharing and visits to the wedding dance’s page.

Those in marketing who analyse the role of viral videos in promoting products saw this experience as a new turn in the role of brand managers, as one analyst noted:

A brand manager’s role now involves spotting vehicles like video that can help a brand gain momentum... Marketers will need to develop a skill to differentiate the real gems from the thousands of other videos out there that can give their brand an extra boost. (Hafoush 2009)

Thus, an analysis of media design and market influences helps to explain why the video garnered such widespread success so quickly. The point is this: Jennifer and Kevin and their wedding entourage were not the first to dance down the aisle, but it was the first time that such a dance was captured and circulated widely on YouTube with an assist from a major industry that stood to gain from its circulation. Thus, their participation in cultural production enabled others to similarly consider how video and the accoutrements of popular culture, including its music, might be used to personise their own weddings and celebrate the
uniqueness of their own union. And it also shed light on how major players in today’s media landscape might benefit from such cultural productions as well.

Mediatisation: A change in religion?

The J K wedding entrance dance is quite different from most of the phenomena discussed in the mediatisation literature. Yet in its widespread circulation, it is consistent with the kinds of cultural products analysed in relation to studies of cultural and social change (see e.g. Clark 2005, 2007, 2008; Griswold 2000, 2008b). This viral video is not directly associated with either the commercial realm or with religious institutions and their leaders (although it is not divorced from these, as I have noted). It is also at some remove from what Bellah termed civil religion or what Hjarvard terms ‘banal religion’. The J K video and its circulation is an interesting instance of cultural production, in that it highlights a situation in which human actors participate in creating cultural meanings in a specific context by utilising means afforded through new technologies associated with YouTube.

As human actors participated in cultural production through the production and circulation of the J K YouTube video phenomenon, this phenomenon demonstrates how digital media are contributing to the personalisation trend in American weddings. This case illuminates the significance of new media within personalisation trends of religion, while also drawing attention to the fallacy of assigning all aspects of this cultural development to new media. In this sense, the example illustrates the kind of precision that I believe is necessary in further developing a theory of mediatisation.

What is interesting about the case of J K’s wedding entrance dance in relation to religious change is that this is hardly an instance of people who are a part of a movement that seeks to change the wedding ritual writ large, let alone religion. Rather, this case highlights the confluence of factors that enable the creativity of human actors to be generative beyond their own immediate situation in ways they neither intended nor could foresee. Jennifer and Kevin and friends may have been self-conscious performers, but these are not people who sought to inject the profane into the sacred. They did not set out to challenge what either church leadership or society might deem to be a ‘proper’ wedding entrance. They wanted to provide astonishment and delight for their friends and family as a means of making their wedding unique and memorable, embracing an element of surprise that was heightened by unexpectedness as the dance occurred within what is usually a rather predictable march down the aisle.

The fact that the video of this unexpected and delightful dance has caught the attention of so many around the world tells us that such actions can be understood as part of a wider movement towards social change that is being taken up both by those who have no stake in changing things as well as by those who do. In light of the large numbers of people worldwide who might be described as only marginally intentional when it comes to religion, this lack of intentionality and its role in fostering developments that have lead to greater personalisation within
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religion seems to raise key questions we might hope that scholarship in the mediatisation of religion will seek to address.

The J K wedding entrance dance video is also a reminder that religion today is being transformed in relation to a larger shift that places religious symbols and practices into the realm of commodities. Power in relation to religion may be decentralised today, as anyone can design their own ‘personal’ wedding rite, but such rites and their design are not properly described as democratised due to the widespread influence of the market. At the same time, what we see in the viral wedding video is not an undermining of a religious tradition, but rather an extension and a renewal of an important form of religious ceremony as it is embedded into a new context and wrapped in new meanings. The location in the church or synagogue enables participants to sacralise their union, to attach ultimate significance to the union and to express and experience cultural meaning through the aesthetic processes enacted in relation to it (Lynch in press).

As such, this viral video and other forms of cultural production it inspires have become a participant in the actor network of the religious ritual of the wedding. Actor-network theory enables us to map relations that are simultaneously material and semiotic, that include technologies, peoples’ experiences and the interests of stakeholders and that draw our attention to the particular constellation of how these factors relate to one another in specific moments. This particular viral wedding video and the ways in which it expresses a trend towards personalisation and circulates through collective action (even if given a head start by a major corporation), demonstrates the affordances of technologies and highlights the circulation of religious symbols and practices within the realm of commodities. It, therefore, offers a complex example of mediatisation and of a transformation currently underway in relation to a particular religious practice.

It is not so much that this particular phenomenon contributed to social change, therefore, but rather, that this event could not have had the worldwide resonance it did without the confluence of communication technologies and a supportive cultural context that is increasingly embracing personalisation within religiously framed rituals such as that of the contemporary wedding. In this sense, I believe that this example highlights three changes consistent with mediatisation theory: (1) that the media extend human communication and interaction beyond immediate time and space; (2) that the media and existing forms of communication amalgamate with one another and (3) that religious symbols can be reframed in relation to commercialised popular culture rather than in relation to traditions associated solely with the institutions of religion. The one claim that the case calls into question is the argument that through mediatisation, the media may become a substitute for existing forms of interpersonal communication and interaction. As this case demonstrates at least one instance in which the media facilitate the extension of existing human relationships across time and space, it suggests that there may be more incentive among human actors to utilise new media in ways that intensify rather than replace human
relationships – a finding consistent with numerous studies of digital media and its uses (see e.g. Livingston 2009; Ito et al. 2009; Watkins 2008).

Furthermore, as this case explores an example made possible through the affordances of digital media, the concept of ‘media logics’ is less applicable than it may have been in earlier studies of television news and fiction that considered how the genres of television dictated the contours of representation for other institutions of society. What is more interesting in this case is the paradoxical way in which digital media afford both immediacy and longevity: they enable widespread circulation of cultural phenomena quickly through collective processes, even as the cultural products that are available online can remain available indefinitely. People come to see themselves as participants in cultural production, persons who are able to demonstrate their uniqueness through personalisation. Then, by allowing others to view examples of their uniqueness, others can be inspired to participate in remediation and bricolage: the passing along and mixing of cultural products to develop their own innovative expressions of uniqueness. Thus, these cultural products become part of a circuit of culture, enabling greater personalisation while also drawing the attention of those large-scale media industries that would seek to benefit from social actions.

Studies of mediatisation, therefore, can help us clarify otherwise unexpressed relations of power that can undermine our human ability to be in relation with one another. It is for this reason that scholars of religion will want to pay attention to the transformations of religions within which mediatisation is playing a role. We need to understand how communication media mediate, just as we need linguistics to understand how language mediates or material cultural studies to understand how cultural products mediate, so that we can better understand the nature of changes within society, culture and power so that, in turn, we can take responsibility for addressing what is disempowering and empowering in our collective lives.5

Mediatisation: Future directions

As this case study illustrates, mediatisation theory will benefit as it moves beyond its focus on television and embraces emergent theories of cybernetics as a means of understanding the relationships between communication technologies, humans and social change. A focus on the inordinate power of television and its industries has been a problem that theorists of mediation have sought to address for many years now (see Livingston 2009; Silverstone 2005; Williams 1977). By bringing to attention the ways in which human actors and cultural patterns contribute to and reinforce the development of media industries that benefit from social practice, these scholars foreshadowed the many contemporary discussions of networked meaning that have emerged in relation to new media and the study of related cultural production processes (see Alexander and Smith 2004; Castells 2000; Latour 2008). These arguments now need to be taken into consideration in relation to a theory of mediatisation. I have suggested that a focus on the affordances of differing communication technologies and their

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Furthermore, rather than focusing on media content and the dissemination of religious views through various media, a fruitful new direction might include focusing on how differing media forms provide new metaphors for understanding communication and even humanity, following the work of Peters (2001). Peters has noted that our concepts of media and of communication have always been concerned with how we address ourselves to the unresolvable problem of disconnect: we all want to feel connected to others and to experience true intimacy, but there is always ultimately some gap to bridge. Communication, Peters argues, is the means by which we envision bridging that gap and communication technologies provide metaphors that enable us to conceptualise both the gap and its bridge. Whereas communication may be linked to how we envision that bridging, talk of religion may be one way in which we articulate the experience of and desire to bridge that gap, whether we conceptualise the gap as one between ourselves and other persons (living or dead), between ourselves and divine Others, or between ourselves and an experience of enlightenment (e.g. consider the link between the words communion, community and communication). The term 'medium' itself is a prime example of conceptual connections between communication and religion. Emerging in the nineteenth century as a term employed to suggest the bridging of space and time through the telegraph, the term was also employed by spiritualists of that day to refer to individuals understood to be gifted in the ability to bridge space and time and to bring the living into contact with the dead. 'Dreams of bodiless contact were a crucial condition not only of popular discourse but of technical invention as well', as Peters argues (2001, 104). Thus, ultimately, I agree with Hjarvard that the media are playing a role in changing religion, but rather than changing religion's content, I believe particular media may be giving shape to our perceptions of what religion is and how we think and talk about it. A focus on perception reminds us that religion is not a universal, static thing, but rather that our understandings and definitions of religion are dynamic and relative to time and place. In other words, the very idea of religion changes as we change.

One of the interesting things about this case study of cultural production in relation to increased personalisation within religiously inflected rituals is that it suggests that whether or not mediatisation is a source of secularisation, or mediating secularisation, mediatisation may equally be understood to be an integral part of the continuation of religion in cultural practice. Media are not replacing but rather reconstituting religion's role within the important ritual moments of life. If we consider religion to be less about institutions and more about culturally meaningful relationships (with other humans and/or divine Others and en route to connection and/or enlightenment), we can then recall the need to think of communication media as enabling us to envision how we might bridge the gaps that separate us. Thus, rather than removing religion's role within meaning systems, media create new ways for us to consider how we might bridge
these inevitable gaps and how we might identify our places in relation to others and our world.

Notes

1. This definition borrows from but also elaborates upon Thompson’s idea of ‘mediatisation’ introduced in 1995. I place this citation in the footnotes to avoid even more possible confusion of mediatization, mediation, and mediaisation as terms that describe somewhat overlapping and somewhat distinct processes. The difference between my work and Thompson’s is twofold: first, I am interested in exploring the affordances of technology, or what particular communication technologies make possible at specific times. Therefore, my work aims to incorporate an historical understanding of social change into Thompson’s social theory. Second, I am interested in how collective human actions double back to intensify the development of independent media industries and their circulation.

2. Some, such as Fox (2009), dispute the claim that it was Kevin’s father who uploaded the video on 19 July, noting that it could have been someone from within Sony or within Chris Brown’s entourage that uploaded that version of the video, or at least re-uploaded it with a corrected and more palatable sound mix and then selected that video numerous times to push up its measure of recorded views.

3. Livingstone (2009) suggests the syllogism between media studies’ interests in studying how communication media mediate, linguists’ interests in studying how language mediates, and consumption studies’ interests in studying how material goods mediate. I thank her for this insight.

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