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Mediated recognition: Identity, respect, and social justice in a changing media environment

1 Introduction

This special issue focuses on the various ways in which media and communication technologies play a role in struggles for recognition. In a nutshell, recognition is about identity formation, acknowledgement, and creating social order. The aim is to highlight how media and communication technologies are increasingly important infrastructures and platforms for recognition struggles as well as to situate broader questions of recognition within the field of media and communication research. As such, the special issue seeks to contribute to our understanding of the mediated nature of recognition, as afforded and co-shaped by technology, genre conventions, and circulation in the public sphere.

In the following pages, we start by briefly situating the recognition theories used in this special issue. Next, we observe how those original theories and works rarely consider communication technologies and the often technologically mediated nature of intersubjective and communicative relationships, leaving many questions about the role of media, mediation, and data unanswered. Vice versa, we can also note that the media and communication literature has used recognition theories to a relatively limited extent thus far. Yet many of its research concerns (such as questions of identity and representation, citizenship, participation, solidarity and distant suffering, prestige, or activism and social justice) could be enriched by drawing on recognition theories. In sum, both recognition

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theories and media and communication studies can strongly benefit from more cross-fertilization. We will point out a few possible directions that this could take by addressing the concept of *mediated* recognition and by presenting the articles that you can find in this special issue.

2 Recognition theories

To begin with, we should clarify that this special issue is not concerned with recognition strictly defined as 'identification'. This narrower use is common in fields such as surveillance studies or machine learning research, which discuss facial recognition systems and their identification of patterns or individuals, for example. The broader use refers to aspects such as intersubjective individual identity construction, autonomy, love, mutual respect, and esteem. When those things are lacking, we speak of misrecognition. Of course, 'narrow' recognition can imply the 'broader' recognition in which we are interested. For example, the many difficulties that certain facial recognition systems have shown with *identifying* non-white subjects implies a *misrecognition* of those individuals and the groups to which they belong because they are excluded and disrespected through unequal treatment.

Space constraints prevent us from presenting a comprehensive overview of all relevant recognition theories. While we omit authors such as Judith Butler or Pierre Bourdieu (e. g., his concepts of symbolic violence or symbolic capital as prestige and recognition), our focus is mostly on Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, generally considered two of the main recognition theorists (for an overview, see McBride, 2013). In 1992, on either side of the Atlantic, they each published their own recognition theory, both instant classics in the fields of social and political theory, moral philosophy, and critical theory.

What characterizes Taylor's and Honneth's recognition theories is that they are dual in the sense that they focus on individuals' as well as on social struggles for recognition (Zurn, 2015, pp. 6–7). Regarding the individual, they share as a starting point the Hegelian idea that the process of mutual recognition is fundamental for humans to build their identity and self-consciousness. We can only make sense of ourselves through our relations with others, not through introspection. As social beings, we need recognition from relevant others to gain a positive (and Taylor [1992] would add 'authentic') sense of self. According to Taylor (1992), this need is vital to humans. A lack of recognition, or misrecognition, can cause serious harm:

> Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (p. 25)

This quote also exemplifies the critical and political nature of Taylor's and Honneth's recognition theories, which brings us to social recognition. Taylor dubbed his 'The politics of recognition' (1992). Since Taylor's work was part of an edited collection on multiculturalism, it should not surprise that his prime focus was on questions of identity and the injuries invoked on marginalized groups through lack of representation or misrepresentations (see quote above). In this context, he observed a tension between *universal* respect or equal rights (politics of universalism) and the necessity for particular identity groups of some *specific* recognition (politics of difference). Minority and dominated groups demand the recognition of their identity or difference from the majority or dominating group. Multiculturalist, feminist, and LGBTQ-activism are prime examples. Media representations are key in such politics of recognition since they afford visibility (or the denial of it), (mis)representation, and possibilities for voice and listening.

Honneth (1995[1992]) revealed his Marxist influences by entitling his work 'The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts', although he also departed from Marx by arguing that not class conflicts but (mis)recognition is the principal motivator for social struggle. In contrast to Taylor, he supplemented universal legal recognition (respect) not with politics of difference but with people's need for love and friendship (to build self-confidence) and with a kind of solidarity that acknowledges people's contributions to society (self-esteem). A lack of respect, confidence, or esteem causes injuries and injustice, which can give cause to activism (Honneth, 1995[1992]). This does not imply that he ignores material issues, since also matters of material redistribution can be considered as questions of recognition, in his view. This led to an intriguing and widely read debate with Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), who criticized Honneth for this position and instead urged scholars to reinstate (economic) redistribution next to (cultural) recognition for assessing social struggles (see also Bertilsson and Buchwaldt-Nissen, 2004; Lovell, 2007; Thompson, 2005). Regardless of whether one agrees with Fraser or Honneth, this general framework helps us understand how social struggles can be partly centered on legal rights, political representation, and material compensation, but very often also revolve around symbolic matters: that is, how and to what extent society affirms and values certain groups' social presence through media and culture, through school curricula, historical narratives, and in the public sphere more generally.

Additional details and updates of both Taylor and Honneth are included in the five articles of this issue. To avoid repetition, we finish our contextualization of their recognition theories here by highlighting a few further critiques, rebuttals, and newer developments. This should help with using their theories as a dynamic resource and as a continuously updated body of work. Perhaps one of the strongest criticisms is Lois McNay's (2008) 'Against recognition', in which she argued that Hegelian recognition theories fail to acknowledge the centrality of power in intersubjective relationships and tend to "naturalize particular accounts of subject formation" (p. 195). Her remedy is to advance the recognition theories' rudimentary ideas on embodied subjectivity by supplementing them with Bourdieu's habitus concept. Other questions asked include what the struggle for recognition is really about (e. g., Congdon, 2020): Is it about justice (Fraser), identity (Honneth) or, as Kompridis (2007) proposed, freedom? Next, scholars have also discussed how exactly recognition can be both individual and social (e. g., Ikäheimo, in print), while special issues have focused on recognition and epistemic injustice (Giladi and McMillan, 2018), Marxist recognition theory (Schmidt am Busch, 2013), and recognition and social psychology (Amer and Obradovic, in print), to name but a few.

Finally, a critique that is particularly relevant for this special issue concerns recognition theories' centrality of intersubjectivity in recognitive relationships. Honneth, for example, restricted this to *interaction between subjects*, which excludes many types of interpersonal interactions that are mediated beyond voice but materially (Deranty, 2009). Using Jensen's (2022, p. 65) terminology, Honneth's conception of interaction is mostly limited to 'media of the first degree' or face-to-face, embodied communication. Only in some of his later work does he also pay attention to 'media of the second degree' (Jensen, 2022, p. 67), one-to-many or 'mass media', when he refers to "electronic media" (Honneth, 2014, p. 162) and their role in people's flexible modes of self-realization. Digital media, or 'media of the third degree' (Jensen, 2022, p. 69), feature equally minimally and "curiously naïve(ly)" in Honneth (Magalhães and Yu, this issue).

3 Recognition, media, and communication

In a world in which social, cultural, and political life increasingly relies on different forms of mediation, media and communication technologies constitute some of the basic conditions and infrastructures for recognition. Communication technologies and media project certain images of particular groups, who are affected by this directly and indirectly. They also provide key forums for the politics of

recognition, for example on social media, while algorithmic and metric systems manipulate what counts as recognition and how we assess it. This is all obvious to media and communication scholars. Also, the relevance of media and communication technologies for fully understanding (mis)recognition seems undeniable. Still, recognition theories very rarely consider them.

Some theorists (e. g., Markell, 2006; Tully, 2000, 2001) have mentioned how recognition plays out at a public and symbolic level. Commenting on the historical evolvement of the concept of cultural citizenship, Pakulski (1997, p. 73), for instance, pointed out that cultural citizenship's domains now start to include "symbolic representations, modes of communication and cultural recognition". Fraser (1995, p. 3) argued that cultural injustice, to which she holds recognition to be 'a remedy', is rooted in the "social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication". Others have stressed the significance of recognition in the mediated public sphere for democratic politics. Calhoun (2002), for example, stated that

> [t]he issue of democratic inclusiveness is not just a quantitative matter of the scale of a public sphere or the proportion of the members of a political community who may speak within it. While it is clearly a matter of stratification and boundaries [...], inclusiveness is also a matter of how the public sphere incorporates and recognizes the diversity of identities that people bring to it from their manifold involvement in civil society. (p. 167)

While these accounts foreground how recognition plays out at a public and symbolic level and thus implies an important role of certain media, they do not, however, theoretically specify or offer empirical substantiation of it. The ambition of this special issue is to contribute towards this task.

When we turn to media and communication studies, we can observe that while they have shown interest in questions of recognition, there has been a relatively limited and scattered integration of recognition theories. Some positive examples are contributions focusing on the 'other' (Cottle, 2007), the public sphere (Dawes, 2022; Maia, 2014), social media (Davies, 2021; Faimau, 2014; Jacobsen, in print; Jansson, 2019), public service media (Malik, 2014), ideology (Downey, 2008), musical media events (Nærland, 2019), refugees' (mis)recognition (e. g., Bonini Baldini, 2019; Georgiou, 2018, 2019), journalistic credibility (Stringer, 2018), and visibility (Thomas, Brink, Grittmann, and de Wolff, 2018). What recognition theories can bring to media and communication studies is a theoretical framework to analyze such issues in a systematic and critical way. The recognition theories add transdisciplinary insights and nuance to our understandings of concepts such as identity, autonomy, esteem, or justice, while their normative nature provides a helpful pathway to go beyond the often still dominant liberal models of democracy, participation, and freedom, for example.

Media and communication studies address recognitive relationships both as face-to-face or direct interpersonal communication and beyond. They explain how media and communication technologies have come to play a crucial role in, for example, identity formation and self-consciousness, in building intimate relationships, and in- and out-groups. Other research focuses on how media law and policies can set rules for the (proportionate) representation of certain groups in public service and/or for-profit media, or on reconfigurations of people's (self-) esteem through reputation systems and other metrics, and so on. At the same time, rapid changes in communication technologies and their uses pose new questions about how media and communication technologies condition and enable (mis)recognition. One recent issue is how humans relate to their (perhaps not so) equivalent data subjects that emerge through increased dataveillance (e. g., Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Goriunova, 2019). We can also think of the roles that algorithms play in recognitive politics, or how datafication and metric systems such as the Chinese Social Credit System are bringing the rationalization and computation of recognition to completely new levels.

4 The concept of mediated recognition

Because media and communication technologies have such a central role in, and impact on processes of recognition, it is relevant to consider the concept of *mediated recognition*. A common understanding is that mediation is not neutral, that it has certain consequences for the producer and audience: for how information can be communicated, for how it is received and interpreted, whether any feedback is possible, and that it influences the conditions for future communication (Couldry, 2008; Silverstone, 2005). In other words, we cannot limit our approach to studying the interrelationships between media technologies and recognition as a conjunctive relationship, but we must be receptive for how mediation is also changing recognition, hence the concept mediated recognition. We define this simply as *recognition through, by, and in media and communication technologies*. This definition includes previous but narrower proposals of the term mediated recognition that were principally concerned with media (re)presentations (Lorenzana, 2016; Maia, 2014) or recognition 'in' media. By adding 'by' and 'through', we try to account for the various ways in which media and communication technologies can shape recognition (e. g., metrics, data subjects, algorithms) and provide infrastructures and platforms for recognition struggles (e. g., electoral politics, cancel culture, and moral grandstanding [e. g., Grohmann, in print]).

One advantage of using the prefix 'mediated' is that it is open and does not imply specific types of media (Livingstone, 2009). In a context where many competing specifications circulate (e. g., [deeply] mediatized [Couldry and Hepp, 2017] versus digitized, datafied, or algorithmic), having one unifying denominator can increase coherence in discussions on different types of mediated recognition. It provides a space to make explicit the commonalities and shared mechanisms that explain processes of mediated recognition (whether datafied or algorithmic) while leaving room for uncovering what is unique about different communicative contexts. Furthermore, it helps to signal some degree of continuity, while adjectives such as algorithmic or datafied tend to suggest discontinuity (Driessens, in print), with mediatization exclusively focused on media-related socio-cultural *change* (e. g., Couldry, 2008; Hjarvard, 2013). This is the reason why Livingstone preferred 'mediation' as overarching term to 'mediatization', because it helps "to recognize their mutual relations and interdependencies" (Livingstone, 2009, p. 7). This is obviously not to say that we should not account for the excellent work that has been done under the label of 'mediatized' (e. g., Cottle, 2007; Jansson, 2017) and 'datafied' recognition (Campanella, this issue) or that has looked into the interrelationships between mediatization and individualization (e. g., Hjarvard, 2013).

5 Overview of the special issue

This special issue seeks to advance debates on the role of media, technology, and communication in the politics of, and struggles for, recognition. The issue does not thematically focus on one particular dimension of mediated recognition. Rather, it brings together contributions from the emergent scholarship on this nexus. The focus is on plural dimensions of how media matter for recognition and vice versa. The special issue includes contributions that both empirically and theoretically explore the intersections between media and recognition in a diversity of media genres as well as national, institutional, and technological contexts. They assess the implications of mediated recognition for questions about social justice, diversity politics, and for extant social theories of recognition. In this way, this special issue makes a concerted effort to situate questions of recognition in the field of media and communication studies and indicates avenues for further research and theorizing.

In the first article, '*Mediated recognition in campaigns for justice: The case of the Magdalene laundry survivors*', Eirik Vatnøy and Dawn Wheatley present a compelling case from recent Irish history. Through rhetorical analysis of the media campaign of the Magdalene Laundry survivors, an advocacy group, the article

details how struggles for recognition and redress can be strategically (and successfully) acted out in the media. The article demonstrates the potential of rhetorical analysis to study how demands for recognition are advocated and negotiated in the media. Tellingly, the authors show how this advocacy group's appeals for recognition (in terms of both monetary compensation and social acceptance) were successful due to the campaign's use of so-called constitutive rhetoric – framing the redress of the Magdalene survivors not only as essential to restoration of the Magdalene survivors' dignity but also as a matter of the Irish nation's dignity.

John Magnus Dahl and Torgeir Uberg Nærland's article '*Playful recognition: Television comedy and the politics of mediated recognition*' highlights how comedy can facilitate processes of recognition. Challenging commonplace understandings of mediated recognition as a matter of respectful and positive representation of subaltern groups, this article makes evident how the irreverence, subversion, and playfulness inherent to comedy also harbor potential for recognition. Empirically, the article centers on a recent humor show from Norway, aimed at young non-Western immigrants. Drawing upon both textual analysis and focus group interviews, the article develops the concept of 'playful recognition' to account for the contradictory ways in which humor can incite recognition.

'*Furries, freestylers, and the engine of social change: The struggle for recognition in a mediatized world*' by Leif Hemming Pedersen addresses key theoretical implications of the mediation of recognition. The article first specifies what kind of change is involved in mediated recognition by analyzing Honneth's conceptualization of social change and by linking this to mediatization research's specifications on media-related social change. This is the foundation for the article's argument that what Honneth has referred to as individualization and social inclusion have been facilitated through mediatization: On the one hand, there are more opportunities for expressing and mutually recognizing new personality dimensions; on the other hand, more people are included in recognitive relationships. It further problematizes these processes in light of the distinction between affirmational and transformational struggles for recognition, which is then exemplified using data on four young social media users in Denmark.

João C. Magalhães and Jun Yu draw on Honneth's later work on freedom to critique the different ways in which social media platforms seem to cause injustice. Their article '*Social media, social unfreedom*' adopts Honneth's theory of justice to show how social media platforms deny both legal freedom (subjective rights) and moral freedom (self-determination), which leads to what they call 'social unfreedom'. This framework forms the basis for their argumentation against current dominant strategies to address corporate social media platforms' ills, which brings the authors to a brief sketch in their conclusion of necessities to create just platforms – platforms that enable the institutionalization of mutual recognition.

Bruno Campanella continues the discussion on recognition and social media platforms in his article '*From mediated to datafied recognition: The role of social media news feeds*'. He scans the literature on digital media and social media to point out those aspects that are relevant from a recognition theory point of view and then explains how recognition theory can shed new light on these issues. Campanella suggests that future studies on recognition and social media platforms should pay closer attention to the platforms' governance and news feed organization and how these affect identity politics, sociability, and ultimately processes of recognition.

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