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We argue that all communication is medial in the sense that every human sign-based interaction is shaped by medial aspects from the outset, and we propose a dynamic, semiotic concept of media that focuses on the process-related aspect of mediality. Media are social procedures of sign processing. We criticise the reification of media by arguing that all media are technical media, but the technical aspect cannot be reduced to materiality. Our dynamic concept takes into account the narrow link between “sign” and “medium” in social interaction and is therefore relevant as a theoretical and methodological basis of multimodal interaction analyses.

We test the applicability of the proposed definition using as an example the second presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, which shows how the spatial arrangement and camerawork create meaning and how the protagonists both use the affordances of this special mediality and have their behavior shaped by it. The analysis also demonstrates that, even in this staged situation, face-to-face communication must already be regarded as an inescapable medium of human communication and has a mediality from the outset.
1. Theoretical Discussion

1.1 The Concept of Media in Everyday Language and Science

The word *medium* has many different usages in everyday language. Three of the most interesting and relevant are the following:

a) a thing or pure matter (the material aspect), as either a machine, an apparatus, a device or hardware (e.g. computer, smartphone, television, typewriter), on the one hand, or a “carrier medium” (e.g. sound waves, paper, blackboard, overhead transparency), on the other;

b) an institution (the institutional aspect): “So you want to work in the media”;¹

c) a potential or process in which something, especially meaning, is constituted or generated (the process aspect): He “knew how to express himself in the medium of paint”.²

These three aspects correspond to three traditional meanings of the word *medium* in the history of Western thought (cf. Margreiter 2003: 152; Lagaay/Lauer 2004: 9f.; Münker/Roesler 2008; Münker 2008):

a) the medium as a means to an end or a tool;

b) the medium as the middle or “the in-between”: the place of encounter that brings people and different things together (cf. Margreiter 2003: 152; Roesler 2008: 322f.);

c) The medium as (a necessary condition of) mediation.

Recent media theories and research on mediality thematize and discuss all three aspects. They have been strongly influenced by Marshall McLuhan (1964), who defines *media* as extensions and substitutes of the human body and sensory performance. This definition is extremely broad: for example,


² http://trans-mississippi.unl.edu/texts/view/transmiss.news.odb.18980913.html (last access: 16 June 2019).
eyeglasses, the microscope and the camera extend or replace the eye; clothing expands our skin; a telephone expands our speech organs, and so on. This understanding of media finds its origins in the philosophy of technology of Ernst Kapp and Arnold Gehlen. According to Kapp and Gehlen, technique consists of objectified, outsourced body functions, and all technical artefacts are projections of our organs (cf. Margreiter 2003: 153).

Another crucial point in McLuhan’s theory is that the mediality of a medium is normally not perceived: we use the medium, talk about it ideologically, but what we do not see or recognize is its mediality, i.e. the ways it shapes the choice of signs and how we use them, and therefore its materiality and processuality (cf. Margreiter 2003: 153). Media have a tendency to make themselves invisible (cf. Krämer 1998). This tendency shapes the mediation process: media do not merely transport something, but are instead part of the way in which sense is produced and constituted. Precisely because they have a tendency to become invisible, they imperceptibly leave their traces on the respective message (cf. Krämer 1998; Jäger 2007, 2012; Linz 2016; Schneider 2006, 2008; Stetter 2005). Krämer’s trace theory can be understood as a moderate reading of McLuhan’s “The medium is the message”. But while McLuhan holds the deterministic view that “cool” media have a different effect than “hot” ones, other media theorists today have pragmatized his theory (cf. Sandbothe 2001; Bolter/Grusin 2002): whether a medium is cool or hot depends not only on its mediality, but also on how we use it. Accordingly, Jay David Bolter and Robert Grusin define a medium as “[t]he formal, social, and material network of practices that generates a logic by which additional instances are repeated or remediated, such as photography, film or television” (Bolter/Grusin 2002: 273, italics added).

Furthermore, recent media theories and research on mediality consider not only the processual and material aspects of media, but also the institutional aspect. New institutionalism conceptualizes not only media, especially mass media, but also “social media” like Facebook and Twitter as institutions in order to compare and relate them to other institutions like family, church, school and government: “[...] it can be argued that the mass media have emerged as a
social institution, fulfilling many of the functions that are no longer being served by traditional social institutions such as the family, church, and school" (Silverblatt 2004: 39).

Shoemaker and Reese describe the interweaving of mass media and other social institutions in modern societies, especially the US, on the basis of this view: “Indeed, we assume media cannot be understood except in relation to other fields” (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 99; cf. Cook 1998, 2006; Sparrow 1999’ Schudson 2003, 2018).

According to Shoemaker and Reese, this entanglement was overlooked for a long time because journalism was perceived as an independent, objective authority. The traditional norm of journalistic independence promoted the view of a separation between journalism and social institutions (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 98). According to new institutionalism, however, they cannot be separated at all: mass media have never represented reality “objectively”, but are themselves “political actors” (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 100; Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999).

According to Shoemaker and Reese (2014: 100), this view of media as “an institutional actor allows us to take it seriously in relation to other key political institutions”. Considering mass (as well as social) media as social institutions makes it possible to compare them with other key institutions. Following Bourdieu’s field theory, the two authors stress that economic and cultural capital interact in the various “fields of action” with which mass media and other institutions are intertwined: “Modern societies, through the interplay of economic and cultural capital as forms of power, develop specialized spheres of action, or fields, which have their own relative autonomy and power dynamics among them” (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 101). In journalism, media institutions can be culturally or economically rich, and sometimes both (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 102). The same is true of various television channels and political talk show and discussion formats that combine economic and symbolic capital in different ways.

According to Luginbühl (2019: 128), political television discussions are subject to a threefold logic. First, they function as a fourth estate (cf. Hanitzsch 2007: 373f.), a potential political corrective. Second, they enable the filmed protagonists to present themselves in as positive and
successful as light as possible. And finally, they must entertain
the audience. In this threefold way, the medium of television
is thus a political actor: it presents oral interactions that are
shaped from the outset by the institution of television and the
media format of television discussion. Without the medium of
television, these interactions would never take place in this
way, as a result of which the medium not merely transmits
the content, but becomes an actor in its own right. As we
show below in our analysis of the 2016 US presidential
debate, the medium of television is a political institution; it
shapes not only the spatial arrangements and the
camerawork, but also the conversation itself, including
aspects like turn-taking, topic treatment and presentation of
self and others.

The view that media are institutions fits with the view of
language as a medium, because language was also conceived
of as an institution early on by some of the most influential
linguistic theorists. For both Whitney and Saussure, the
language system – for Saussure, *la langue* – is a social
institution. This view implies that there is no strict conceptual
separation between mass media and semiotic media such as
languages, because both are social institutions. For Saussure,
there is a dialectical interplay of *langue* and *parole* (language
use) at both the social and individual levels: the language
system can only develop by being used socially by
individuals, and at the same time all language users
participate in the social institution “langue”. However, langue
can only exist in a more or less stable way if the linguistic
schemata are internalized in individuals’ language “depots”
(see Saussure 1967: 383f. Jäger 2010: 188f.). The langue is “a
kind of average” (“une sorte de moyenne”; Saussure 1972: 29)
between speaking individuals.

According to Ryfe (2006: 137), “[i]nstitutions mediate the
impact of macro-level forces on micro-level action”. They
are a necessary condition for social systems and
communication. Mass media as social institutions and as a
“networked public sphere” (Shoemaker/Reese 2014: 98) can
be used to overcome spatial distances. Similarly, the
standardization of languages goes hand in hand with the
possibility of inter-regional communication. Another
similarity between languages and other social institutions is
that they are all based on social conventions, rules and habits,
and thus possess an inherent normativity (cf. Silverblatt 2004: 37f.; Austin 1975: 12–46). Just as a speech act is based on conventionalized felicity conditions (cf. Austin 1975: 14–15), there are also conventionalized patterns of action and customs in other social institutions (e.g. one should get to school on time, parents are responsible for their minor children and the government can enact laws to be obeyed).

1.2 A Plea for a Process-related Understanding of Media

As the previous considerations have already shown, in both everyday language and scientific discourses the concept of media includes material, processual and institutional aspects. Nevertheless, there has always been a tendency to reify media and reduce them to their material aspect. In some media theories, the term medium is still used to refer to only the matter used to “transport” meanings, information or signals from a sender to a receiver. Especially in German media discourse, but also internationally, this technical conception of media is still dominant in linguistics (cf. Marx/Weidacher 2014: 54; Schmitz 2015: 8) and some media studies works (e.g. Hartley’s widely read introduction to Communication, Cultural and Media Studies (2020: 200): “Media of communication are therefore any means by which messages may be transmitted”). Leeuwis (2004: 118) focuses on media as apparatuses combining communication channels that exist “for the ‘transportation’ of visual, auditive, tactile and olfactory signals”; in his view, communication media are “composite devices which incorporate several channels at once”. On the one hand, this is a technical concept in the narrower sense; on the other hand, Leeuwis (2004: 118), along with Schmitz and Marx/Weidacher, emphasizes the idea of potentiality when he discusses media as incorporations of channels that “allow for” communicative applications.

In our opinion, the technical aspect of media can be integrated more adequately if a broader concept of technology is used that does not reduce the term to hardware, but instead includes the meaning of the word technique. As Winkler (2008: 91) points out, this broader concept has its origin in Greek philosophy, where τέχνη referred to certain practical skills, for instance the skill of painting or making music. In ancient rhetoric, elocution skills were also
understood as *téchne*, something between a pure instrumental technology and an esthetic art (Gutenberg 2001: 146). This skill-related aspect is clear in English, as examples in dictionaries show (“I used a special *technique* to make the bread”, Merriam-Webster online, emphasis in original).

If we employ a definition of *media* that takes into account both the material and the procedural aspects of technology/technique, we can say with Winkler (2008: 91) that *all* media are technical. We understand *media as socially constituted procedures of sign processing* (Schneider 2008, 2017). This definition first implies that media always have to do with communication and the mediation of signs (cf. Stetter 2005; Margreiter 2003: 154). Thus, this definition is narrower than McLuhan’s, who understands even a street, a wheel, glasses and a microscope as media, but broader than the technical definition, which only focuses on hardware, apparatuses and sign transmission. A basic assumption of our definition, then, is that face-to-face communication is the first phylo- and ontogenetic procedure of sign processing and thus the basic communication medium among human beings.

A specific feature of this definition is the conceptual proximity of *sign system* and *medium* – the two terms describe one and the same multi-faceted phenomenon from different perspectives (cf. Margreiter 2003: 155). If we consider sign systems from the perspective of their mediality, i.e. their materiality *and* processuality, then we look at them as media or medial procedures (Schneider 2008, 2017, following Margreiter 2001: 4). The specific way in which a given medium processes signs defines its *mediality* (Schneider 2017; cf. Münker 2013: 247). *Processing* here means not only mediation, but also constitution. The sign with its potential for meaning and its material qualities cannot be separated from its medial processing.

This process-related view of mediality makes it clear that media are not simply carrier matter. The classic “Socratic” question “What is a medium?” promotes the reification of media and leads to categorization problems that cannot be solved convincingly. Our action- and process-oriented view leads to different questions. For example, what structural conditions are specific to the medial procedure of face-to-face communication? What effects does mediality, i.e. the characteristics of a given medial process, have on
communication? Seen in this light, “medium” is a typical “zoom concept” (Hermanns 2012: 269), in which the “scopus” can be set differently, the granularity can differ depending on the particular research interest. If the medium “spoken language” is to be compared with the medium “written language”, the scopus is relatively wide and coarse; a comparison between face-to-face and telephone communication is narrower, and a comparison between landline telephony and mobile telephony is narrower still. The medial process (= medium) is characterized by its mediality, i.e. by its medial properties or structural communication conditions. It opens up specific latitudes that communicators can use. Thus we always have a certain freedom of action under the specific media conditions. At the same time, however, the media infrastructure shapes what we can do: it is always and inevitably part of meaning production. It is this relationship between the possibilities and limitations given by a media infrastructure, on the one hand, and the way people use this scope for their communicative purposes, on the other, that is addressed by the concept of media affordances (Zillien 2008; Hutchby 2014).

McLuhan denies such freedom of action and takes a deterministic view: “McLuhan’s own theory is not interested in exploring what we do with media – it is interested in describing what media do with us. And what media do is to shape, according to their technical properties, the people who use them as well as the content they transport” (Münker 2013: 247). In Münker’s view, McLuhan’s – and Kittler’s – “media-technological determinism simply misreads the relationship between the technology and the use of media by interpreting the necessary condition of media technology for any media usage as a sufficient condition” (Münker 2013: 250). Even mediality as a whole is not a sufficient, but only a necessary condition of media usage. The crucial point is this: for scientific analysis, a distinction must be made between (a) mediality, i.e. the possibilities of the medium, (b) the sign system(s)/modes employed, (c) the communicative practices (language games in a Wittgensteinian sense) and (d) the skills of the players (see the diagram in Schneider 2017: 45). The mediality of telephoning, for example, consists in simultaneous communication between spatially absent
persons who use the oral signs of a particular language; in this medium, numerous culturally grown language games can be played (e.g. private telephoning with friends, telephone negotiations, making appointments). A further question is how skillfully individuals master these medially shaped practices, how well they can negotiate on the telephone.

Contrary to the deterministic view, then, we argue that there is a strong interdependence between mediality and media use. On the one hand, media contour the use of signs; on the other, individual and social use changes the media.

1.3 Medium and Communication Form

Recent media theories based on a narrow conception of technology do not locate the procedural aspect in the medium, but instead “outsource”: they separate the concept of communication form from that of medium. The form of communication concerns the structural conditions of communication provided by the medium. The question, however, is whether such a conceptual separation between medium and communication form still makes sense if a medium is understood as a procedure of sign processing. In our opinion, the answer is no. It is much more important to determine how to draw the line between medial procedures and culturally grown, conventional language games (communicative, cultural practices or genres).

Based on a very similar systematic question, Brock/Schildhauer (2017: 15f.) present the currently most sophisticated concept of communication forms: they try to separate the mediality of communication from conventional practices/genres while maintaining a distinction between medium and communication form: “Where does medium end and communication form start, and where does genre take over?” (Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 18).

When we ask about the real medial aspects (= the mediality) of communication, our task is to distinguish mediation/processuality/materiality from content/genre/cultural practices. But is communication form then a suitable term? Due to the semantic proximity between communication form, communicative practice and genre in everyday language, the danger of confusion is especially high, as can be seen in Holly (2011: 155), who defines
communication forms as “medially conditioned cultural practices” (translated by Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 21).

In order to further develop the model, Brock and Schildhauer proceed from Schildhauer’s definition of communication forms:

Here, I conceptualize communications form [...] as a technical constellation which gives rise to communicative potentials. Potentials include the semiotic systems available for message production, the possible number of participants and the extent to which distance in space and time can be bridged. The potentials can be used by several genres to a varying extent (Schildhauer 2016: 30–31, as quoted in Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 23)

According to Brock and Schildhauer, the communication form is a “technical constellation” that includes the medium; they opt to integrate the medium into the communication form concept (cf. Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 33). For example, the human articulatory apparatus is understood as a biological medium that is part of the communication form “public speech” (cf. Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 36). This analysis can also be applied to face-to-face communication and other medial procedures based on orality.

By integrating the medium into the communication form, Brock and Schildhauer’s model overcomes the separation of the two concepts. According to Brock and Schildhauer (2017: 35), this overcoming is necessary because “the medium imprints itself on the actual message”. Thus, the two authors, like Krämer (1998) and McLuhan/Fiore ([1967] 2001), “focus on how the media co-create rather than merely transmit meaning” (Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 35; cf. Luginbühl 2015; Schneider 2017). As pointed out in Section 1.1 above, media always tend to make themselves invisible when shaping the “message” and can therefore develop their impact all the more subtly and powerfully (cf. Krämer 1998).

In this respect, there are many similarities between Brock and Schildhauer’s conception and our own, but also important differences. First, in their definition of communication form they include “the technical medium as one of its most basic components” (Brock/Schildhauer 2017: 28). Second, and much more important, why could it not be the other way around? Why can we not say that the
communication form is part of the medium? Historically, the expression *medium* has always referred to mediation, materiality and potentiality: it is a socially constituted procedure of sign processing. As Christian Stetter (2005: 91) puts it, a medium is a symbolizing procedure operating over a substrate or conglomerate of apparatuses. Viewed from the other side, one could also say that a medium is an apparatus set in motion, “so that through this operation something is produced, namely a representation of a certain form” (Stetter 2005: 74, our translation). From this perspective, it becomes possible to dissolve the reifying definition of *media* and at the same time always include in it the material basis of mediality: following Stetter, a procedure of sign processing over or in a material substance or apparatus is the same as a sign-processing apparatus set in motion. If one adopts this way of seeing, then even a computer can be regarded as a medium without necessarily reifying it. For only a computer that is switched on functions as a medium (cf. Schneider 2017: 37). In reference to social media, Münker (2013: 252) argues “that some media exist only due to their use”. We reformulate this thesis: *all* media exist only due to their use.

1.4 All Media are "Technical": The Inescapability of Sign Use

As we have shown above, face-to-face communication and public speech can also be regarded as media or medial procedures with a certain mediality. This view overcomes the erroneous traditional notion of medialess communication, which separates things that belong together. In our opinion, there is no such thing as non-medial communication. Some theorists refer to interpersonal communication (especially face-to-face communication) when referring to synchronic exchange between communicating persons. If these persons interact at the same time and in the same place, we have a case of face-to-face communication. For our discussion, it is important that face-to-face communication is usually not considered a medium. Leeuwis (2004: 196), for instance, calls face-to-face communication “non-mediated”. When referring to “interpersonal ‘media’”, therefore, he places the word *media* in quotation marks. However, studies in conversation analysis discuss the “mediality” of face-to-face communication, even though they do not explicitly refer
to oral language as a medium (cf. Auer 2009; Becker-Mrotzek 2009; Imo/Lanwer 2019).

But, as we have seen, the concept *media* includes all the structural conditions of communication. In mass-media communication, for example, there is no separation between “interpersonal communication” and technically mediated communication in the medial procedure. In television discussions, for example, the medial procedure of oral interaction is technically and medially shaped from the outset. As we will see in the empirical section below, this shaping happens, for example, through spatial staging and camerawork.

But the crucial point here is the following: even (unfilmed, “natural”) face-to-face communication is “technical” in a broader sense. This view makes it possible, for example, to compare the medial procedure of (unfilmed) face-to-face communication with the medial procedure of television discussion. That these are two different sign-processing procedures would be occluded if we were to regard face-to-face communication as “media-less”. Always considering sign use as medially shaped is a precondition for contextualizing and comparing all kinds of sign use. This opens up new horizons for analysis and overcomes the division between phenomena that are actually inseparable. In Section 1.1, we observed something similar with the concept *institution*: by understanding media as institutions, we can see how they are related to other institutions, e.g. political ones. In the same way, understanding face-to-face communication as medium makes it possible to compare it with other media and work out interesting similarities, connections and differences.

The traditional belief that interpersonal communication, especially face-to-face communication, is non-medial was, in our opinion, based on the *myth of authenticity*: face-to-face communication was regarded as genuine and authentic, while written communication acts and acts that depend on human-made devices (e.g. telephoning or watching television) tended to be branded as artificial. But this view is misleading: since the use of signs is fundamental for meaning-making from the outset, there are no completely objective representations; rather, every form of communication and representation is semiotically and medially shaped and thus perspectival.
The remainder of this article is devoted to the analysis of a media event that was watched live by about 66.5 million television viewers (Serjeant/Richwine 2016) and streamed by probably more than 100 million Internet users (Granados 2016): the second presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on October 9, 2016. We do not analyze this debate in terms of content or politics, but instead the media process in which the debate took place. Roughly speaking, what we are dealing with here is a live, unidirectional, mass-media broadcast that encompasses several partial formats, including one-to-many monologues and face-to-face, side-by-side and split-screen communication. As in any face-to-face communication, the oral communication used here is sequential, multimodal and ephemeral. At the same time, however, it is recorded and thus made repeatable for all time. In addition, the presidential debate is not only characterized by its complex mediality, but is also institutionally shaped from the outset, because the footage was produced by certain television stations, in this case NBC, CBS and C-SPAN, countless other mass media (television and radio stations, print media, social media) are involved and the entire staging and script is subject to strictly defined regulations.

2. Empirical Discussion

As elaborated above, we understand every communication as mediated and all sign use as shaped by the mediality of the medium in use. Apart from a material aspect that includes technical possibilities and restrictions, we understand the concept medium to also include processual, institutional and cultural aspects. Political TV debates are a case in point, as the processing of verbal and nonverbal signs, i.e. the entire interaction, is shaped by the medium of TV (which operates in a certain market, in a certain political system and with certain journalistic norms). This medial shaping affects crucial conversational aspects like turn-taking, topic management, face work, portrayal of self and others and use of the studio space. Of course, these aspects are also shaped by genre and individual competence, but they all rely on the structural moments of the medium mentioned here. What we can
observe here is a media- and genre-specific performance of verbal interaction, a phenomenon Tolson (2006: 10) called the “performativity” of media talk.

Political TV debates are also a good example of what has been referred to as the mediatization of politics (cf. Higgins 2018; Strömbeck/Esser 2014; Hepp 2014; Falasca 2014), i.e. the interdependency of the political and the mass-media system, which results in the adaptation of the political system to the mass-media system and vice versa. As mentioned above, three different logics (journalistic, political and economic) shape the processing of signs in political TV debates as part of the institutional media context. In other words, political information is materialized and processed in a very specific, conversational way, including a specific use of multimodal resources (sensu Mondada 2016). In the following, we will focus on aspects of medial shaping that can be related to structural moments of TV mediality and conversational TV formats.

2.1 Double Articulation and Para-interaction

All conversation on TV is double articulated, as Scannell argued in 1991:

All talk on radio and TV is public discourse, is meant to be accessible to the audience for whom it is intended. Thus broadcast talk minimally has a double articulation: it is a communicative interaction between those participating in discussion, interview, game show or whatever and, at the same time, is designed to be heard by absent audiences. (Scannell 1991: 1)

TV conversations are performed from the very beginning for a non-present, but always ratified audience. We therefore have to distinguish between the interaction between the interlocutors within the studio and the pseudo-interaction with the non-present audience. The latter has been described as “parasocial interaction” by Horton and Wohl (1956: 215), but we will instead refer to social para-interaction, because we understand all human relationships as “social” (cf. Moores 2005: 75). Para-interaction means that parts of the sign use provoke the illusion of face-to-face communication, including mutual perception and two-way communication.
Social para-interaction aims at “intimacy at a distance” (Horton/Wohl 1956: 215) and can be realized e.g. by addressing the audience or staging traits of informal face-to-face conversations. In our example, the audience is directly addressed at the beginning of the show (with a brief greeting, “Good evening”, and some explanation of the debate, “The people you see on this stage were chosen [...]”) and again at the end of it (Cooper: “Our thanks to the candidates, the commission, Washington University, and to everybody who watched”, Raddatz: “Good night, everyone”); always accompanied by a look into the camera. Besides of these sequences, the audience at home is only once addressed verbally – and only implicitly and indirectly – by Clinton, in the following turn:

1. CLINTON: Well, Martha, first, let me say – and I’ve said before, but I’ll repeat it, because I want everyone to hear it – that was a mistake, and I take responsibility for using a personal e-mail account. (20:59–21:10, italics added)

Although it is clear – and with the greeting and goodbye it is made clear – that the conversation is directed at an audience at home, this fact remains marginalized throughout the debate in the verbal utterances. That – except for one camera tripod that appears briefly in one shot (1:30:50) – no cameras can be seen at any point in the debate also serves to deflect attention from the fact that the conversation is directed at an at-home audience. On the one hand, then, direct hints at the presence of an audience at home are minimized.

On the other hand, the gaze of the persons on the screen reveals an important aspect of social para-interaction. The politicians use gaze direction strategically: they mostly or at important moments look directly at the camera, and thus at the audience at home. While Trump looks into the camera most of the time when talking, Clinton mostly lets her gaze wander over the studio audience. But she looks straight into the camera at rhetorically key moments (see italics in the following excerpt, Example 2):
2. CLINTON: So this is who Donald Trump is. And the question for us, the question our country must answer is that this is not who we are. That’s why – to go back to your question – I want to send a message – we all should – to every boy and girl and, indeed, to the entire world that America already is great, but we are great because we are good, and we will respect one another, and we will work with one another, and we will celebrate our diversity. These are very important values to me, because this is the America that I know and love. And I can pledge to you tonight that this is the America that I will serve if I’m so fortunate enough to become your president. (10:13–11:02; italics added)

While Clinton generally looks at the audience in the studio or at Cooper, who asks her a question (see Screenshot 1), she looks into the camera during the sequences indicated above. This is not incidental, but clearly intended to address the audience at home with electoral promises (Screenshot 2).

A closer look at the candidates’ responses also shows other ways to double articulate answers. Because the main reason to take part in a political TV discussion is not to engage in an objective, rational debate, but to promote one’s own person and positions, politicians often switch the topic without verbally indicating that they are doing so, but instead phrasing the transition as if the two topics were related. Trump’s topic shifts are quite abrupt, integrated in an argumentative transition only very superficially, as in the following excerpt (Example 3).

3. TRUMP [responding to a question regarding some of his comments regarding women]: But this is locker-room talk. You know, when we have a world where you have ISIS chopping off heads, where you have –
and, frankly, drowning people in steel cages, where you have wars and horrible, horrible sights all over, where you have so many bad things happening, this is like medieval times. We haven’t seen anything like this, the carnage all over the world. And they look and they see. Can you imagine the people that are, frankly, doing so well against us with ISIS? And they look at our country and they see what’s going on. Yes, I’m very embarrassed by it. I hate it. But it’s locker room talk, and it’s one of those things. I will knock the hell out of ISIS. (6:19–6:59)

Trump’s remarks about ISIS, which very roughly depict his plans if elected president, seem to be related to his response regarding his disrespectful comments about women. The phrasing “you know, when we have a world where ...” allows us to expect argumentative support for his assessment of his utterances, but what follows is not related to this issue at all. While this topic shift is (even if only superficially) integrated, the next is not (Example 4).

4. COOPER: Have you ever done those things?
TRUMP: And women have respect for me. And I will tell you: No, I have not. And I will tell you that I’m going to make our country safe. We’re going to have borders in our country, which we don’t have now. People are pouring into our country, and they’re coming in from the Middle East and other places. We’re going to make America safe again. (7:36–7:54)

While the overall subject remains Trump’s behavior towards women, he starts discussing homeland security and “people” that are “pouring” into the country. Although she is much more subtle, Clinton also sometimes employs this strategy. After Trump claims that Bill Clinton’s behavior towards women was much worse than his own, Clinton discusses Trump’s disrespectful treatment of Captain Humayun Khan. She skillfully and subtly leads to this new topic by accusing her opponent of “never apologiz[ing] for anything to anyone”, not even Khan (15:40–16:01). However,
this argumentation cannot hide the fact that Clinton here also
switches the topic.

All the aspects mentioned above – the direct or implicit
addressing of the audience at home, the gaze behavior and
the (more or less) inconspicuous topic shifts – are examples
of double articulation. And they illustrate how structural
aspects of the medium (one-way audiovisual mass medium,
appropriation of public mass media by the political system)
transform everyday conversation practices. These
transformations show that all answers, and of course all
questions too, are not for the audience in the studio, but the
one at home.

2.2 Controlling and Spurring the Debate: The Town-hall Framing

The medium of television (as an institution, not as a technical
apparatus) aims to create and maintain a social relationship
with its audience. Aspects of this “sociability” (Scannell 1996:
28) include the staging of being close to the audience (see
above, para-interaction, but also close shots, live
broadcasting and so on), the stating of spontaneous behavior
and of course the meta-function of television, entertainment.
The aim of television companies is to produce an entertaining
(which does not necessarily mean un-informative) debate, a
dynamic swapping of blows between the candidates. This
means that there must be critical questions and not just
keywords that allow the candidates to articulate their slogans
(cf. Clayman/Heritage 2002). At the same time, however, the
debate must be controlled by the medium’s agents, the hosts,
so that it does not descend into chaos. The ways in which this
debate is framed and the hosts vary between sparking off and
controlling the debate reveal how the aims of the medium
shape everyday conversational action, including asking
questions, providing answers, assigning the right to speak,
turn-taking in general, real-time processing of utterances and
face work. These essential aspects of face-to-face (or side-
by-side) interaction are interwoven with the specific
mediality of the debate from the outset. This is an example of
how the basal mediality of spoken communication
differentiates itself within the mass-media television format,
but also influences it from the very beginning.
The debate is framed as a “town-hall meeting” (COOPER: “Tonight’s debate is a town-hall format, which gives voters the chance to directly ask the candidates questions”). This framing as a town-hall meeting that is open to everyone and makes it possible to ask critical questions “directly” is related to the journalistic norm of serving as the fourth estate, because the journalists appear as agents of control by bringing the citizens’ questions to the candidates. But while the frame of a town-hall meeting implies that everyone can spontaneously pose as many questions as they like and the person interviewed can answer in detail, the conversation here is under strong media control: the speaking time for an answer is limited to two minutes; the citizens in the inner circle of the studio are hand-picked and prevented from engaging in any backchannel behavior, whether verbal or non-verbal (another transformation of everyday practices) and from asking follow-up questions; and the studio audience in the outer circle, which cannot be seen but can sometimes be heard and is then silenced by the hosts, is also subject to strict rules (COOPER: “We want to remind the audience to please not talk out loud. Please do not applaud. You’re just wasting time”. 20:30; RADDATZ: “And really, the audience needs to calm down here”. 19:39). This control is related to the journalistic principle of balance, but it is of course also intended to control the candidates’ self-promotion and the possible escalation of the interaction.

In some of these cases, we can see how the hosts use the town-hall frame to control the conversation explicitly: they use it to manage the timing and the topics discussed. Timing is crucial for all media talk, as the conversations cannot, unlike in an actual town hall, be open-ended, but have to end right on time. This allows the hosts to interrupt the candidates by referring to the citizens’ questions (already at the very beginning, the host Raddatz says: “[...] we hope to get to as many questions as we can. So we asked the audience here not to slow things down with any applause [...]”). In the following extract (00:11:04–12:11), Raddatz interrupts Trump, who is responding to accusations from Clinton (“I said

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3 Beginning of the debate, not included in the footage published on YouTube; therefore no timestamp.
starting back in June that he was not fit to be president and commander-in-chief” 8:39):

5. RADDATZ: And we want to get to some questions from online
TRUMP: Am I allowed to respond to that? I assume I am.
RADDATZ: Yes, you can respond to that.
TRUMP: It's just words, folks. It's just words. Those words, I've been hearing them for many years. I heard them when they were running for the Senate in New York, where Hillary was going to bring back jobs to Upstate New York and she failed. I've heard them where Hillary is constantly talking about the inner cities of our country, which are a disaster education-wise, job-wise, safety-wise, in every way possible. I'm going to help the African-Americans. I'm going to help the Latinos, Hispanics. I am going to help the inner cities. She's done a terrible job for the African-Americans. She wants their vote, and she does nothing, and then she comes back four years later. We saw that firsthand when she was United States senator. She campaigned where the primary part of her campaign...

RADDATZ: Mr. Trump, Mr. Trump – I want to get to audience questions and online questions.
TRUMP: So, she’s allowed to do that, but I’m not allowed to respond?
RADDATZ: You’re going to have – you’re going to get to respond right now.
TRUMP: Sounds fair.
RADDATZ: This tape is generating intense interest. [...]
threatening questions and at the same time “deflect” them (cf. Clayman/Heritage 2002), i.e. the hosts can bring up critical issues without having to affiliate or disaffiliate themselves from them (RADDATZ: “So, Tu from Virginia asks: is it OK for politicians to be two-faced?” 43:49).

The hosts perform a tightrope walk between a controlled, answer-question interview and a dynamic quarrel between the candidates. For example, if one candidate provokes the other, the hosts may depart from the question-answer structure. While the overall structure follows the order “question – answer candidate 1 – answer candidate 2”, in Example 5 above Trump successfully demands the floor again after Clinton responds to his first answer and attacks him directly (not in transcript). The hosts suspend the regular order here to follow the provocation principle: guests who are provoked get the turn. Nonetheless, Raddatz interrupts Trump after one minute because he does not address the question that has been posed, but instead delivers slogans and demeans Clinton. When he is interrupted, he insists on the provocation principle mentioned above (“So she’s allowed to do that, but I’m not allowed to respond?”). In the next example, he also insists on being permitted to respond after Clinton has responded to a question that was directed only to her; in doing so, he refers to the right to equal speaking time, a phenomenon specific to political TV debates (Example 6, 00:41:57–42:04):

6. RADDATZ: There’s been lots of fact-checking on that. I’d like to move on to an online question...
   TRUMP: Excuse me. She just went about 25 seconds over her time.
   RADDATZ: She did not.
   TRUMP: Could I just respond to this, please?
   RADDATZ: Very quickly, please.

Situations like these, which are aimed at controlling the debate, often lead to fights for the floor among the candidates and between the candidates and the hosts. Fights over speaking time occur regularly (Example 7, 01:19:16–19:36):
7. COOPER: We have to move along.

CLINTON: Nine million people lost their jobs.

RADDATZ: Secretary Clinton, we have to...

CLINTON: Five million homes were lost.

RADDATZ: Secretary Clinton, we’re moving.

CLINTON: And $13 trillion in family wealth was wiped out. We are back on the right track. He would send us back into recession with his tax plans that benefit the wealthiest of Americans.

RADDATZ: Secretary Clinton, we are moving to an audience question. We’re almost out of time. We have another...

Here again, audience questions and time restrictions are mentioned as necessitating changing the subject and finishing a turn, again leading to a situation in which the conversational order is threatened. At such moments, the subject is often abandoned quickly, mutual denials are exchanged and more complex arguments cannot be elaborated. But the audience can witness a highly dynamic verbal fight that could become chaotic, and which the hosts must therefore contain. Such situations have a high entertainment potential and thus contribute to sociability, as the following excerpt demonstrates (Example 8, 00:23:37-24:33):

8. TRUMP: [...] What you did – and this is after getting a subpoena from the United States Congress.

COOPER: We have to move on.

TRUMP: You did that. Wait a minute. One second.

COOPER: Secretary Clinton, you can respond, and then we got to move on.

RADDATZ: We want to give the audience a chance.

TRUMP: If you did that in the private sector, you’d be put in jail, let alone after getting a subpoena from the United States Congress.

COOPER: Secretary Clinton, you can respond. Then we have to move on to an audience question.
CLINTON: Look, it’s just not true. And so please, go to...
TRUMP: Oh, you didn’t delete them?
COOPER: Allow her to respond, please.
CLINTON: It was personal e-mails, not official.
TRUMP: Oh, 33,000? Yeah.
CLINTON: Not – well, we turned over 35,000, so...
TRUMP: Oh, yeah. What about the other 15,000?
COOPER: Please allow her to respond. She didn’t talk while you talked.
CLINTON: Yes, that’s true, I didn’t.
TRUMP: Because you have nothing to say.
CLINTON: I didn’t in the first debate, and I’m going to try not to in this debate, because I’d like to get to the questions that the people have brought here tonight to talk to us about.
TRUMP: Get off this question.
CLINTON: OK, Donald. I know you’re into big diversion tonight, anything to avoid talking about your campaign and the way it’s exploding and the way Republicans are leaving you. But let’s at least focus...
TRUMP: Let’s see what happens...
(CROSSTALK)
COOPER: Allow her to respond.

In this example, Clinton can hardly respond coherently because Trump keeps interrupting her; in addition, the host repeatedly tries to save the floor for Clinton. She accuses Trump of diversion, i.e. strategic behavior, and attempts to control the debate herself by suggesting that they move on to the audience’s questions. Trump in turn accuses the hosts of neglecting the Clinton e-mail controversy, an accusation Cooper rejects repeatedly before giving the floor to an audience member, causing Trump to utter an ironic remark in which he frames the debate as an unfair fight (“one on three”).
Sequences like these are predictable in political TV debates and are not a result of the specific combination of individuals involved here (cf. Luginbühl 1999, 2007). While the politicians try to get as much speaking time as possible in order to promote themselves and devaluate their opponent, the hosts both spur the debate and try to control it in order to combine the medium’s needs for entertainment and balance. Sequences like these are predictable because they are structural moments of TV communication in general (double articulation, para-interaction, sociability) and political communication in and for TV in particular (mediatization of politics, different logics at work). Aspects of everyday talk like turn-taking, topic management, portrayal of self and others and face and relational work are shaped by these media-specific aspects from the very beginning — and not just because they are filmed and aired. The same is true of the town-hall frame: it is optimized for the needs of the medium in order to simultaneously stage a democratic discussion and control the interaction.

2.3 Camerawork and Editing

Nonverbal behavior is also shaped by the medium. We have already mentioned the strategic use of gazing at the camera (i.e. directly at the audience at home). But while politicians can control their nonverbal behavior to some extent, they cannot control which camera perspective is used or how the footage is edited, and their behavior in space is also restricted by the studio design. Final control over the meanings that are broadcast therefore lies with the medium — that is, with the media institution’s picture director (Holly 2015). The design of the studio and especially the way the footage is edited shape and contextualize what is said and how the participants (can) use their bodies — and what we can see of this. What we can see and hear is not just a combination of sound and images, but an independent staging of the course of conversation (Keppler 2015: 171). What is most striking in NBC’s coverage of the second debate is the predominant use of split screens: of the 68 minutes that the debate lasts, 49:35 consist of split-screen shots in which the two candidates can be seen in close-up. The studio design is obviously optimized for these split screens (Screenshot 3).
The two chairs do not face each other or the studio audience (the “town-hall participants’), but the hosts; they have the height of a bar stool, so they are not really intended to be sat on. They indicate the place where the candidates are supposed to stand and, if they move around, return to. It is therefore to be expected that the candidates will stand and move within the red circle and towards the “town-hall participants” to their right and left. The cameras are placed to deliver a full frontal view of the candidates: they are located to the left and right of the hosts (note that the chairs actually face the cameras, not the hosts) and (hidden in black windows and thus hardly visible) behind the “town-hall participants”. The room, with its spatial arrangement of hosts, participants and bar stools, with its camera infrastructure and red circle, predetermines how the candidates will move, but without prescribing specific movements (cf. Hausendorf 2020). To sum up, the entire room is unobtrusively and invisibly optimized for full-frontal camera shots of the candidates and for staging a town-hall meeting. In addition, the cameras behind the participants allow for medium shots that show both candidates at the same time, one behind the other.

As mentioned above, the predominant camera setting is the split screen (see Screenshot 4).
The split screen allows for two frontal close shots at the same time, which makes it possible for the home audience to sit very close to both candidates simultaneously and observe even the smallest mimic movements, allowing it to scrutinize the emotional reactions of the speaker and listener at the same time. It is important to note that this is an “impossible” view, as the screenshot below (Screenshot 5) demonstrates: immediately before Screenshot 4, we can see that, from a viewer’s perspective on site, it is impossible to see both candidates from the front; and we can also see that they do not have their heads at the same height, contrary to what the split screens suggests.

A possible attraction of these debates, as mentioned above, is the tightrope walk between control and (conversational) chaos, which also foregrounds face and relational work. And it is these aspects that the split screen, with its “impossible” view of the candidates’ faces, also emphasizes. But this view
can also lead to orientation problems on the part of the audience: because the front view is predominant, it can become unclear who the candidates are looking or pointing at.

Together, Example 8 above and Screenshots 6 and 7 below illustrate how the split screen works. While Trump continues to attack Clinton, she smiles broadly, which she rarely does in the entire debate, and shakes her head.

**Screenshot 6**: Clinton smiling and shaking head while Trump attacks (23:41).

A few seconds later, a four-second shot demonstrates that the split screen showed an “impossible” view that a person on location could not have had (Screenshot 7).

**Screenshot 7**: Clinton responding to Trump’s attacks (23:48).

If only the person talking, in this case Trump, had been shown, Clinton’s nonverbal behavior could not have been seen, just as it would have been difficult to see it in the studio.

Since the two protagonists are well briefed, they know that
the split-screen format predominates, and they expect to be filmed in close-up even when they are not speaking. When she is not speaking, Clinton tries to avoid looking into the camera; in some cases, however, she does glance at the camera before immediately turning her gaze away (37:20–37:38). This is another example of how the media process shapes the actors’ communicative actions. We can see here how the camerawork creates a media-specific reality that is intended to allow viewers to witness emotional (or strikingly calm) reactions to attacks. In the end, it is all about who cracks whom.

Although the split screen predominates, reporting on the debate focused extensively on shots during which Trump could be seen behind Clinton. Immediately after the debate, for example, the Guardian published in its online version a short video excerpt from the debate entitled “Trump ‘prowls’ behind Clinton during presidential debate” (Guardian 2016). CNN commented as follows: “Donald Trump created an awkward situation during Sunday’s presidential debate, where the candidates were free to roam around the stage, and the Republican nominee chose to stand right behind Hillary Clinton” (Diaz 2016). Clinton herself wrote afterwards: “It was the second presidential debate and Donald Trump was looming behind me” (Filipovic 2016). And New York Times journalist David Itskoff (2016) created the following meme (Tweet 1):

Tweet 1: Tweet by David Itskoff.
Two things are noteworthy about these shots in which one candidate can be seen behind the other. First, these shots comprise only 16 minutes of the debate (compared to almost 50 minutes of split screen); and second, of these 16 minutes, shots of Trump behind Clinton comprise 11:21, while those of Clinton behind Trump comprise only 4:56. Trump’s “looming behind” Clinton is a result of not only the fact that he is shown doing this twice as much as she is, but also that Trump moves behind Clinton when she speaks, while she does not move very much when he speaks.

The following screenshots show Clinton moving towards the right to answer an audience question from that side of the studio, and Trump moving back to his chair but then positioning himself directly in sight of the camera that is filming Clinton (Screenshots 8–10).

**Screenshot 8-10:** Trump aligning himself behind Clinton (25:25–25:50).
We can see here how politicians and the medium (as an institution) interact at the micro-level: Trump strategically aligns himself with the camera’s line of sight, and the camera cuts from a close to a medium shot, including both candidates in one frame, again allowing both faces to be seen at the same time. When Trump positions himself in a spot that is likely (but not necessarily) to be captured by the camera, the image immediately cuts to capture that view. As a result, CNN’s claim that Trump “created” this situation is only half true.

The camera also attempts to capture Clinton in the background while Trump is speaking but not looking in the direction of the hosts; but – and this is the difference – Clinton does not align her body with the camera, but only her gaze (see Screenshots 11–12).

Screenshot 11-12: Clinton behind Trump (29:14; 33:39).

The candidates’ gaze work, the way they use the studio room, how they walk, align and disalign their bodies are all shaped by the medium of television. As in language use, the effect of the medium is not secondary. The medium itself influences
the behavior of the persons on screen from the outset and creates its own reality of the conversation, a reality that cannot be experienced at the location itself.

3. Conclusion

As the analysis of the second presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump has shown, sign processing during the debate is continuously shaped by structural aspects of television and specific traits of political communication in television. These structural aspects – the technical infrastructure, para-interaction, entertainment, the fourth estate, political propaganda and so on – can potentially conflict with each other, which leads to, and is exploited by, specific practices on the part of the hosts, the politicians and the studio audience. The way oral communication is processed (including embodied aspects) is therefore shaped by the whole medial procedure from the outset, including the ways in which turn-taking is organized, topics are introduced and avoided, face work is done and controversies are cheered on or ended, and where people move or look.

Therefore, it is not adequate to separate the technical aspects of the medium, the “hardware”, from the processual aspects and the structural conditions of communication. These three aspects together constitute the mediality of a medium, i.e. of a medial procedure. What German linguists call “communication form” is included in the medial procedure. If we separate these aspects from each other, it is impossible to adequately analyze the “medial traces” (cf. Krämer 1998) they leave behind. Brock and Schildhauer’s (2017) definition of communication form avoids separating these aspects by integrating the concept of medium into it. As we have argued, however, the concept of communication form can be dispensed with altogether if we begin from a holistic understanding of media and then describe the specific medium in question in its specific granularity.

The most important task of media linguistics is to describe communication as consisting of medial procedures under concrete circumstances. What is the mediality of a given medial constellation and format? Another task of media
linguistics is to differentiate the mediality of a concrete case from the communicative, culturally constituted practices involved. Mediality also has institutional aspects. A third task of media linguistics is to distinguish between the institutional and other aspects that are constitutive of communicative practices. Making these distinctions will help us understand our communication better and differentiate medial constellations, and they provide a very specific and clear role for what we call *media* linguistics.

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