

Resituating Media

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Book Review: Jeremy Swartz and Janet Wasko (Eds.), 2021. *MEDIA: A Transdisciplinary Inquiry*, Intellect (280 pages).

MEDIA: A Transdisciplinary Inquiry is the first delivery in a trilogy exploring the conceptual frameworks of Media, Life, and Universe. Gathering eighteen essays that give special attention to the historical, material, and ecological dimensions of media, this volume seeks to expand our understanding of mediation by considering a myriad of systemic and integrative approaches that reimagine what media is and can become. At the same time that the terms ‘medium’, ‘media’ and ‘mediation’ seem to permeate more and more aspects of human experience, our definitions and understanding of their meaning seem to have reached a point of stagnation. Starting from that shared premise, this volume sets out to expand the scope and depth of these terms by reconsidering them through the lenses of complexity, openness, multiplicity and hybridity.

Organised in six sections (Genealogy, Meanings of Media, Organs and Organization, Engagement and Extensions, Biomediations, and Repair and Metamedia), the essays in this collection deliver a fascinating exploration of the liminal spaces between the material and the symbolic, offering a series of intersections across the realms of the physical, virtual, natural, artificial, analogue and digital. Moving fluently through disparate fields ranging from anthropology to political economy, each chapter shares the same critical impetus: defying traditional conceptions of media so as to foster a greater receptivity to emerging patterns across different intensities, velocities and orders of magnitude—from the subatomic to the astronomical.

Genealogy

The first section uncovers crucial moments in the development and history of media; confronting us with some of the existential crises of the present and some of the challenges we may face in the future.

Fred Turner’s “When Multimedia Meant Democracy” offers a historical overview of the rise of a new democratic ethos during the first half of the twentieth century. The use of mass media by fascist regimes compelled critical intellectuals to envision new and more egalitarian forms of communication. Going back to the late 1930s, he traces the emergence of what he calls the “surrounds”—immersive multi-media environments that stand in conceptual opposition to the one-

directional mode of communication so characteristic of mass media. Giving expression to key ideas from American thinkers and refugee Bauhaus artists, mobilising the once counter-cultural values of authenticity, self-expression and egalitarianism, and finally serving an instrumental role in the conceptual entanglement between politics, consumerism, and 'freedom of choice', the history of the "surrounds" allows us to better grasp the origins of the role that media plays today in our cultural imaginary.

In his "Four Reporting Cultures: Designing Humans In and Out of the Future of Journalism", John Markoff recounts a series of personal experiences to illustrate crucial moments of cultural, organisational and technological change within the history of news reporting. Combining entertaining professional anecdotes with key events that succeed in capturing the spirit of the times, he describes how the press lost its role as gatekeeper, transferred its power to big media corporations and reinvented itself in the process. Situating AI technologies and a movement beyond human cognition as the latest point of inflection in the production and consumption of news, Markoff muses on the threats that an upsurge in bots and fake traffic pose to democracy, raising important questions about the future role of humans in journalism—and the workplace.

In "Dark Materials: Media, Machines, Markets", Graham Murdock uncovers the simultaneously material and invisible costs of our contemporary mode of media production and distribution. Just as the elusive dark matter makes up most of the universe we live in, the majority of our digital media systems are also made up and supported by an immense complex that, for the most part, remains hidden from view. Whether in terms of concealed social and ecological costs, or in terms of veiled ideological operations shaping our conceptions of media, it is the very material dimensions of communication that we must place at the centre of our analyses of media futures. Noting that much of the so called "new materialism" tends to sidestep questions of power and responsibility, Murdock revisits the development of communications under digital capitalism from a Marxist perspective. In doing so, he makes the case that a critical political economy framework remains one of the best available starting points for an interrogation of that which manages to remain hidden in plain sight—depleting resources, overconsumption of energy and the generation of waste.

Meanings of media

The second section explores a range of interrelated meanings of media, combining ecological, cultural, and systemic perspectives.

Sean Cubitt's contribution makes us think about the unity between communication, community and mediation. In "A Community of Media: There Is a There There", Cubitt uses a photograph of an "uncontacted" Amazonian tribe as a means to scrutinise our assumptions of universality and consider how certain imagined externalities—community or the natural—are able to amass critical immunity. Showing that the very existence of a seemingly innocuous photograph is intimately tied to (material) circuits of datafication, commodification, and energy consumption, he argues that, in helping us to perpetuate the myth of an 'unpolluted' community living outside of capital, even the most "innocent" of images can operate as an ideological device to sustain capitalist forms of accumulation. Reflecting upon imaginary boundaries that fabricate a sense of alterity that tends to gravitate towards the poles of nostalgia and utopia, he argues that the categories of community and communication do not "precede" mediation—they are adjacent to it; and thus, equally instrumental in the production of particular forms of subjectivity.

In “Media as Cultural Techniques: From Inscribed Surfaces to Digital Interfaces”, Sybille Krämer interrogates a popular strand of contemporary scholarship that conceives of media as sovereign agents with the power to create what they convey. She wonders if it is possible to disrupt the tendency of ‘media fundamentalism’ in such research (through a revisitation of ideas from “old school” interpretations that understood media in terms of *transmission*). For Krämer, the basic principle of a medium is to make perceptible the otherwise unseen—to facilitate exchange between dissimilar domains that are not readily accessible to one another. However, because a medium can only make something present through the process of its own withdrawal, media also have the ability to “make what they mediate seem unmediated” (p. 79), and thus to operate below the threshold of perception. Reminding us that a medium always arises from a space in between the observed and the unobserved, Krämer succeeds in making the point that the mediating function combines the paradigms of generation and transmission—it requires a theory that remains sensitive to the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, proper to all forms of translation.

From a systemic and ecological view Lance Strate's chapter “Understanding ‘Medium’ in the Context of the Media Ecology Tradition” continues to expand our definitions of media beyond the purely material or symbolic. Starting from McLuhan's famous proposition—suspending our concerns for “content” in order to pay attention to *the medium itself*—Lance Strate provides an account of the significance that the term ‘medium’ has for the media ecology tradition. This field of enquiry starts from the premise that media is not so much something that we ‘use’: it is constitutive of the *environments* we live in. From this perspective, media is not simply the product of culture, but the very substratum where a culture lives, reproduces and evolves. Covering early interpretations, diverging uses and semantic distinctions of the terms medium and media, Strate emphasises the effect of ‘invisibility’ that the routinisation of our communicational practices has on our perception of any given medium. In more general terms, there is always a dynamic tension between augmentation and attenuation happening in all forms of mediation.

Organs and organization

The third section bundles together three essays that, in their own particular ways, contemplate the possibility of conceptualising mediation as a form of intervention.

In “Between Media Studies and Organizational Communication: Organizing as the Creation of Organs”, François Cooren and Frédéric Matte turn our attention to a revelatory historical division in the field of communication: between those who are primarily interested in the study of media, and those who are mainly interested in the study of interactions. The source of both sides’ mutual disciplinary ignorance is located in a theoretical predilection for either humans or technologies. Cooren and Matte set out to explore alternatives for narrowing down the conceptual gap between these two disciplinary poles. Finding fertile ground in the semantic kinship between the terms ‘medium’ and ‘organ’, they develop this analogy further and demonstrate its heuristic value through a case study that offers an interesting way of combining the relational characteristic of media with the mediated nature of interactions.

In “Paradigms for Creative Industry Research”, Angela McRobbie provides an overview of creative labour studies, offering some pointers for future areas of research and ascertaining the relevance that this field has for a wider media studies audience. She discusses three prevailing paradigms in the field of creative economy: cultural policy, ‘space-labour’ and art theory, and then proceeds to propose a fourth: the place of the object—which puts an emphasis on materiality—the

social life of objects and the agency of things. This proposal emerges after an interrogation of forms of social enterprise, the organisation of creative industries and the logic of creative labour. Doing so leads her to advocate a sociology of artistic production that is much more sensitive to the socio-economic circumstances that determine what is it that ‘can be made’.

In “The Politics of Mediation: Colonization to Co-Generative Democracy”, Stanley Deetz offers a contextualising overview of the politics of mediation. He explores the role of mediation processes in the reformation of democracy through what he calls “politically attentive relational constructionism”. Springing from a relational ontology that emphasises the co-emergence of observer and world—or rather, the co-construction between a way of encountering and what is encountered—this framework seeks to reclaim indeterminacy and otherness as key elements of experience. For Deetz, such a perspective would allow us to build up a politics of decision-making that is particularly attentive to the ways in which relations of power are embedded in our social constructions, as well as to recognise how the same solutions that enable us to see and act in specific ways also blind us from considering possible alternatives. Reconceiving mediation in light of this would allow us to better appreciate the potential productivity inherent to forms of political antagonism, resulting in a willingness to design modes of interaction that would ultimately enhance democratic co-operation.

Engagement and extensions

Contributions in the fourth section investigate the possibilities and consequences of the proliferating modes of mediation, engagement and augmentation brought by networked digital technologies.

In “Phantasmal Selves: Computational Approaches to Understanding Virtual Identities”, D. Fox Harrell sets out to imagine different ways in which we could use computing technologies to expose and understand the values we build into virtual identity systems. By reminding us that systems of identity are also systems of *classification* with a tangible influence on our sense of self and our perspectives on others, this contribution helps us to think about some of the unforeseen social impacts that poorly designed systems might yield in the future. Offering several critical examples of projects that aim to serve positive user needs and values, Harrell criticises the dream of having total mastery over how we digitally present ourselves.

One of the earliest promises of computer technology was to simplify tasks so as to expand our available time. Several decades later, as Amber Case notes in “Calm Technology/Media and the Limits of Attention”, it seems to be doing the exact opposite: commanding our routines, overwhelming our attention and demanding more and more of our free time. In spite of the fact that attention seems to have become a tremendously scarce resource, we keep on designing smart devices as though they are willing to give their undevoted attentiveness. Going back to the paradigms of ‘calm’ and ‘ubiquitous’ in which devices are meant to operate unobtrusively from the background, Case discusses some of the necessary principles for designing technological products that can enrich our lives in an age of information overload—and attention scarcity.

In “The Next Internet”, Vincent Mosco takes a more cautionary and critical stance, discussing some of the implications and risks associated with the next stage in digital development. Describing the convergence of cloud computing, big data analytics, machine learning and the Internet of Things (IoT) as nothing short of an *ontological shift*, Mosco goes beyond the hyped dreams of non-stop leisure, friction-free capitalism or the ‘Singularity’ to reveal some of the major social, environmental and political challenges that the ‘Next Internet’ will confront us with. In a world of

total and ubiquitous connectivity to sensors and real-time analytics—what would happen to the concentration of power? In a moment when media become embedded everywhere—would it even make any sense to talk about experience and mediation as separate categories? Against such a scenario, Mosco considers the possibility of giving the Next Internet a public utility status, enabling a greater degree of public control than the dispersed commercial system we have today.

Biomediations

Exploring biomediation and biosemiotics, the fifth section of the volume expands our understanding of what a medium is by contemplating the possibility of informational 'organisms' and 'living' media.

In “Biological Dimensions of Media Ecology and Its Relationship to Biosemiotics”, physicist Robert K. Logan suggests that understanding media ecology today requires us to think beyond humans and their devices—it requires us to consider the interactions, emergent dynamics and co-evolutionary nature of the apparently distinct realms of technology, biology and culture. Treating media as ‘organisms’ that both adapt to and have an impact on their environments, Logan extends the ‘biotic agency’ metaphor through the notions of replication, competition, symbiosis and survival, expanding our current view of media ecology and opening new directions for its study.

In “Biomediations: From ‘Life in Media’ to ‘Living Media’”, Joanna Zylińska uses the concept of ‘biomediations’ as a tool to both rethink the intrinsic relationship between media activity and life, and to outline her own philosophy of media. Starting from the proposition that what we call media ‘objects’ is nothing but the provisional stabilisation of a complex series of entangled and dynamic processes, she goes on to discuss the various forms of interchange between these entities and their milieus in terms of a processual and relational ontology. Significantly, the notion of biomediations is also meant to open up an ethical dimension of responsibility—producing an image of the world requires making a ‘cut’ in the ceaseless flow of biomediations, which also necessarily means framing reality in an arbitrary (and politically meaningful) manner.

In “Lynn Herschman Leeson: The Infinity Engine”, Ingeborg Reichle integrates many of the ideas presented in this volume into a discussion of the art installations of Lynn Herschman Leeson—an artist exploring how new biotechnologies challenge our notions of human identity. Inviting us to think about the relationship between art, media and everyday life, Reichle describes how DNA sequencing, biometrics, genetic surveillance and other forms of biomediation are able to recast some of our most fundamental concepts—including our notions of past, present and future (thereby shifting ethical boundaries and fostering new forms of social control).

Repair and metamedia

The sixth and final section explores the possibility of using the notions of ‘metamedia’ and ‘repair’ as bridges between poetics and political economy, creating new opportunities for inter-disciplinary co-inquiry.

In “No Issues without Media: The Changing Politics of Public Controversy in Digital Societies”, Noortje Marres uses the ‘Dieselgate’ controversy to examine the mutual roles that technology and media play in the articulation of public scandals. Digital devices begin to determine the cultural processes of rating and ranking, on the one hand, and controversy begins to serve more and more as an instrument of publicity, on the other. In this moment, Marres invites us to re-consider the critical importance that the mediatization of technological objects has in the conferral of normative, moral

and political capacities to non-human entities. This in turn helps us to think through what is needed for public accountability to be 'truly enacted' in digital societies.

In “The Poetics and Political Economy of Repair”, Steven J. Jackson and Lara Houston deploy the notion of 'repair' to explore how the relational, experiential and affective dimensions of media infrastructures relate to their material, structural and economic dimensions. Things (designed, produced and used) not only become obsolete or break down, but they are also *put back together* in different ways, exemplifying cultural conceptions of estimation, resilience and care. Bringing poetics and political economy together, they emphasise key features of infrastructure and discuss how media studies can best incorporate these different modes of attending to the world.

Finally, Jeremy Swartz closes the collection of essays with “Metamedia”. In this last chapter, he offers a conceptualisation of ‘metamedia’ as a constantly unfolding space of symbiosis between habits and habitats. Drawing from cognitive linguistics and 'radial category analysis', he stresses the need for a more extensive and transdisciplinary notion of metamedia, one that would enable us to reimagine what it means to do research about society and the world around us.

Although the notions of medium, media, and mediation have become nearly inseparable from most aspects of human experience, a great deal of the theoretical tools we use to make sense of them still reflect the ethos of a time in which we used to regard them as being ‘separate’ from our communicational practices and meaning-making capabilities.

Questioning the legitimacy of several boundaries meant to keep the arts, humanities, and natural sciences at a “safe distance” from one another, this edited collection pushes scholars—communication and media scholars in particular—to reconsider many of their assumptions, conventions and discipline-oriented reductionisms.

More immersive, integrative and flexible conceptions of media are a necessity—not just for the sake of epistemic accuracy, but as a matter of strategic competence. We are in dire need of new and better conceptual tools, ones that can deploy the meliorative praxes needed to face the unprecedented challenges of our time. This volume takes a decisive step in that direction, serving as an antidote to the all too frequent compulsion for dissection and segmentation that characterises a great deal of theoretical enquiries of media.

Author Bio

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