

From:

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Media, Culture, and Mediality

New Insights into the Current State of Research

May 2010, 464 p., 39,80 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-1376-6

Current culturally oriented media studies have significantly advanced central concepts such like »mediality«, »media culture«, »media discourse« and »procedures of media«.

Focused on this newly defined terminological field, this volume presents landmark contributions for media studies providing new insights into the current state of research on media theory and media culture, simultaneously developing an agenda for future research.

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Preface

IRMELA SCHNEIDER, ERIKA LINZ, AND LUDWIG JÄGER

I.

Among the formative developments of the 20th century with far-reaching consequences for the relationship between media, communication and culture are the differentiations, expansions and modifications of communication technologies. The dissemination of audiovisual media at the beginning of the 20th century has led to changes in the relationship between text and image as well as to shifts in the relational structure between speaking and writing, between orality and literacy. Since the middle of the 20th century, television was the medium that took root, making audiovisuality into a constitutive factor of culture, challenging the boundaries of established differentiations—for example, between globality and locality or between the public and the private realms. With the pervasive expansion of computer technology and the development of networked communication towards the end of the 20th century, renewed shifts in cultural structures could be experienced leading to transformations in the various communicative cultures. These changes on the one hand focused the attention on the increased importance of media for culture and communication in societies, while on the other hand they intensified the questions regarding the development of not only technological media, but also of the developments within the complex interplay and interdependencies between media, communication and culture.

With view to the issues and perspectives, theories and methods with which cultural studies have explored the role of media and their development during this time and on the background of these historical findings, three main research directions can be differentiated in a pointed (and therefore simplified) way—leaving out the concept of media research as audience research:

For one, since the middle of the 1970s initiatives were started within the philologies to expand the research-field of their disciplines. Culture being significantly characterized by audiovisuality—by moving pictures, by technologized speech and voice—proved no longer commensurable with exclusively engaging in studies of literature

and language and their history, theory and analysis as they had thus far defined the philologies. The question now became which theories and methods should be developed in order to analyze the audiovisual media of storage and dissemination as symbolic worlds constituting an important factor of culture and society and their aesthetics. Apart from this, attention was focused on analyzing the correlations between the developments of media and the changes in communicative forms and structures of mentalities.

These undertakings can be distinguished from the second main direction of research that concentrated on technology. The central idea was that the technical *a priori* of media decide the standards and norms of choice, storage and transfer of data, thus specifying the patterns of perception and experience.

And finally, the third direction of research considered the media of dissemination as a social subsystem of functionally organized societies. Questions of the organization and operative modes of these systems as well as of their dominant differentiations characterized the analyses made from this perspective.

All three research programs were characterized significantly by the fact that technological media lay at their center; the point of departure therefore was a rather narrow understanding of the term 'medium.' This only changed with the intense response to the "Toronto School of Communication," i.e., to the writings of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Edmund Carpenter and with the debates on orality and literacy that had been inspired mainly by Eric A. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) and Jack Goody's and Ian Watt's *The Consequences of Literacy* (1963).

From this initial position, the initiative of a research group at the universities of Aachen, Bonn, and Cologne was launched in the beginning of the 1990s. The group did not come together in order to continue the previous proposals of media research. Instead, it undertook to break new ground for such research by asking new questions and proposing new perspectives. The focus now was not on technological media alone; rather, the group concentrated on the theories and the history of the relationships and the interplay between media, culture and communication. Initial questions were based on the conviction that this complex area should be analyzed both systematically and in its historical dimension in order to construct the genealogies that in the course of the 20th century had led to the self-descriptions of society as information-, knowledge-, and media-societies. This meant that the group was neither aiming at postulating a technological *a priori* of media, nor at only placing the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the pervasive increase of audiovisuality at the center. It also did not intend to analyze media of dissemination as a social system. It wanted to establish a broad termi-

nology for 'medium' and 'mediality' instead, a terminology used for media that allowed researchers to focus on the shared terrain on which 'discourse' and 'things,' technological apparatuses and social communication of meaning meet, establishing specific media-cultural configurations for historical time spans.

The guiding principle was twofold: with such a perspective and with the cooperation of different disciplines from the humanities on the one hand new and advanced insights were to be reached, while on the other the object-range of cultural studies with inter- and transdisciplinary questions was to be media-theoretically re-perspectivized. This meant that media were not defined as simply a widening of the research topic of these studies. Rather, it was necessary to examine which new insights into 'old' objects could be gained if they would be viewed anew under a media-theoretical perspective.

In January 1999, the initiative of this research group led to the founding of the collaborative research center "Media and Cultural Communication" which lasted for ten years until the end of 2008; it redefined German and international research questions regarding media, it widened their methodological and theoretical perspectives and thus lastingly shaped national and international research in this area. The group consisted of scholars in media studies, musicology, linguistics, literary studies, history and ethnology as well as in computer sciences and psychology.

Part of the most important scholarly results of the collaborative research center altogether was the shaping of the contours of a media theory oriented on cultural studies and obtaining its profile by developing an operative and difference-logical roster of terms and by structuring the media-comparative and media-historical analyses.

Proceeding by way of our guiding theoretical idea of focusing on the reciprocal relationships between media, culture and communication and of using process-oriented terminology, the group was able to avoid creating a hierarchy of concepts from the beginning; thus, it revised the known thought pattern defining culture and media via a relationship between a material basis and its 'spiritual' superstructure. The guiding methodical and difference-logical patterns of thought also excluded elevating any one of the terms—let us say 'communication'—to a basic category substantiating everything else. This means that cultures neither were marginalized as mere secondary phenomena of certain media technologies, nor were they defined as substantially opposed to media understood primarily from a technological point of view. Rather, the group's investigations centered on a media-theoretical analysis of the roles of media in forming culture and communication. This operative turn meant that the procedures of media took center stage. Focusing on procedures in its turn led to conceptualizing media and multimedia as infrastruc-

tural systems that form cultures and their perceptual, epistemological and communicative systems.

Thus, one central strategy of our research was the refusal to limit our conceptual work regarding the term 'medium' by definitions or stipulations. Rather, the discussions made us realize that we should reformulate questions of *what* into questions of *how*. Our focus now became not so much *what* a medium is but rather *how* media operate, i.e., which operational logic they are following on the one hand, and which ones they develop while processing on the other. Thus, we were able to compare different media operations synchronically and diachronically. The results of these discussions can be generalized in the following observation: There is only one constructive way of proceeding; namely, by framing methods and problem areas one connects a generalizing theoretical approach regarding media to certain concrete, historically and culturally specifiable problem areas.

An encompassing concept of media crystallized and established itself in the discussions of the research center integrating quite different, 'coexisting' techniques of generating, distributing and 'legibilizing' meaning apart from those electronic technologies of storing, distributing and processing data that already could be found at the center of public interest for several decades. In this broad sense, not only electronic or classical media of storage and dissemination like books, manuscripts, pictures or films are media but also the human body as a carrier of communication and the anthropological and cultural medium language.

Working on the term 'medium' necessitated developing a further differentiation extending beyond 'medium' toward the field of 'mediality.' The term 'mediality' as worked on and developed by the research center—and that is therefore by now firmly grounded in scholarly discussions—indicates that cultural artifacts and communicative processes are fundamentally organized by media; thus the approach integrates into the media-theoretical analysis also those anthropological means of expression and forms of communication that remain hidden in a use of the term 'medium' that is centered on technology or primarily oriented on sociological questions. Moreover, such an expansion of the term 'medium' allows for the systematic analysis of inter- and multimedial constellations to supersede the monomedial study of individual media. Here, the focus is not on one medium but on media in media.

The transdisciplinary and methodological reflection of the basic research theories characterizing the aims of the research center was decisively promoted by its specific structure, i.e., by the inter-university cooperation and the resulting wide spectrum of the various disciplines cooperating in the research center. Taking various questions from cultural and media studies as its point of departure, this

specific research situation allowed for the development of analytical instruments through which traditional fields in cultural studies and other fields of the humanities could be reconceptualized media-theoretically. During this research process and beyond it, new questions and perspectives regarding the by now almost 'classical' technological media emerged, also affecting the theory and history of the media of dissemination that in cultural studies continue to remain underdeveloped. And as a final point, with these media-theoretical terminological categories and the analytical instruments differentiated by them, the research center has created a basis for the analysis of the dynamic deployments of media in the 21st century.

The basic foundations that made the research at the center possible for ten years were generous grants from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) and the state of Nordrhein Westfalen, as well as the sustained support of the participating universities.

II.

The research center was divided into three project areas individually focused on a particular research field, cooperating with and connected to each other. The main terms and differentiations developed in these three project areas were the decisive factors for the organization of the present anthology.

The contributions in the *first part* of this volume are the results of the first project area centering on *mediality* and the problematization of media differences. The question with which concepts and models media differences could be differentiated and terminologically grasped occupied a large part of the discussions. Looking at the history reflecting media shows that media differences constituted a central thematic area almost since the beginnings of the history of media. However, while in this venerable history the theoretical model comprehending media and their differences with ontologizing descriptions was widely spread, the goals of the research group was aiming at conceptualizing media procedurally. Mediality has to be reflected upon both from the perspective of generating and of processing differences. Through this perspective, media changes, media upheavals, media competitions, or the co-presence of individual media can be observed as media differences, while at the same time and beyond this terminology allows for meaning to be generated simply by the reciprocal reference of media to each other.

Media are defined by difference, but they are also required to bridge this difference. This applies to media platforms or to media within media whose heterogeneity is visible since they are conceptu-

alized as monomedia with terms like writing, image, film, television or computer only retrospectively (in the sense of a constitutive deferral of meaning); it also holds true for 'archimedia' like natural languages since they, too, are mixed media.

Media differences produce multiple practices of recoding (commenting, paraphrasing, etc.) and it is these practices that have the function to make unreadable or difficult to read works readable or to disrupt established semantic conventions. We might say that these are procedures and activities constituting culture.

The *second part* of this volume incorporates another project area concentrating on the analysis of *discourses*, specifically media discourses. The term 'media discourse' does not in the first place refer to those elements communicated by media; rather, it refers above all to what is said or written about media. Reference can be made here both to individual media and to media in the sense of a *plurale tantum*. Reconstructing and analyzing media discourses does not ask about social and cultural references in order to describe media as indicators of specific socio-cultural developments. It is rather the pragmatic function of such discourses, i.e., these discourses are always also involved as factors in the processes they are describing. Media discourses form media as dispositives and the politics thereby entered into them can create specific dispositive regimes. Our analyses have shown that discursive events have a disruptive potential so that they can delay or divert the development of media dispositives. Thus, discourses contribute to stabilizing and transforming the terrain of what can be said about or done with media. As the analyses show, practices of discourse are not supplementary semantic operations that are added to media 'as such' and that therefore could also be missing; on the contrary, media discourses are a constitutive factor of media processes.

The analysis of media discourses on the one hand was aimed at reconstructing the historically necessary epistemological conditions for bringing up the subject of media and constituting them as objects of a media theory. On the other hand, the research groups were interested in the cultural options and scopes of action disclosed by a specific knowledge of media. And thirdly, they were concerned with analyzing the body of statements regarding the patterns of argumentation and the use of rhetorical strategies. With this broad material basis it was possible to frame considerations on the function of media discourses as continuing social self-characterizations circulating in a constellation that casts the assumption of a 'self' of society severely into doubt.

A *third area* of research was directed at analyzing the *procedures* defining cultures of communication. Given its media parameters and its conditions of a maximized diversification of knowledge and of

target groups, our initial consideration was that communication is a highly fragile process. Therefore, the question arises how under the present conditions communication is at all possible (not in a normative sense but regarding connectability) and what strategies and methods are generated stabilizing successful communication. With these questions in mind, the groups focused on the aesthetics and modes shaping cultures of communication.

With regard to the socio-cultural level of differentiation attained today, it became decisive for the research to realize that inter- and intracultural communication could be successful only if it could fall back on methods of interdiscursive and intermedial reference. Exemplary analyses of various methods occupied with this project area are contained in the *third part* of this volume. The analyses show in what way certain modes of stating and indicating, of speaking and expressing, and of their aesthetics emerge from the differences of approaches.

III.

Apart from the individual work of the authors, all contributions are also a result of intense and continued discussions between the members of the research center. They have developed from the exchange of ideas regarding the exploration of problem-fields and they matured from debates on terms and methods of thought processes. In this respect the contributions are also a result of a sort of collective authorship that emerges as a welcome side effect from a long-lasting research collaboration such as this one.

The limited dimension of a book made selection necessary. This has created particular problems for us, the editors, since first of all we had to choose from a multiplicity of excellent contributions originating from this research center. Secondly, as members of the research center, and therefore of a research group, we did not want to exclude anyone. Members of the center whose contributions are not included in this volume will nevertheless recognize their contributions to the discussions included in the materials printed here.

As editors we owe our thanks to all who have contributed to the discussions—especially to the members of the research center, but also to the colleagues of the three universities and last but not least to the numerous national and international guests who have supported the research done at the center with lectures, workshops, and in discussions.

We would also like to thank Anna Bienefeld for the typesetting of this book. And our particular gratitude goes to Brigitte Pichon and Dorian Rudnytsky for the careful attention they gave to the transla-

tion of the essays as well as for their editorial help with the typographic layout.

Translated by Brigitte Pichon and Dorian Rudnytsky