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## Configuring Media Theory

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Reading Larissa Hjorth's *Mobile Media in the Asia Pacific*, I come across the following passage:

The mobile phone is a key indicator of the region's accelerated rise into twenty-first-century post-modernity. Moreover, as symbolic of the shift from the mobile phone to mobile media in the region, the young female consumer has attracted much focus as the multimedia transforms user-producer models of consumption and production towards 'produser' paradigms (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Extending upon Alvin Toffler's (1980) theory that consumers are increasingly being part of the production process in the form of 'prosumers', Axel Bruns utilises the rubric of the 'produser' to address arising forms of creativity and expression within contemporary networked media.<sup>1</sup>

Striking here is the temporal gap between the futurist predictions about the transformation of consumption practices – articulated in Toffler's 1980 book, *The Third Wave* – and the uptake by Bruns a full 26 years later. Why is it that 26 years after Toffler modeled the active user, "produser" enters the vocabulary of critical media theory? To what historical condition should we attribute this lag? And more importantly: *should we consider Alvin Toffler's work as media theory?* This last question asks us to query the purview and boundaries of media theory as such. This is a political problem that cuts both ways. If we delimit media theory to critical theory (in which Bruns is on the right side of the delineation, while Toffler, the futurologist and apologist for late capital, is located on the wrong side, and hence is not theory) then we might well by the same gesture also be delimiting which regions of the world

produce theory. In anticipation – and indeed, excitement – for the emergence of this new journal, *Media Theory*, might we have to reopen the unanswerable question, what is (media) theory?<sup>2</sup> And perhaps more pertinently to a moment that follows the postcolonial critique of theory and its often West-centered bias, might we not have to ask about the location of media theory?<sup>2</sup> This question of location is at once one of geography, as well as of genre or industry (for instance: the educational sector and its associated publishers, versus for-profit presses).

Media theory as we know it rests on particular regimes of print capitalism and its exceptions, with non-commercial university presses in North America (Duke, Minnesota) or alternative, niche commercial presses (Verso, Polity) in the UK publishing the bulk of English language theory. (Calling a press alternative is perhaps something of a misnomer, since Polity, for instance, is owned by John Wiley and Sons, a publicly traded company which, according to its Investor Relations page, “aims to enhance shareholder value through outstanding business performance and effective communication with its shareholders”<sup>3</sup> – a goal in which we might assume Polity plays a part.) It follows that these remain arbiters of a sort for what counts as theory. It also follows that different systems of print capitalism in other countries would have different standards and properties, distinct forms of circulation that in turn produce different kinds of theory.

Allow me to be more concrete. I recently had the pleasure of seeing a volume I co-edited with Alexander Zahlten arrive in print: *Media Theory in Japan*. This book is a product of years of thinking about how to frame Japanese media theory, and media theorization that takes place in Japan, years of thinking about how to make room for the diversity of theoretical forms we and our incredible contributors had experienced or been a part of in the Japanese context, without also making this into a culturalist “exotic Japan” book. Our solution – and indeed the goal from the outset – was to build in routes and means by which the issues we and our contributors engaged with could work back into media theoretical debates and questions being engaged with in our own places of work – North America, Europe, and Japan. Whether we succeeded or not time will tell, but one of the issues that was most important to us was to acknowledge that media theory in Japan might read, look and feel different

than media theory as it is currently understood and configured in Europe and North America. In what follows I will take the liberty of raising some issues that relate to both the founding of this journal, and to the editing of the *Media Theory in Japan* collection, a process that has both impacted my thinking about the topic this journal addresses, and is fresh in my mind.<sup>4</sup>

Media theory is a *configuration* more than it is a definable entity. For example, media theory in Japan in the 2000s played out in for-profit paperback editions as much as in academic presses. As a result of this mode of circulation, there was a take-up of theory by a wider general public, who came to theory through wide circulation monthly magazines like *Eureka* or *Contemporary Thought (Gendai shiso)*, whose issues line book store magazine sections. One of the most widely read media theorists, Azuma Hiroki, quit his university job and started his own café, publishing company and event space, Genron. Another, Hamano Satoshi, started a (now defunct?) girl-idol producing project (Platonics Idol Platform) after writing a book on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Before discounting these writers as fame-seekers who prefer the TV spotlight to the life of a *maître penseur*, and before critiquing them as emblematic of the neo-liberalization of the domain of thought and the perverted creators of a quite literal marketplace of ideas – we might ask if we have something to learn from this peculiar situation in which media theorists might themselves be media figures.<sup>6</sup> Might this be another life of media theory to which we should pay attention, which would require a different reading practice – given trade paperbacks rather than academic hardcovers are their writing medium of choice – and which may in fact require a reconsideration of our own lineage of what we consider media theory?

The conclusions that derive from the above, and which are also the starting points for a new delineation of media theory include the following:

- 1) Theory's place is not just in the university
- 2) Theory can be commercial - and therefore cannot be discounted on those grounds
- 3) Theory takes place in different milieus, and also takes different forms

The third point is especially important for expanding the “where” and “when” of theoretical practice, beyond the male cliques that, particularly but by no means exclusively in Japan, govern high theory and occupy the top university posts. This means seeking out and acknowledging theoretical practice, in the manga industries, for instance, or in art practices, or within the television criticism circulated within weekly magazine serials, as are highlighted in Anne McKnight’s and Ryoko Misono’s contributions to *Media Theory in Japan*.

It also means we need to widen the scope of the institutions of media theorization. One outcome may be the need to treat – whether critically, ethnographically, redemptively or theoretically – the work coming out of think tanks, ad agencies, consultancies and so on as forms of theorization that may indeed be called media theory. Recognizing the diverse places, institutions and sites at which theoretical work takes place, means also expanding the purview of what *counts* as theory.

## **McLuhan in Japan**

Perhaps there is no better way of exploring the ramifications of this than by turning to someone regarded as the ur-media theorist, Marshall McLuhan. In what follows, I’ll briefly summarise the feverish reception of Marshall McLuhan in Japan in the late 1960s, drawing on my own contribution to *Media Theory in Japan*. The McLuhan craze in Japan was brief, but intense. It began in late 1966, and had all but died out by mid-1968 barely lasting long enough to see the translation of *Understanding Media*, which appeared in November 1967. Far more popular than the translation of *Understanding Media* was the 1967 *McLuban’s World* (Makurūhan no sekai), a work of applied McLuhanism by a man who did the most to shape the reception of the figure in Japan: Takemura Ken’ichi.<sup>7</sup> Takemura is known as the preeminent McLuhanist in Japan, and his 1967 *McLuban’s World* sold ten times more copies than the eventually translated *Understanding Media*, and made it up to #8 on the bestseller list of 1967. *McLuban’s World* was the *Understanding Media* for Japanese audiences. What marked Takemura’s work was its appeal to general audiences, and, even more significantly, its presentation of McLuhan as the prophet of the electronic age, best read by business people, salaried workers, television industry heads and marketing executives.

Takemura hence channeled a very specific McLuhan for Japanese readers: McLuhan the business visionary, McLuhan the adman, McLuhan the prophet of media industries and their transformations. And perhaps most importantly, a McLuhan localized for the Japanese context, complete with references to Japanese popular culture, ads, and politics with future predictions thrown in to boot. In Takemura's hands, McLuhan's work was living theory, easily shaped to address current trends and business discourse. Takemura himself functioned as a kind of marketing guru, or a management consultant before the fact. In fact, McLuhan's work was so marked by Takemura that we should call this phenomenon *TakeMcLuhanism*.

Two consequences follow from this telescopically compressed examination of TakeMcLuhanism. First, the phenomenon refocuses our attention on the *institutional conditions* for media theory, which in this case were the advertising industries that made the McLuhan boom what it was. The massive ad firm, Dentsū, was where McLuhan found his first home, in the form of Takemura's bi-weekly lectures on McLuhan. The broadcaster and print giant, Asahi, was TakeMcLuhan's second home, insofar as it sponsored the journal where Takemura first introduced the media theorist. Print capitalism, the media industries, and ad agencies are the major brokers and rainmakers for TakeMcLuhanism, and have had a hand in media theorization ever since.

Second, if we take the institutional conditions of media theorization seriously, then we also must rethink the relation between media theory and media practice. The lure and promise of TakeMcLuhanism was that it promised what I would call *actionable theory*. A variation on the US intelligence term *actionable intelligence* – which the US military defines as “information that is directly useful to customers”<sup>8</sup> – actionable theory implies a more immediate relation between theory and its practical consequences than is usually expected. Media theory in this case is not confined to academic circles, but rather circulates in and through the ad agencies and media industries it purports to describe. Whether it was in fact *used or useful* in the end seems almost beside the point, since what matters is its *perceived* actionability, its perceived usefulness.

We should not understand this operationalization of theory as a unique character of the Japanese media situation; while attenuated there, particularly given the privileged place of ad agencies in brokering the introduction of theory, the Japanese context brings to light a tendency that is not only specific to the media theoretical textures of Japan, but can equally be seen at work elsewhere. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, has a media persona that is not so different from that which Asada Akira had in the 1980s. McLuhan himself was criticized as a tool of capitalist corporations at the height of his popularity in North America and England.<sup>9</sup> And so on.

In a piece on the reception and financial burden of theory, “At What Cost Theory?”, Kay Dickinson points to the epistemological and financial burdens that the reliance on imported theory places on the Arab world, and institutions outside the Global North in general.<sup>10</sup> Her titular question, “At What Cost Theory?”, can be opened onto other questions, which we might raise in line with some of the issues briefly discussed above: “To What Ends Theory?” Or, “To Whose Benefit Theory?” Or, “In What Institutions Theory?” Or yet again: “In what sections of the bookstore theory?” For, if McLuhan can be turned into a management guru, surely we must consider the immense bodies of work in management and indeed futurology (returning to the status of Toffler’s work) as a kind of media theory – as Alan Liu does, for instance, in *The Laws of Cool*, where he dubs management gurus the “Victorian sages of our time.”<sup>11</sup> If TakeMcLuhan is proto-management guru, surely the large bodies of work of media management theory might also fall within the purview of this journal. This is work – perhaps like Toffler’s – that operates at the margins of self-help literature, business literature, and what we might call management consulting for the less wealthy. We might think of this work as *vernacular media theory*, a kind of everyday theory, a quotidian theory – doing to media theory what Miriam Hansen did to high modernism in her appellation of Hollywood cinema as vernacular modernism. Hansen writes: “classical Hollywood cinema could be imagined as a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity, as an industrially-produced, mass-based, vernacular modernism.”<sup>12</sup> Vernacular media theory would hence take the place of classical Hollywood cinema as a kind of everyday theory; an industrially-produced, mass-based, vernacular media theory.

To address the status of media theory in Japan, but always-already elsewhere as well, hence requires careful thinking about the status of operationalized theory or actionable theory, a willingness to embrace it as a kind of media theory, even if not *critical* media theory. This opens onto other questions around methodology and approach: how should we treat actionable theory – how can we take it seriously, not simply discount it because of its commercial ends? Do we need a method of analysis similar to that which cultural studies developed around popular culture, this time applied to popular theory? What might such a method look like?

As *Media Theory* embarks on its journey, as an open access journal – a medial configuration of access that might make of it something closer to the everyday than the pay-walled journals that circumscribe such access – we might hope that it provides the space for reflection on the very conditions for media theorization and diverse geographical and institutional sites of media theory. May the journal produce new configurations of media theorization, allowing the principle of web-based open access to creatively inflect the modes of media theory that are possible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Larissa Hjorth, *Mobile Media in the Asia Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction: The Creolization of Theory,” in Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, ed. *The Creolization of Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> “Investor Relations,” <http://ca.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-301728.html> (Accessed June 17 2017)

<sup>4</sup> I thank my co-editor Alexander Zahlten for allowing me to present some of the issues we developed collectively in the introduction to our volume, and in the general framing of the project.

<sup>5</sup> <http://tokyotorico.jp/artists/pip/> (Accessed June 26, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> The appearance of the ‘intellectual as media personality’ is perhaps traceable back to the 1980s phenomenon of ‘critical theorist as TV star’, Asada Akira, as Marilyn Ivy does in her Marilyn Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: Consumption of Knowledge in Post- modern Japan.” In *Postmodernism and Japan*, edited by Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 21–46, Alexander Zahlten has reconsidered Asada’s performance as a kind of enacted media theory in “1980s Nyū Aka: (Non)Media Theory as Romantic Performance,” in *Media Theory in Japan*, ed. Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten (Duke University Press, 2017), 200-220.

<sup>7</sup> Takemura Ken’ichi, *Takemura Ken’ichi jisenshū: Makurūban no sekai: Gendai bunmei no taishitsu to sono miraijō* (Takemura Ken’ichi’s Self-Selected Works: McLuhan’s World: The Constitution of Contemporary Civilization and its Future) (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1980), originally published as: *Makurūban no sekai: Gendai bunmei no taishitsu to sono miraijō* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1967). Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> “Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (2010, amended 2016), [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf), 1.



<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Gerald Emanuel Stearn, introduction to *McLuhan: Hot and Cool*, ed. Gerald Emanuel Stearn (New York: Signet Books, 1967),

<sup>10</sup> Kay Dickinson “At What Cost “Theory”? An Economics and Poetics of Uptake,” in *Framework* 56, No. 2, Fall 2015, pp. 433–450.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Liu, *The Lanes of Cool: Knowledge and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999), 65.

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