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Marc Steinberg, Raka Shome, David M. Berry, Ned Rossiter, Johan
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MANIFESTOS

Media Theory 1/1

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...theory', or which prefer to emphasise 'theories' or 'philosophy'

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What Is Media Theory?

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With the relative ease with which new journals can now be established, the launch of a new journal of media theory obliges us all the more to justify the need for such an endeavour (Cubitt, this issue), to argue that we do indeed need yet another journal theorising media (Shome, this issue), and to convince at least some readers that the journal deserves the name, *Media Theory* (Mitchell, this issue). For this launch issue of the journal, editorial and advisory board members were invited to set out their own views on the importance of (a new journal of) media theory. While the journal can hardly satisfy the occasionally conflicting and contradictory wishes of everyone on the boards, this special issue represents a pluralistic manifesto for the journal – manifestos for various possibilities and directions for *Media Theory*.

Media, Theory and Media Theory

Media Theory is not, therefore, a journal that privileges any particular theoretical approach, perspective or tradition to the study of media, but nor is it simply a matter of disinterestedly presenting their diversity or that of the range of theoretical concepts or tools proposed or applied in media research. Rather, in emphasising ‘media’, ‘theory’ and ‘media theory’, the journal aims to *deprovincialise* media theory by bringing into dialogue and debate the diversity of ways in which media are theorised. For despite the inherently interdisciplinary histories of the various disciplines in which media is studied internationally, there remains a tendency to restrict one’s reading to one’s own field or disciplinary, geographical or linguistic bubble, applying and developing theories without sufficient knowledge of how those theories have already been debated and developed elsewhere. And although media research has

been institutionalised in media, communication and information studies disciplines, departments, research centres and journals around the world, much of the theoretical media research continues to be done outside of those fields. In many of the most well-established (and often commercially published) media journals, the theoretical element of individual articles is often restricted to the opening literature review section of peer-reviewed, empirical ‘research’ articles, while articles that are devoted to theoretical engagement and close reading of theoretical texts are demoted to un-peer-reviewed ‘commentary’ sections. Conversely, the more ‘theoretical’ media journals (normally more recently established, online and open access) tend to focus on particular schools or, if they are explicitly open-goaled and interdisciplinary, to either privilege dialogue between particular approaches or disciplines, or to feature multiple disciplinary approaches without much evidence of dialogue or rapprochement between them. This journal aims to offer the best of both these types of media journal, as well as those non-media-related journals that privilege theoretical exploration and debate, with a particular focus on transcending theoretical, disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

The aim is not to establish a particular theory of any particular media, or to present the various theories of the various media; it is rather to theorise media by unravelling and teasing apart, by undermining and critiquing, and by providing genealogical accounts of alternative attempts at theorising media. To do so necessitates the transcending and transgressing of disciplinary boundaries, and the bringing into dialogue of diverse theoretical approaches. The journal will endeavour to encourage the Marxists as well as the Foucauldians, the media historians as well as the media archaeologists, those who follow in the footsteps of Williams as well as those who stand on the shoulders of McLuhan, and those from within the British cultural and media studies tradition as well as those within German cultural techniques and media theory, to write as much for each other as for the already converted, resisting the temptation to settle for the journal becoming an echo chamber for any one approach. For *Media Theory*, to theorise is therefore to ‘make, adapt, stretch and compact distinctions between terms that are generally familiar’ (Baehr, 2000: xix), to ‘dismantle’ traditions (Baehr, 2000: xlv), to ‘flush out assumptions’ (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 30), to reconstruct the genealogy of theorisations and to reveal the

‘dissension of things’ (Foucault, 1977: 142); it is the “never-finished task and vocation of undermining philosophy as such, of unravelling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds” (Jameson, 2009: 59). Unlike (media) philosophy, (media) theory must always return to the stuff of media (Cubitt, this issue) and to its own mediation (Mitchell, this issue). On one level, this means continually asking the question, what is, or are, media? More than a particular technology or industry, anything can become a medium – from sex to seismographs, from chlorophyll to cash (Cubitt, this issue), from a grain of sand to the universe (Mitchell, this issue) – but not everything is always-already a medium. Infinite, indefinite (Mitchell, this issue) and ‘intrinsically plural as object’ (Cubitt, this issue), there is nevertheless always something outside media – the *unmediated*, the *immediate*, the presentation as opposed to the *representation* (Mitchell, this issue). One task is thus to perpetually reconceptualise what concerns us as the shared object of our studies, refusing consensus on what is to be included or excluded.

Thus far, the contributions to the journal have been from mostly – if, thankfully, not yet dead – white men from the global north. If the journal is to be effective in its pursuit of deprovincialising media theory, then more effort needs to be made to include and engage with theories and theorists from normally neglected communities and locations. The effort to deprovincialise media theory goes beyond inclusion of and dialogue with multiple disciplines, locations, identities and perspectives, however; it means decolonising and geopoliticising theory (Shome, this issue) and generating a critique of media power.

Aware of its own mediation as an online and open access journal, *Media Theory* will aim to be a journal that is both recognisably an academic journal, by paying heed to scholarly conventions, as well as something new, by challenging those conventions and what we have come to expect an academic journal to be. Adhering for the most part to referencing conventions, the double-blind peer-review process, publishing ethics, indexing and archiving, and publishing articles with a creative commons licence that ensures the integrity and authorship of the article, we will nevertheless be open to experiments in radical open access publishing, including the possibility of open peer-review and remixing content.

At the heart of the project behind this journal, therefore, is a focus on deprovincialisation (media theory from the global south; queering media theory; etc.), radicalising open access publishing (remixing; rethinking peer-review; theorising ‘openness’ and ‘access’), and problematising the concepts of ‘media’, ‘theory’ and ‘media theory’, as well as a conscious and consistent endeavour to bring into contact and into dialogue diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, so as to develop a transnational and transdisciplinary forum of debate on media theory and academic publishing. *Media Theory* is thus both an academic journal on media theory, and an opportunity to self-reflexively critique and debate what media theory and academic journals are, have been and could possibly be.

Media, Metaphor and Representation

The first section opens with essays on media, metaphor and representation, beginning with W.J.T. Mitchell’s metaphorical reflection on what we talk about when we talk about media: ‘Counting Media: Some Rules of Thumb’. Distinguishing between five overlapping and contradictory rules of media (the rules of none, one, two, three and all), Mitchell insists on the need for media theory to engage with media ‘on its own field’, to question its own antitheses and to be self-reflexive about its own metalanguage. Setting out the three basic orders of media – images/sounds/words – and mapping them onto other familiar triads from the history of media theory, from icon/index/symbol to gramophone/film/typewriter, he also reminds us that media is itself one part of a triad: that between sender and receiver in the transmission/communication model. Ultimately, he argues, media can be both everything and nothing, while everything and nothing are, in turn, always potentially media. Beyond the unambitious and yet impossible task of simply defining, listing and counting all these different potential types of media, or asking when and how something becomes media, Mitchell argues that the task of media theory is to provide an ‘account of such counting’; of the ways in which we have theorised media, as much as a theory of media itself.

For Liam Cole Young, such attempts at triadic thinking highlight the importance of imagination, conceptual modelling, speculative thinking and experimental writing to media theory. In his article, ‘Imagination and Literary Media Theory’, Young laments

the waning importance of literary studies (in favour of communication studies and anthropology) to media theory, reminding us that imagination – as object as well as method – has been an “engine” that has driven media theoretical debates over the past sixty years or so. In emphasising the imaginative thinking, close reading and experimentalism of the literary stream, Young shows how media theory has been able to ground abstract ideas in material, discursive and technical contexts that have otherwise been neglected by more historical or philosophical approaches. In light of the contemporary complexities of everyday life and new forms of computation, commerce and governance, he argues that a return to the literary roots of media theory could help provide the new metaphors we need to understand the relation between technological and social change.

For Scott McQuire, we must continue to question the general understanding of ‘media’, where ‘mediation’ is seen as the production of ‘signs’ related to or representing something – such as voice, experience or event – that is somewhere else. In ‘Media Theory 2017’, he looks back at Derrida’s theorising of ‘writing’ in *Of Grammatology* to argue for the contemporary importance of theorising presence, absence and temporality in media that have become digital, mobile and ubiquitous. Despite numerous media studies attempts at theorising the secondariness, supplementarity and representationality of media, McQuire argues that new terms and concepts are needed if we are to understand the ways in which profound changes in all that we have understood as media – “in terms of scale, integration with everyday life, transformation of the archive, and the growing convergence of media platforms with other domains such as transport, logistics, finance, health, and e-commerce” – constitute a new register of experience that requires a radical rethinking of assumed relations of presence and absence.

Locating Media, Theory and Society

Responding to transformations in, and the increasing imbrication of, media technologies and society is often presented as the study of ‘media and society’, where ‘society’ could mean ‘anything else’, and where any theoretical engagement is with a separate body of (non-media-centric) knowledge developed within other disciplines. There has in recent years, however, been a debate on whether or not media theory

should be privileging media-centric approaches instead. In considering the merits of the two approaches in 'The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate', Terry Flew situates them within wider and more historical debates about the relation between materiality and discourse in the work of Hall, Laclau & Mouffe and others, as well as in the debate between McLuhan and Williams on, respectively, the media's influence on society or the social shaping of media. Turning to the mediasphere, medium theory, media ecologies, mediation and mediatization, Flew argues that the journal should be open to consideration of those perspectives on the media that come from within the study of media itself, and engage in more speculative accounts of where our media technologies may be leading us socially, culturally, politically and economically.

In retheorising 'media' and its boundaries, it becomes essential to reconsider the boundaries of 'media theory' too, and, in 'Configuring Media Theory', Marc Steinberg questions the provincialisation of media theory by asking 'what counts as (media) theory?'. If we are delimiting media theory to critical theory, then we ignore those theorists, such as Alvin Toffler, that fall on the wrong side of the divide. Likewise, we may also be delimiting which regions of the world produce theory. For Steinberg, the need to locate media theory is a question of genre and industry, as well as of geography, as different systems of print capitalism in other countries would produce academic publications with different standards and forms, which would in turn produce different kinds of theory. Considering the diversity of types, media and milieux of theory conducted in Japan, by media figures, artists and entrepreneurs in popular paperbacks, manga and weekly magazines for general and professional readerships, as well as university lecturers writing in hardbacks produced for their students and colleagues by commercial academic publishers or university presses, he proposes that media theory is thus a 'configuration' more than a definable entity as such; one that requires us to reflect upon the institutional and geographical conditions of media theorisation.

In doing so, we can more ambitiously aim to geopoliticise and decolonise media studies, producing new epistemological frames within which to study media. This is what, in her article, 'Going South and Engaging Non-Western Modernities', Raka

Shome argues the journal should be doing. Taking issue with the ‘comparing media systems’ and ‘media/communication and development’ approaches, as well as the more recent emphasis on ‘dewesternising media studies’, Shome argues that they tend to position Southern media (studies) in opposition to those in an invisible North/West. For Shome, therefore, theorising media – rethinking “what media means, what it can mean, its histories, its scope of operations, and even the objects that may count as media” – is a question of geopoliticising knowledge production and non-Western mediated modernities on their own terms. Such a task also entails rethinking what ‘theory’ might be in relation to media and media studies.

Machinic World

The urgent need to develop new theories and concepts to keep up with rapid technological and social change has always been an important rationale for media theory. Today, as abstract data is captured, stored and analysed by machine learning systems in increasingly complex ways, new conceptual models for thinking about machine learning and artificial intelligence are required if we are to understand and critique what is happening beneath the surface of these new computational forms. In his ‘Prolegomenon to a Media Theory of Machine Learning: Compute-Computing and Compute-Computed’, David M. Berry attempts to do just this by drawing on Spinoza’s distinction between *Natura naturans* (‘naturing Nature’) and *Natura naturata* (‘natured Nature’) to think through the difference between constitutive and operative types of machine learning. In suggesting these concepts, he draws out the significance of recent developments in this complex technological field not just for media theory and digital humanities, but for social theory and human attention too.

Despite acknowledging the significance of algorithms to our everyday lives, however, most of us have no idea how they actually work, nor of the extent to which our tastes and desires are shaped by machinic operations. While Berry interrogates the medium specificity of algorithms and software to understand the former, Ned Rossiter considers the algorithmic production of subjectivity and affect in order to propose a response to the latter. In ‘Paranoia is Real: Algorithmic Governance and the Shadow of Control’, Rossiter responds to recent debates on fake news and post-truth politics to argue that meaning and truth are tied less to representation these

days (if we accept that we have moved from a logocentric to a machinic world) than to algorithmic calculations of anticipation and pre-emption. The task becomes, therefore, one of developing techniques and tactics to assist our political and subjective orientation in worlds of algorithmic governance and data economies.

But ‘What Are the Theoretical Lessons when Agnostic Hacker Politics Turn to the Right?’, asks Johan Söderberg. How do we stop these new techniques and tactics being hijacked by corporations or by the far right? Although originally allied with left-liberal causes, for example, Internet subcultures and discussion forums provided the breeding ground for the return to the mainstream of neo-fascists and white supremacists under the self-proclaimed banner of alt-right politics. Fake news and the alt-right may urgently demand new theoretical responses, but they also pose questions for the efficacy of previous theorisations of media, and for the future of media theory itself.

Form and Matter

While some are convinced that theory has had its day and is no longer relevant, particularly in a context of big data, algorithmic automation and the computational turn, M. Beatrice Fazi makes the case, in her article, ‘The Ends of Media Theory’, for the continued need for theoretical enquiry and speculative endeavour. Situating the ‘end of theory’ discourse in the historical context of long-standing critiques of rationalism and logocentrism, and drawing on Jameson’s distinction between theory and philosophy, as well as Horkheimer’s distinction between traditional and critical theory, Fazi focuses on the importance of abstraction, conceptualisation and problematisation to both (media) theory and (media) philosophy. Arguing that new concepts are needed to perceive and think in a highly techno-mediated world, to “think computation precisely as a problem; as a problem in need of relevant concepts”, Fazi argues that media theory is only an abstraction in the Whiteheadian sense that experience is always-already abstract, and that to abstract is not, therefore, to move away from the real, but rather “to construct it in terms of its actuality”.

Attempts to grasp the character of “rapid and radical social change” and to construct reality in terms of its actuality have led many media theorists to relish the dissolution

of the opposition between form and matter. For John W.P. Phillips, however, there remains a tension between those that privilege form and those that privilege matter, putting a strain on the very idea of ontology itself. In ‘The End of Ontology and the Future of Media Theory’, Phillips grapples with theoretical and philosophical attempts to “think things”, to “think the media” in terms of the physical existence of “the between”, and to think the way each media platform is “displaced by its own mediatic disruption”.

Responding to this dissolution between form and matter, Mickey Vallee’s article, ‘Contiguity and Interval: Opening Media Theory’, turns our attention to the borders of mediation. For Vallee, media are both here and there, and mediation, which both connects and disconnects, is only possible in terms of its own ruptures and intervals. Arguing that the contemporary boundaries of mediated environments are expanding and collapsing in continuous variations, affecting the very definitions of ‘media’ we have come to depend upon, he turns to topology as a creative way of exploring media as open and fluid. Understood topologically, there is no division between the contiguous and the interval, but rather these terms are nodes in a network of continuous variation that underlies evolving definitions of media, bodies, environment, time, place and space.

Turning to the simultaneity of processes of stratification and mediation in his article, ‘Media Theory: How Can We Live the Good Life in Strata?’, Rob Shields reminds us that media not only transmit and store, classify and relate; they also isolate, juxtapose and stratify. For Shields, media needs theory to understand the “layered, stratified and mediated world of many (local and global) scales, contending histories and futures that haunt our present as anxieties”. But the purpose of theory is not just to help us understand or critique the contemporary condition; we need media theory, he argues, if we are to learn how to live the good life in such mediated and stratified times.

In the Spirit of the Manifesto

Although all the authors who submitted articles to this inaugural issue were asked to provide manifestos on what they would want a journal on media theory to be and do,

the following were written very much in the style or spirit of a manifesto. Taking the early 20th Century *Blast* Manifesto of the British Vorticist movement as her starting point, for example, Jane Birkin shows how the manifesto can be considered as a material object that makes declarations in form as well as content. In her article, ‘Manifesto: Graphic, Sonic, Affective Object’, Birkin goes on to draw on a range of concrete poetic and graphic modernist manifestos to highlight the performativity of their ‘moving information’.

In his call for ‘Open Theory’, Sunil Manghani similarly draws upon a wide range of examples, from the *Communist Manifesto* to Bono and *1984*, to illustrate a wide range of issues – from reading and writing, through production and reproduction, to the relation between (online) journals and their ‘audiences’ – and to argue that *media* “gets us faster to what we already know” and that *theory* “only applies each time it is evoked”.

In Gary Hall’s ‘The Inhumanist Manifesto’, he adopts the manifesto mode of political writing to consider the links between his research interests in posthumanism, piracy, Marxism, open access and the commons, on the one hand, and, on the other, the various publishing ventures with which he’s been involved. Taken together, they demonstrate a manifesto by example, in which Hall presents his own privileging of collaborative, non-competitive and not-for-profit work, emphasises the performative generation of projects as hyper-political, media gifts – providing space for “thinking about politics and the political beyond the ways in which they have conventionally been conceived” – and argues ultimately for the displacement of the humanist categories that underpin our ideas of academia, publishing and critique.

In the penultimate article of the issue, ‘10 Propositions for Doing Media Theory (Again)’, Christoph Raetzsch discusses the significance of the journal’s open access format, its focus on theory, and its emphasis on the international and transdisciplinary scope of media theory, which “delimits a space of inquiry where positions can meet outside their own disciplinary [and geographical] contexts”. Representing the rich (historical, geographical, disciplinary) legacies of media theory

in the journal is important, he argues, to promote the kind of detached theoretical perspective that is required to provide critical distance in the face of accelerated technological change.

Finally, the issue ends with the first article to have been submitted to the journal: in the author's own words, an 'unrefereable rant' on the kind of journal *Media Theory* needs to try to be. In 'What Is a Journal for?', Sean Cubitt argues that to survive, a journal needs, more than anything, a reason to exist. For him, this should be a transdisciplinary project to actively refuse disciplinary closures, and to critically interrogate the scope and limits of specialisms and disciplines, in contrast to those who would defend them for their own sakes. Because specialisms are not intrinsically valuable or collective enterprises, he insists, the journal's transdisciplinary project should be to collectively enable (not determine) media theory, and to foster dialogue between specialist objects and schools of thought so as to "unleash the potential each of them has locked up inside its disciplinary firewalls".

We'll try our best. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy the 'Manifestos' issue.

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Counting Media: Some Rules of Thumb

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Theory is philosophy that is aware of its own mediation. Therefore, media theory has to be philosophical, but it cannot take its own metalanguage for granted. It has to play with its own means, on its own field, allowing theory to emerge as sensuous, articulate experience, as images, sounds, and words.

But this does not mean that media theory is just “one damn thing after another,” as Richard Rorty once characterized history. Media are systems. It is possible to describe their structural features, and to differentiate them more or less rigorously. We can focus this point by asking the question, “how many kinds of media are there?” Since anything – a rock, a weed, a person – can become a medium under the right circumstances, it would seem like the answer is infinite or indefinite. All we need to ask is when and how does something count as a medium, and we find ourselves counting “the media” endlessly. So what we need is an account of this counting, a theory that takes us beyond mere enumeration of examples. That should be the goal of a journal that deserves the name, *Media Theory*. Here are a few gestures, by way of some propositions and prepositions.

The Rule of Three

There are three and only three great orders of media: images, sounds, and words. This triad emerges from the convergence of the limits of the human sensorium with the fundamental ways in which human beings create meaning. Seeing and hearing, what Hegel called the “theoretic senses,” are mediated (transmitted and stored) in

images and recordings, material or mental. Memory itself is multi-media faculty oriented toward storage and retrieval, while imagination projects the same ensemble of audio-visual traces forward in time. This sensuous dimension of media converges with language, or more generally, semiosis: sounds become formal and patterned in music, articulate in speech, chaotic and disarticulated at the moveable frontiers of sense. Sensations become signs; signs are sensed. Out of this we make sense and (even better) nonsense.

Test this proposition by asking yourself if you can think of a medium that does not involve one or more of the three great orders. What else is there in cinema, theater, opera besides images, sounds, and words? What do you see on the screen of your computer other than icons, words, and the indexical pointer that moves and activates them? The three basic orders of media produce the double signification of “sense” as feeling and meaning. Peirce’s triad of icon, index, and symbol aligns itself with Roland Barthes’s *Image/Music/Text*; with Foucault’s “seeable and sayable” separated by the blank space between a picture and a proposition; with Nelson Goodman’s division of notational/inscriptional modalities into “score, script, and sketch”; with Aristotle’s division of theater into the elements of “melos, ophis, and lexis”; with Saussure’s anatomy of language into iconic signified, symbolic signifier, and indexical bar; with David Hume’s division of the association of ideas into relations of similitude, cause and effect, and arbitrary signage; with Lacan’s “registers” of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real; with Friedrich Kittler’s tracing of the three media storage technologies in *Gramophone Film Typewriter*.¹

The Rule of One

It may look as if the rule of three also governs the most common image of media we possess, namely, the communication model that postulates a sender and receiver connected by a medium of transmission (images, sounds, words). But the medium is itself the “third” in this case, the betweenness consisting of signals and codes, and the apparatus for delivering them. So perhaps this should be called the “rule of one,” since the medium is in this case a specifiable, even a specific, at times a singular thing composed of the elements specified by the Rule of Three. That composition may be highly variable, emphasizing one of the elements (as in pure music) or bringing them

together in novel combinations (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*). The singularity or specificity of a medium, then, is not reducible to its material, technical support, but includes the practices, skills, and purposes to which it is put. “Medium specificity” is more like the specific character of a recipe than any specific ingredient, or even a list of ingredients. It is a way of putting things together – paint with brushes and canvas; ink with paper and writing; pixels with purposes.

The Rule of Two

There are two basic ways of positioning – or more precisely, of pre-positioning, media: “in” and “through.” The medium “in” is the use of materials and technology for storage and retrieval. It is the “input” model in which something is embedded, uploaded, locked away in order to be seen, heard, or felt in a moment of downloading and reception. The medium “through” is the transmission/communication model. The contrast between media in and through is exemplified by the difference between a live and recorded performance, between a signal fire that announces the fall of Troy, and a campfire around which we huddle to tell stories about the fall of Troy. Of course, the two pre-positions of media constantly converge, as when the live, real-time news broadcast is stored on your DVR, or the pre-recorded video is played back in the here and now. That is why the rule of two is constantly re-affirmed and broken at the same time.

The Rule of None

Media are both everything and nothing. Absolutely anything can become a medium, but that does not mean that everything is functioning as a medium at all times. Paint is a medium when it is used to make a picture or adorn a body; it is not a medium while it is sitting in the can. There is always something outside or beyond a medium – the unmediated, the immediate, the presentation as opposed to the representation. We need to reverse the famous, misconstrued Derridean axiom, “there is nothing outside the text,” to say just the opposite: “there is always something outside a medium,” something that exceeds, escapes, defies mediation. Media theory must investigate its own antitheses. The field should be re-named “Immedia Studies.” Of

course, every moment of immediacy will give way at some point to the Jack Horner principle, and we will pull out a plum: “Ahah, it is mediated after all!” We need to study the moment before we pull out that all too predictable plum.

The Rule of All

Nature, God, the Universe are the media “in which we live and move and have our being.” Space and time are media. The stars will go on transmitting light through space-time long after we are around to see them, just as they did before we emerged from the slime. And the sun will continue to store energy in rotting vegetation long after we are around to extract oil from the earth. Living things will continue to imprint their remains in the mud as fossils, and the air will continue to transmit sound. But minds are also media, dependent on the material support known as brains embedded in bodies connected by media to other bodies. Marshall McLuhan said that the content of every medium is another medium, so the content of a film is a staged performance, and prior to that, the performance may be re-mediating the script which adapts the content of a novel.² To keep it simple, think of the way the content of writing is speech. But what is the content of speech? My answer: thought is the content of speech. But then what is the content of thought? We suddenly find ourselves coming around the curve of a circle encompassing the totality of media: the content of thought is words, images, and sounds, the three orders with which we began. That is why all those big, cosmic media, Nature, God, the Universe, can become the content of something as tiny as the human brain, or Blake’s grain of sand.

Notes

¹ For more on these triads, see the chapter on “Media Aesthetics” in *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

² This idea is further elaborated in Bolter and Grusin’s concept of “re-mediation” in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

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Imagination and Literary Media Theory

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Triads

Media theory loves its threes¹. Marshall McLuhan wrote his dissertation on the medieval trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (2003 [1941]); Friedrich Kittler emphasized three media functions of processing, storage, and transmission in a book about three devices, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), which he mapped onto Lacan's three registers of real, imaginary and symbolic; Lewis Mumford (1963 [1934]) split the history of technics into three ages: eotechnic, paleotechnic, and neotechnic; John Durham Peters (2009) wrote about a "media studies triangle" of text-audience-industry (outside of which we find the "civilizational" media theory of Innis, McLuhan, et al.) In this very issue, W.J.T. Mitchell (2017) suggests a "rule of three" about what he sees as "the only three great orders of media": images, sounds, and words. I could go on...

It's not hard to see the attraction to threes: in mathematics, Pythagoras showed the formal elegance and structural integrity of three – no surprise Pythagoreans thought the triad to be the noblest digit; in social theory, Freud split us into Id, Ego and Superego, while the backbone of Marxian theory is a three (when we remember that the base beneath the superstructure is made up of forces *and* relations of production); Mitchell (2015) reminds us of a great many other triads in the history of thought via Piece, Barthes, Aristotle, and Hume, among others; there are three jewels at the heart of Buddhism (Buddha is affiliated with yellow, Dharma with blue, Sangha with red), which correspond to the three primary colours our eyes can see; in

Hinduism, there is the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and then of course there is Christianity's Trinity of Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Maybe all of this has something to do with the way we experience and understand time as past, present, and future. I'm not sure, but someone should write a media history of the triad (or maybe it would be a triad history of media theory): more complex than two but not so unruly as four.

This journal would be a good venue for such a project, but I am after something different. I want to focus, instead, on the concept that would be at the heart of such an inquiry: imagination. Triads are imaginative experiments with drawing seemingly-incongruent items together. They forge surprising connections and offer frameworks for understanding. They are paradigmatic of media theory's long and rich history of conceptual modelling, speculative thinking, and experimental writing. Triads thus invite a consideration of the importance of imagination to media-theoretical research past and future.

Imagination

Imagination is a lovely concept to think with, but it's all too rarely that we accept its offerings. It is a rich and complicated concept. Like *media*, *culture* and *communication*, we can trace through its history of usage many of the great intellectual and philosophical debates of the western tradition. It shows up constantly in thinking about thought. John Ruskin claimed imagination to be "the grandest mechanical power that the Human intelligence possesses, and one that will appear more and more marvellous the longer we consider it" (Ruskin, 1846: 161). Shakespeare thought about imagination a lot, such as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

And as Imagination bodies forth
The forms of things Unknown, the Poets pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing,
A local habitation, And a name.

And we find it at work in Genesis Chapter 6, verse 5: “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

So sometimes imagination is dangerous and sometimes it is beautiful. And sometimes it's a vein to be tapped: great poets, painters, and architects are said to 'capture the imagination.' Still other uses suggest imagination not as a substance to be captured but as something that envelops, like ether or air: the *modern imagination*, the *Western imagination* or *Canadian imagination*. We know how fraught and contested such categories are. Raymond Williams famously said that culture was one of the two or three most confusing and contested words in the English language (Williams, 1983: 87); surely *imagination* is not far behind.

Imagination is, like all the best words, difficult to contain. No sense in even trying. Rather than define imagination, or capture yours, I am hoping to glean from some of the ways it travels through media theory. Gleaning has the advantage of opening up new possibilities for old words. It's a worthwhile endeavour, I think, because it's rare that we incorporate *imagination* into our scholarship and teaching. It seems to lack the empirical or analytical rigour that we demand of ourselves and our approaches. Our default setting is to be cold and diagnostic, safe in our critical and historical distance. But what might *imagination* bring us that other analytic concepts or approaches don't?

Media theory offers a rich archive for considering this question. In fact, I think one of the defining characteristics of media theory is that it has been as much about imagination, over the years, as anything else. It's right there on the second page of McLuhan's preface to *The Gutenberg Galaxy*², but, more importantly, it's an engine that has kept media-theoretical debates humming along for at least sixty years and probably longer. So, my topic is not a specific text or object, but media theory itself, which is an intellectual formation that takes 'imagination' as both *object* and *method*.

But I have another fish to fry. I've been wondering for a while where the literary stream of media theory has disappeared to. Here, my inspiration comes in part from Erhard Schüttpelz (2016), who recently suggested that media theory emerged in the 1950s as a “bastard child” of communication studies (in both its engineering and

social scientific senses), anthropology, and literary studies. The communication and anthropological influences get a lot of attention, but the literary ones have lately been fading away. This is curious, given so much of media theory's incubation was in literature departments, and that its unique prism of analysis was cut from the literary cloth.

What I have in mind is not what's happening in Digital Humanities (DH) programs. What I call *literary* are approaches to thinking about media, communication, and technology that employ methods of close (not distant) reading and that opt for depth of analysis rather than breadth. This is not a polemic against DH, which has taught us a lot about literature and culture. Nor is what I have in mind about posthuman subjectivities – in fact it's not about the subject at all. In the traditions I have in mind, ways of thinking, speaking, and doing are positioned as relays in larger media-technical infrastructures that do not privilege human bodies (though they may pass through them). Discourse and texts are understood not as founts of human meaning but as indexes or traces of technical systems that structure ways of knowing³. This literary stream is an essential element in the soil from which media theory grew, and as the gazes of our colleagues from elsewhere in the humanities turn toward our objects and methods, we should develop a proper morphology of that soil.

Imagination as Object

First: imagination as object, an idea captured in two pithy, and by now legendary, quips: James Carey's characterization of the telegraph as "a thing to think **with**, an agency for the alteration of ideas" (Carey, 2009: 157, emphasis added); and Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum that "our writing tools are also working **on** our thoughts" (quoted in Kittler, 1999: xxix, 203, and 204, emphasis added). I bold *with* and *on* because the gulf between these words is everything between two traditions of thinking about media, one pragmatist and generative, the other existentialist and diagnostic. A central question of media theory – the relation between technology and thought – shows up here in two senses: with Carey, it's posed as: (1) How do media (re)shape imaginative frameworks by which people conceive of themselves and their relationships (with other people, tools, institutions, and the natural world)? Put

another way: Media here provide *metaphors*. With Nietzsche, the question is: (2) What role do media play in structuring the conditions by which thought is possible at all? They here shape *language*, which is for Nietzsche the context in which thought itself arises. These quotes are two poles of an intellectual continuum. Between them is media theory.

1) Media History

Carey's essay is of course a masterclass in demonstrating the intellectual and social effects of technology. He shows the telegraph to have wide-ranging implications for language (emphasizing concision and economy; revealing language as a code; inspiring new literary experiments from, for example, Hemingway, who was "fascinated by the lingo of the cable"), for finance (after the telegraph, markets become geared toward abstract futures), for space (communication at a distance overcomes bodily limitations to an unprecedented degree), and for time (standardized time zones impose order on a chaotic rail system). Carey uses the word sparingly, but what he's talking about is imagination: the way people think of themselves, their jobs, each other, and their environments, which are all reconfigured by the telegraph. An emerging imaginary (technical? telegraphic? logistical?) connects each of the phenomena Carey describes: economical prose, futures markets, rapid signal traffic, and standardized time zones alike. The telegraph is not here the driver of historical change, but it provides new metaphors and models for thought, it provokes new fears and desires, and each of these make a difference.

I point to Carey's essay not just because it is so well-known, but because it is paradigmatic of this historical vein of media scholarship. There are, of course, many other examples – from Harold Innis and Michelle Martin to more recent work by Jonathan Sterne and Lisa Gitelman. These approaches carefully sift through archives to understand complex webs of social, political, and institutional activities within which techno-cultural imaginaries, and the devices they produce, take shape. These are literary thinkers but their texts are documents and grey literature; they mine archives to understand imagination.

So that's one track – I call it *Media History* for simplicity's sake but I am not enamoured of this term. (I wanted to call it *social media history*, but that now describes

something quite different). Another track, running parallel, takes imagination as its object, though it comes at it from another angle.

2) **Discourse Networks**

I'll call this second track, again for lack of a better term, the *discourse networks* approach of McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, and more recent thinkers like Cornelia Vismann. "Discourse networks" is the translation of Kittler's (1990) term *aufschriebesysteme*, which translates literally as inscription system. I'll take a bit more time to explain this stream because it does not always benefit from Carey's lucid prose.

This stream is no less historical but is much less about *History*, if I can put it that way. It uses methods from disciplines other than History to think about the past. Its primary texts are literary rather than archival. It inverts Media History's method by mining imagination to understand archives and technological change.

This is what McLuhan meant when he claimed art to be an "early alarm system" of technological change (2003 [1964]: 16). Figures like Shakespeare, Thomas Nashe, and T.S. Eliot, he argued, teach us as much about the shift from manuscript culture to the Gutenberg galaxy and beyond as Gutenberg himself (or his apparatus). In crashing these thinkers and time periods together, McLuhan hot-wired linear historical narratives about culture and technology. The resulting 'mosaic' approach shows how linear type and standardization break up imagination, which he understood in medieval terms as "that ratio among the perceptions and faculties which exists when they are not embedded or outered in material technologies. When so outered, each sense and faculty becomes a closed system. Prior to such outering, there is an entire interplay among experiences" (McLuhan, 1962: 300). The story of modernity for McLuhan is the splintering of imagination and outering of the senses into apparatuses. These produce new, competing environments of perception. In the Gutenberg galaxy, structures of knowledge and institutions take root that privilege the reading eye over the listening ear, and which mirror the linear logic of type found on the printed page.

McLuhan thought that literary texts were most interesting not for their meaning or content, but because they are unique traces of historical shifts in sensory and imaginative life. This mode of reading was picked up by Kittler, who was an even more extraordinary reader. McLuhan went straight from the Gutenberg galaxy to electric media, skipping over the emergence of technical media like the gramophone, daguerreotype, film camera, and typewriter. Kittler filled these considerable gaps while also performing a decisive inversion of McLuhan: it is not that media are extensions of Man, said Kittler, but that Man is an extension of media. Media technologies and networks are more than outered human senses, or expressions of human will. They delineate and structure the imaginative space within which we think, act, and do. We come to know our bodies and minds only through the media technologies that structure them. Concepts and imagination are media effects, for Kittler, not the other way around.

Kittler agreed with McLuhan that the zone most privileged for detecting and exploring these historical paradoxes is literature. To demonstrate his thesis and infuriate his colleagues, Kittler ransacked German literature for bizarre, forgotten texts by unknown authors and obscure oddments by famous scribes. These he parachuted – often in their entirety – into his texts without traditional explanation or commentary. Kittler cared nothing for authorial intent, social context, narrative and thematic meaning, or any other traditional objects of literary analysis. “In lieu of philosophical inquiries into essence,” he wrote, “simple knowledge will do” (Kittler, 1999: xl). This dictum is usually understood as a defence of number against the humanities’ unfounded suspicion of quantification (how quickly we forgot, he always said, the centrality of mathematics to the history of painting, sculpture, and music). But it also captures his approach to literary analysis.

In the Kittlerian mode, there is no unmasking of the world of illusions, no decoding of hidden ideological messages, no performance of the virtuoso critic. The mode is to read words on the page, as they are; not to go digging for meaning, but to recognize how texts *operationalize* the media logics in which they are produced. He is at his most lucid (at least in English), when he writes in the Preface to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, “[This book] collects, comments upon, and relays passages and texts

that show how the novelty of technological media inscribed itself into the old paper of books [...] What writers astonished by gramophones, films, and typewriters – the first technological media – committed to paper between 1880 and 1920 amounts, therefore, to a ghostly image of our present as future” (Kittler 1999: xl).

In the Gramophone chapter, Kittler makes a jarring jump cut from his own prose to a 1916 story by Mynona (pen name of Salomo Friedlaender) called “Goethe Speaks into the Phonograph” (Kittler, 1999: 59-66). Friedlaender’s protagonist is Professor Abnossah Pschorr, inventor of the “telestylus” and technical engineer of the highest order. We also meet Anna Pomke, Pschorr’s assistant and object of affection, who is too enamoured of Goethe’s poetry to notice the Professor’s technological achievements. To win her affections, Pschorr devises an apparatus that he believes can capture and conquer the fount of Goethe’s poetry and power: his voice. This involves raiding Goethe’s tomb and taking a wax model of the poet’s larynx. Pschorr uses it to build a dummy larynx that, he says, will reproduce “the timbre of the Goethean organ as deceptively close to nature as possible” (1999: 63).

But this is not just mimicry. Pschorr aims to take Anna to Weimar and place the apparatus in Goethe’s study, where, he assures her, vibrations from the poet’s voice still faintly echo. “I want to suck those vibrations through the larynx,” he tells a baffled archivist when they arrive (1999: 63). Pschorr receives permission, and his apparatus works. It faithfully captures, amplifies, and records (via phonographic needle) physical vibrations made by Goethe’s voice. This pulls Anna only further under the poet’s sway. The Professor broods on the train journey home. Realizing his mistake – that Anna has been transfixed by Goethe’s voice rather than the sublimity of his device – he tosses the technical means of connecting Anna and Goethe out the window. With the channel now gone, Anna’s affections for the Professor immediately flower. (As Winthrop-Young points out, Kittler rarely passes up opportunities to irk his critics by reducing human relationships to crude couplings – bodies of desire are analogous to plugs and sockets in his sexual circuitry of human affairs. See Winthrop-Young, 2011).

In Kittler's reading, Friedlaender's story is a media effect in both what it represents, and how. "Friedlaender correctly delineated the new constellation of eroticism, literature, and phonography" and his story "conjures up the technological past in the shape of Germany's *Mr*-author in order to predict the transformation of literature into sound" (Kittler, 1999: 59). In other words: Pschorr's victory over Goethe stands in for technical media's victory over the "epoch of writing." Sound recording technology – like the gramophone and Pschorr's apparatus – break up writing's monopoly over imagination and expression. For millennia, writing was the only means humans had to reliably store and transmit cultural knowledge (which Kittler sees, correctly, as data). To store a sound was impossible. All you could do was describe it in writing, i.e. pass it through the bottleneck of the symbolic. But with the gramophone comes the ability to record sonic vibrations from physical reality and play them back at some point in the future. Writing's monopoly over sensory experience is no more. The poet is reduced to mere mortal. The technically savvy professor takes his place at the switchboard of power over imagination, which has become data processing. "[...] [F]rom the arts to the particulars of information technology and physiology – that is the historical shift of 1900 which Pschorr must comprehend" (Kittler, 1999: 72). Paradoxically, literature is the medium through which we understand the end of its monopoly over imagination.

This mode of reading saw Kittler skip over all kinds of nuance regarding power and politics along the lines we are used to working with. He has been rightly taken to task for this (see Peters in Kittler, 2010: 1-17 and Winthrop-Young, 2011: 120-145 for an overview of critiques). But his discoveries about literature still demand our attention. Primary among these is that the objects found by traditional textual analysis (narrative, theme, character, ideology, mytheme, etc.) are not the only ones there for consideration. Through his mode of media-technical analysis, we learn about epochal shifts in the nature of culture and civilization, which are everywhere and always technical, grounded in changes to the processing, storage, and transmission of data. Literary texts document these changes in motion; they do not simply *represent* these shifts but they *are themselves* evidence of them. As Kittler writes, "...we are left only with reminiscences, that is to say, with stories. How that which is written in no book came to pass may still be for books to record. Pushed to their margins even obsolete media become sensitive enough to register the signs and clues of a situation" (Kittler,

1999: xl). Texts and the imaginations that produce them bear the imprint of their media epoch. It's the job of the critic and theorist to read them in such a way.

Kittler is often framed as a technofetishist, but there are few as committed to erudition and close reading as he was. And this reading mode, in spite or because of its howlers, has inspired some of the most original thinking about media of the last 30 years.

3) Imaginary Media

Some such thinking falls under the rubric of *imaginary media*, which is my third example of media theory that takes imagination as an object. Like media archaeologists, theorists of imaginary media are interested in forgotten histories and archival oddments. They locate gardens of forking paths where the historical trajectory of technology might have been otherwise – ideas that mediate impossible desires and so die on the vine (or were never meant to live at all): The Soviet internet that wasn't (Peters, 2016); an algorithm that produces new songs based on the totality of Canadian folk music (Svec, 2016); da Vinci's helicopter device; the doomsday clock (suddenly back in the world with a vengeance). These imaginary media invite us to ask "what if?" They invite reflection on what we ask of technology, what we project onto it, and how those expectations change. They bring into focus dominant assumptions – not just about media and communication, but about how we conceive of history, present, and future. In so doing, imaginary media seek to reframe our relationships to each other, technical devices, the natural world, and the divine or ineffable. Peter Blegvad (2008) brilliantly noted that hands folded in prayer are one of the most simple but significant imaginary media as they establish a channel for the transmission of "devout aspiration" (discussed in Kluitenberg, 2011: 58).

Imaginary media are often about folds – how desires and fears from earlier historical moments reappear in unexpected ways to complicate linear media histories. Even actually-existing media accumulate layers of imagination. A clock is not simply a clock, as Eric Kluitenberg, like Mumford (1963 [1934]) before him, argues. It has

variously been imagined as: (1) a device that imposes onto the world the regularity of the divine; (2) a conceptual model for the movement of the heavens; (3) an object that embodies the strength of human achievement; (4) an oppressive device that robs living labour of time (2011: 49-50, 57-58). These meanings do not replace or subsume but graft onto one another. In 2017, the clock is all of these things simultaneously. It thus offers insight into imagination not only in terms of fictional or impossible desires, but also regarding the conditions of imagining. “The question of imaginary media,” according to Parikka, “is what *can* be imagined, and under what historical, social and political conditions?” (2012: 47).

Much more can, has, and should be said about imaginary media (see especially Kluitenberg et al., 2006). For now, let’s emphasize that in addition to mediating impossible desires and thus teaching us about historical imaginaries, theories of imaginary media challenge narratives that see technological development as a straight arrow of progress, or which understand media only in terms of use.

That’s three ways that media theory takes imagination as an object. We might have assumed at the outset that thinking about thought would plant us squarely in the realm of ideas. But we’ve seen how media-theoretical thinking takes ideas out of the clouds, grounding them in material, discursive, and technical contexts. We land on the plane of technologies and techniques, hands, mechanisms and inscription surfaces – elements that for centuries were ignored by historians and philosophers.

Imagination as Method

Now, to imagination as a method. I’ll spare you another triad and focus on writing and textual production. Experimenting with form and style has long been part of media theory, and it’s worth opening a conversation about how and why.

Let’s start with Harold Innis, whose work was stylistically peculiar. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, Innis conducted extensive field work for his economic histories of Canada. He called this *dirt research*, which is a term I like because it captures (or conjures) something about the gritty realism of the knowledge he sought. It was field work that went beyond ethnography. It paid as much attention to geology and

biology as to culture, to non-humans as to humans (hence his 1930 book, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, starts with a 5-page ethology of the beaver). It is about impressions and enumeration rather than thick description or analysis; ontics, rather than ontology (see Young, 2017). Innis sought to let the dirt of place imprint itself on him, as Peter van Wyck argues in his beautiful and unjustly-neglected book, *The Highway of the Atom* (2010: 198). (One wonders what Kittler might have thought about Innis trying to embody something like Freud's mystic writing pad in this way and at this time.)

Innis's late communication texts (ca. 1948-1952), for which he is now most widely known, echo the scattershot style of his field notes. *Empire and Communications* (1948), *The Bias of Communication* (1951), and his unfinished *History of Communications* manuscript (2014) were apparently produced, at least in part, using a cut-up method – more than a decade before William S. Burroughs popularized it. There's even some evidence that he experimented with early photocopy technology to facilitate this cut-up method (Chisholm, 1970; Watson in Innis, 2007 [1948]: 16). He'd cut sentences from the photocopies and rearrange them on a new page, often without adding any connective tissue (or citing the original source). I wonder how playing around with their order and arrangement spurred his thinking. It certainly falls in line with his habit of reading several wildly divergent books at the same time so as to open his mind to surprising connections. (McLuhan joked about using a similar technique, “reading only the right-hand page of serious books” in order to combat their “enormous redundancies.” This, he said, kept him “very wide awake filling in the other page out of my own noodle,” *Telescope*, 1967).

Innis's motivations for the cut-up method are mysterious. Whatever they were, the effect of the style was to both confuse and inspire (which are not always, or ever, so different). The communication texts are hard to read – everyone agrees on this. They are fast, disconnected, and unsystematic. James Carey described this style as akin to a poem, “an infernal quotation machine of indirect speech – with its author elusively hidden within it” (Carey, 1999: 84). The connection to poetry is not such a stretch. Innis was after, I think, a generative rather than analytical bias, a style to counterblast what he called the *mechanization of knowledge* – the standardization of thinking that

would sap its power. He makes us, as readers, work for it. And we are the better for it.

That almost all media theorists are indebted to this style (whether they know it or not), is a testament to its power. McLuhan's "probes" and mosaic approach are direct descendants. He crashed incongruous elements together to see what new pathways for thinking such collisions might open. McLuhan didn't only theorize "cool" media, he wrote in precisely this way – replacing rigour with creativity, refusing to be didactic, inviting readers to think, and thus demanding we become active. Kittler's jump cuts extend this style, as I described earlier, and imaginative experiments continue: Cornelia Vismann's book, *Files*, formally enacts the acceleration of data processing that is the topic of her book. Early chapters about antiquarian techniques of file management are long, detailed, and syntactically complex. As the book moves forward in time, explanatory detail and connective tissue between ideas become more scarce. Sentences are short. She mirrors, stylistically, what she describes: the increasing obsolescence of humans in data circulation and management. The complexity and speed of the final chapter – which folds together Babylonian clay tablets and the digital computer and clocks in at 4 pages – almost exceeds the ability of a human reader to keep up.

For a final example, let's return to Nietzsche's famous words: "our writing tools are also working on our thoughts," which may have been written on a typewriter but were certainly written under its influence.

Nietzsche turned to this bizarre mechanical writing ball [see Fig.1] as his vision deteriorated. Its discrete alphanumeric characters snapped letters into place, one at a time, and untethered writing from his hand. Kittler suggests this caused Nietzsche's writing to move "from arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style" (1999: 203). He clacked violent truths from the machine, like bullets, and Kittler argues further that it was this mode of writing that revealed genealogy to Nietzsche as a method of historical analysis – that the writing ball's deconstruction of words into individual keystrokes showed the essential contingency of language, knowledge, and concepts previously unquestioned. Once language and the authorial subject go, any stable conception of ideas, history, or God melts away.

As Kittler writes, “under conditions of media the genealogy of morals coincides with the genealogy of gods” (Kittler, 1999: 211). It is no coincidence that genealogy continues to be a touchstone for literary media theory.

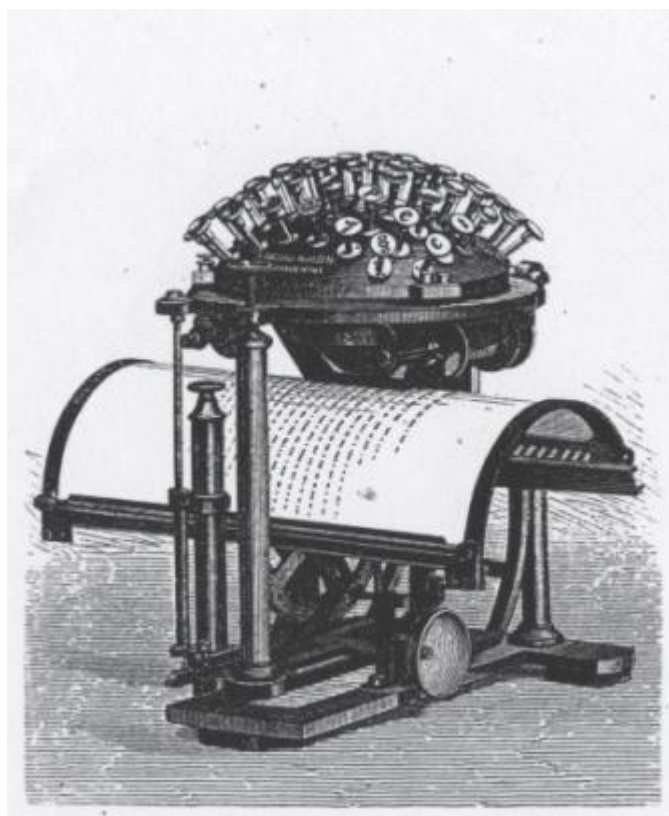


Figure 1: [Malling-Hansen Writing Ball, ca. 1878](#)

Each example in this montage exhibits experimentation with literary and poetic devices: aphorism, digression, metaphor, juxtaposition, and analogy, among others. These techniques resist standardization, which is a deep ethic that unites media theorists from Nietzsche to Innis, Kittler, Vismann and beyond. To break free from old habits is to explode the horizons of thought in any given historical moment; not just to diagnose media environments and structures of power, but to imagine alternatives.

This task is increasingly urgent. Global logistical systems, emergent artificial intelligences, and other new forms of computation, commerce, and governance annihilate traditional modes of understanding and organizing life and labour on the

planet. We are in need of different metaphors, concepts, and modes with which to understand the systems that enframe us. Literature and literary media theory have been sounding this alarm for some time; we would do well to heed their call. This journal offers an exciting new space for such work.

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Notes

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² “Such a change [from print to the electric age] is not a difficult matter in itself, but it does call for some reorganization of imaginative life” (McLuhan, 2011 [1962]: 3).

³ What I describe as ‘literary media theory’ is similar to what Pryor, Trotter et al. (2016) explore as ‘technography’ – writing that is not only about technology but is also aware of its own technicity. I’m sticking with ‘literary media theory’ to preserve focus on media theory as a field, and because the thinkers explored here all use the word *media* rather than *technology* or *machine*. (This conceptual choice – to understand *media* instead of technology – would make for another worthy study).

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Media Theory 2017

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Once upon a time

This year marks half a century since the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* – arguably one of the key texts for 21st century media theory. Here I want to briefly substantiate this claim, and, in the process, mark out the urgency for new work in this domain. A journal such as *Media Theory* would seem an ideal space for developing this trajectory.

Among other things, the first part of *Of Grammatology* announces 'grammatology' as a theoretical matrix for the study of 'writing' conceptualized in a radically non-traditional sense. As is perhaps better understood today than when he first proposed the analysis, Derrida demonstrates that Western thought has been organized over a long period by a complex privileging of 'speech' over 'writing'. Within what he terms the *epistémè* of logocentrism, the spoken voice (*phonè*) has consistently been granted "a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind" (Derrida, 1976: 11). Aristotle's determination that spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, and written words are the symbols of spoken words, recurs in different forms and formulations across history, obeying a deeper continuity according to which writing is determined as the 'mediation of a mediation' (Derrida, 1976: 12). Within this epoch, "reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness" (Derrida, 1976: 14). The text is positioned as secondary in relation to an element – speech, thought, consciousness, etc – that assumes greater presence. As such, this element constitutes an originary moment or locus of meaning against which 'writing'

is inevitably parasitic. Derrida argues this same logic even persists into the modern structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, despite its claim to put many traditional assumptions about language into question, through its definition of the sign in terms of the constitutive split between the sensible and the intelligible, the signifier and the signified. Such a binary division assumes, as a condition of its own functioning, the possibility of a pure signified; the originary presence of a meaning independent of any signifier which is thereby necessarily understood as ‘technical and representative’ (Derrida, 1976: 11).

The secondariness of ‘writing’ is not a minor determination, nor one possible configuration among many, but belongs to a conceptual chain that establishes and supports a certain understanding of truth, temporality, subjectivity and being. Derrida anticipates his argument:

We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the sub-determinations that depend on this general form and which organize within it their system, and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth) (Derrida, 1976: 12).

In short, in the era that Derrida characterizes in terms of *logocentrism*, ‘writing’ has generally been thought according to a mode of what can only be called idealism. Writing exists in a relation of perpetual secondariness to the ideality of some originary experience; a thought, speech, action or ‘event’ that is subsequently re-presented (narrated, recorded, performed), but which, at its presumed moment or point of origin, remains free from any dependence on a material signifier. Insisting on materiality, for instance on the way that specific attributes and affordances of media technology indelibly shape the construction of meaning and the process of communication, can undoubtedly challenge this idealism in some respects. But this

will only work to a certain extent, and is endlessly at risk of reaffirming the old logic by repeating the structure of opposition from the other side (as ‘technological determinism’, for instance. Here we might find the kind of broad distinctions between ‘oral’ and ‘written’ culture on which those such as McLuhan (1962) and Ong (1982) depend, in which a medium is positioned as constitutive of a certain type of consciousness).

Fast forward

Summarizing Derrida’s complex argument is not simply difficult but hugely risky. The brevity of my exposition demands that I jettison much of his patient demonstration, including his careful attention to crucial contradictions, such as the relation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ writing, between phonetic and non-phonetic alphabets, between ideogram and pictogram, that have been integral to this era. My justification for taking this risk is not to offer a substitute for Derrida’s text, which should be carefully read and re-read, but to use it to situate a contemporary problematic; namely, the way that what Derrida analyzes in terms of the traditional concept of ‘writing’ still governs much contemporary thinking of ‘media’. The problem extends much further than ‘medium theory’. It demands we address what is still a general understanding of ‘media’ and ‘mediation’ as production of ‘signs’ that have a derivative or parasitical relation to a plenitude apparently found elsewhere, most notably in the still inadequately analyzed domains indicated by voice, experience or event.

Before developing this point concerning the need for *media theory*, I want to show why it has assumed greater urgency in the present. This requires making two more brief points about Derrida’s grammatological project.

1. The traditional determination of ‘writing’ should not be regarded simply as an ‘accident’, nor can it be dismissed as inadequate in the sense of a mere ‘error’. This is something that Derrida takes great pains to insist on: the conceptual armature that treats ‘writing’ as derivative in relation to voice, experience, consciousness and so on, has been

essential to, and indeed constitutive of, a certain history. This includes authorizing a certain concept of history according to a particular mode of distinguishing between ‘oral’ and ‘written’ cultures, which, among other things, has produced highly ethnocentric accounts of all peoples seen to be ‘without the book’.

2. For the same reason, one cannot simply step beyond this history. Instead of ‘moving on’ to a new ‘truth’, what is needed is patient and perilous analysis that seeks to mark out the limits and tensions of the conceptual system, while negotiating the constant risk of “falling back into what is being deconstructed” (Derrida, 1976: 14). As Derrida (1976: 13-14) puts it: ‘Of course it is not a question of “rejecting” these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It’s a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated’.

It is from this perspective that Derrida identifies problems in the traditional concept of writing which allow us to begin to think the ‘closure’ of the *epistémè* (as distinct from its *end*). These include, first of all, various forms of ‘scientific writing’, especially mathematics, which challenge certain idealizations concerning phonetic writing. More importantly for my argument here, Derrida (1976: 10) suggests another trajectory enabling us to perceive the closure of the *epistémè* is “the development of practical methods of information retrieval”, such as “the extension of phonography and of all the means of conserving the spoken language, of making it function without the presence of the speaking subject”. Here the problematic that he announces under the name of ‘writing’ converges with the problematic of modern media. As Derrida gives us to think, when he proposes to retain the name of ‘writing’, while expanding the concept to embrace a deeper logic:

And thus we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space

is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing’ (Derrida, 1976: 9).

‘Writing’ would thus name any mark or trace capable of differentiation and repetition. How might such a conceptualization help us to better understand modern and contemporary media?

Now is the time, the time is now

The new forms of writing that emerge at the threshold of modern media – photography, cinematography – assumed a relation to things, appearances and events that disturbed customary thought. The strange *immediacy* of photography was evidenced by its frequent acclamation as signified without signifier; a kind of ‘natural’ writing in which the world revealed itself without apparent human intervention. Nevertheless, as this initial disturbance lessened, the new media was generally accommodated in the existing system, in which media exist in relation to the traditional primacy of an assumed ‘presence’, such as the ‘actual moment’ that had been photographed or filmed. This set in train a complex system of discourses relating to problems of context and meaning that has never fully stabilized. As Benjamin (2003) recognized in his famous meditation on technological images, cinema exposes tensions in correspondence based theories, as montage initiates a form of visual experience in which sequences of images assemble a point of view that was never simply ‘present’.¹

Similarly, one might note that broadcast media such as radio and television open these cracks of time even wider, as ‘experience’ comes to include the uncanny experiences of remote listening or witnessing of ‘live’ events distributed across multiple sites of production and reception. How should we understand the space-time of such events? The dominant response has sought to remain faithful to the metaphysics of presence by positioning media as *supplement* to the event. This response now stretches across a spectrum from seeing media as enabling a mode of ‘being there’ for those who are absent to more recent valorizations of media as *better than being there*. The progressive integration of screen technologies into live events

such as sports, entertainment and politics, where live audiences are also able to enjoy close-ups and replays as part of the ongoing event, is evidence of the way this logic has been reconstructing the terrain of embodied experience. In contrast, the dominant critical response has been to brand all ‘media events’ as more or less false, insofar as they are seen as fatally disconnected from ‘reality’, from ‘real events’ that exist outside mediation.

Both responses are becoming less and less tenable in the present, particularly as the kind of social experiences of simultaneity that broadcast media first orchestrated – what Dayan and Katz (1992) influentially termed ‘media events’ – has assumed a new valence. As media devices have become digital, mobile and increasingly ubiquitous, and pervasive networks have enabled low-cost, distributed communication between multiple actors, media have become part of everyday life in a new sense. As more and more social interactions are inflected by and through media, it is much harder to oppose a domain of ‘media’ to the presumed ‘immediacy’ of the domain of face-to-face, embodied relations. In the context of differentiated practices of continual and iterative realtime feedback connecting people and platforms, media increasingly becomes co-constitutive of manifold social situations – of events at large – with all the uncertainty and ambiguity that this formulation carries. As more and more aspects of social life are ‘mediatized’, they become subject to the spatio-temporal affordances and commercial logics of complex socio-technical systems. While this raises huge and ongoing concerns around issues such as data ownership, privacy and surveillance relating to the political economy of global digital platforms, it also demands a new understanding of the relation between media and experience, consciousness and event.

It is important to clarify aspects of my argument. Of course, as my reference to Derrida’s argument should make clear, the problem is not simply one ‘introduced’ by technology. Accounting for the functioning of memory, or, equally, for the status of ‘fiction’, has always been difficult for a philosophy of consciousness. What I am suggesting here is that the present conjuncture exposes these contradictions more clearly and challenges us to give better expression to heterogeneous experiences of presencing and temporality. I should also explicitly add that I don’t think Derrida is arguing that there is no distinctiveness to speech, consciousness or to realms such as

face-to-face experience or embodiment – on the contrary – but rather that this distinctiveness can't be adequately thought on the basis of a binary distinction that ascribes 'presence' to one domain and understands mediation as a modified, derivative or supplementary relation to this presence. Nor, finally, am I suggesting there has been no attempt to problematize the 'secondary' status of media. In fact, there is a growing body of work, evident, for example, in the frequent neologisms describing different forms of 'present absence' and 'absent presence' that have been proposed in the last decade, particularly in mobile media research. I think the need for a more differentiated conceptualization of relations of presence and absence has also appeared in various other areas, such as HCI (Human-computer interaction) and memory studies. Nevertheless, I would argue that, so far, this endeavor has been uneven and often *ad hoc*, largely lacking explicit recognition of the deeper historical problematic. In particular, within media studies, questioning of the characterization of media as secondary has not been systematically related to a critique of the presumed plenitude of consciousness, speech, face-to-face experience, the event, and so on. For this reason, attempts to recalibrate how we understand the new entanglements of bodies and technology, of media and face-to-face social encounters in the present, has been hampered by a lack of appropriately subtle terminology and rigorous concepts.

While addressing the problematic seems urgent to me, it is not one that can be accomplished in haste. As Friedrich Kittler (2009: 24) noted, part of this history is the pervasive denial by Western philosophy of its own reliance on 'media'. And, as Derrida has given us to think, this idealism is not a heritage that can be overturned easily. One of the acknowledged progenitors of Derrida's thinking of grammatology was Freud. Putting aside all the contradictions of the Freudian text, its most radical contribution was undoubtedly to question the entrenched model of consciousness, particularly as it had been inscribed in Western thought since the Enlightenment. In place of the plenitude of Cartesian self-consciousness, Freud proposed the manifold temporality of the 'deferred effect' [*nachträglichkeit*] of the unconscious. While unpicking the complex origins of the Freudian text is well beyond the scope of this article, one point of reference for its emergence was clearly a new register of

experience, including the experience of trauma relating to capitalist industrialization and the waging of industrial warfare.

Is it too much of a stretch to argue that, in the present, the profound changes in all that we have understood as media – in terms of scale, integration with everyday life, transformation of the archive, and the growing convergence of media platforms with other domains such as transport, logistics, finance, health, and e-commerce – is producing a similar kind of shaking of experience? One that requires a radical rethinking of assumed relations of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, similar in magnitude to Freud’s intervention? Derrida’s grammatology seems to offer a useful starting point for this kind of inquiry, as philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler (1998) have well understood. This is a trajectory I would like to see more media scholars take up.

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Notes

¹ “The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, offers a hitherto unimaginable spectacle. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign a spectator a single viewpoint which would exclude from his or her field of vision the equipment not directly involved in the action being filmed — the camera, the lighting units, the technical crew, and so forth (unless the alignment of the spectator’s pupil coincided with that of the camera). This circumstance, more than any other, makes any resemblance between a scene in a film studio and one onstage superficial and irrelevant. In principle, the theatre includes a position from which the action on the stage cannot easily be detected as an illusion. There is no such position where a film is being shot. The illusionary nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing. That is to say: *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind.* The equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become the Blue Flower in the land of technology” (Benjamin 2003: 263).

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The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate

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With the launch of a new journal called *Media Theory*, the question presents itself as to what is 'media theory', as distinct from social theory as applied to the media. There are certainly plenty of studies that consider the media in relation to the great traditions of sociology and critical theory, as there are also applications of various strands of political theory (pluralism, elite theory, class theory) and economic theory (neoclassical, political economy, institutionalism) to the media (Winseck, 2011; Waisbord, 2012; Cunningham *et. al.*, 2015).

Social theory can sometimes enter the media curriculum in unusual ways. In an earlier teaching role, I recall being part of a teaching team for a unit called 'The Media & Society'. In this unit, 'society' was synonymous with 'other things' that would be considered when you analysed the media, typically including gender, class, nationalism, race, power, sexuality, and so on. These social categories were rarely explained in any detail, at least not to the undergraduates, and functioned as marker points from which we could explain something related to a particular media text (a film, a TV show, a music video, a news story, an advertisement etc.). We also had distinct approaches to the teaching of film, with a unit with the title of 'American Film & Society' coexisting with a unit called 'European Cinema'. Putting aside the film/cinema distinction, the titles also suggested that the study of American film required that more attention be given to social relations and how they played out in particular films (e.g. constructions of race in *Do the Right Thing*), as distinct from the

more aesthetic focus given to the equivalent European films studied in the other unit.

So, is media theory basically social theory as applied to the media? And if so, would a new journal on ‘media theory’ be justified? In this short paper, I want to consider some approaches to media theory that have worked in the other direction – understanding media as having the capacity to reshape the social, rather than simply being shaped by the social.

Debating Media-Centrism

An interesting way to frame this discussion is to draw attention to recent work that has addressed the question of *media-centrism*. In a recent work on the role of media in enabling citizen participation and political citizenship, Grabe and Myrick (2016) make the argument that a more media-centric approach to understanding informed citizenship can enable a better understanding of trends in contemporary politics than the traditional approaches of political studies. They argue that political theorists underestimate the significance of media in democratic theory, because they use the ‘rational actor’ models of politics, and do not adequately consider ‘the deliberate entanglement of emotion with knowledge acquisition and political participation’ (Grabe & Myrick, 2016: 216). As a related point, the focus on information media and ‘hard news’, rather than entertainment and ‘soft news’ genres, fails to understand the extent to which so many elements of contemporary politics are played out in these popular genres, whose audience reach now considerably exceeds that of the traditional news media formats.

While Grabe and Myrick propose the need for a more media-centric approach to studying politics, David Morley (2009) called for a *non-media-centric* approach to media studies. By this, he meant giving more attention to the material as well as the symbolic dimensions of media. One example would be thinking about communications alongside transportation, as the infrastructure that moves people and commodities, as well as images and information, around the world. It would also involve considering in more detail how nation-states block as well as facilitate such

globally networked flows. A less media-centric approach, for Morley, would 'place current technological changes in historical perspective and returns the discipline to the full range of its classical concerns' (Morley, 2009: 114).

The question of media-centrism provides a window from which we can see how the relative weighting given to the media alongside other factors can generate different insights. For Grabe and Myrick, observations from how people use the media to engage with political phenomena opens up insights that often elude conventional political theory. Benjamin Moffitt (2016) has made a similar point about populism, observing that one of the features of populist political leaders is that they spend far more time engaged with the media – and entertainment and infotainment media more so than conventional news and current affairs – than their more traditional counterparts who lead the major political parties. By contrast, Morley feels that in media studies, the social perspective has been lost in some recent work on global and digital media, particularly around questions of '*who* is mobile in relation to *which* material and virtual geographies ... who has access to what, how that access is patterned and what consequences that access has for everyday experiences of movement' (Krajina *et. al.*, 2014: 688). This suggests that debating media-centrism may be one fruitful line of research associated with a new journal dealing with media theory.

The Ambiguous Legacy of Stuart Hall

Few individuals have played as central a role to the formation of contemporary media theory than Stuart Hall. A detailed overview of Hall's main arguments about the media would be beyond the scope of this paper, but his work brought two key concepts derived from Marxist theories of culture and ideology – the concept of hegemony, first proposed by Antonio Gramsci, and the concept of 'relative autonomy' derived from Louis Althusser – and placed them at the heart of understanding the relationship between media and wider social forces. While Hall was not exclusively a media theorist, he did identify the contemporary mass media as being central to questions of culture and ideology, noting in an early essay that 'the media have established a decisive and fundamental leadership in the cultural sphere

... They have progressively *colonized* the cultural and ideological sphere' (Hall, 1977: 340).

In the hands of a sophisticated theorist such as Hall, the balancing acts associated with mixing British cultural history with European structuralism (Hall, 1986), or proposing a 'Marxism without guarantees' (Hall, 1996) could be managed. Hall sought to maintain a notion of determinacy between culture and other levels of society (economy, politics, law etc.), and indeed saw the relationships between these levels as being 'mutually determining' (Hall, 1996: 44) in any given society. Indeed, the enduring significance of Marxism for Hall was its insistence that 'no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located' (Hall, 1996: 45), and in various works he distanced himself from the work of Michel Foucault, post-structuralism, and the discursive politics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. At the same time, as Tony Bennett observed, Hall 'puts discourse on both sides of the equation', meaning that since "material conditions" ... are discursive in form, [they] cannot fulfil the role assigned to them of setting limits to discourse' (Bennett, 1992: 256).

As Hall's Marxist critics (e.g. Stevenson, 1995; Sparks, 1996) would observe, the 'social practices', 'concrete relations' and 'determinate effects' referred to in Hall's work continued to anchor it back to critical political economy. There is therefore a push and pull in the application of Stuart Hall's work to media studies. It can largely abandon political economy, except as a backdrop to understanding struggles over semiotic power, or the competing interpretations of images generated by socially-situated audiences (e.g. Fiske, 1992), or it can move in the direction of dominant ideology theories, albeit with more attention given to aberrant or resistant readings. For Murdock and Golding (2005: 61), studies of interpretations of media texts and online user self-expression are 'micro studies [that] are absolutely essential to a proper understanding of how people sustain their social relations, construct their identities and invest their lives with meaning', but must be accompanied by 'detailed examination of ... how the economic organization of media industries impinges on the production and circulation of meaning and the ways in which people's options for consumption and use are structured by their position within the general

economic formation'. In this way, the potential indeterminacy of cultural analysis of the media is folded back into the relatively stable structures of political economy and the ontologies of social theory.

The Mediasphere

In Hall's work, the tension between social structures and their modes of representation is often resolved by placing inverted commas around terms such as 'reality' and, as shown above, political economists have often responded by placing semiotic analysis back within the sphere of ideology and the formation of identities, bracketed off from the more 'objective' fields of political and economic power, which remain largely explained by Marxism. But other approaches have asked whether, if such forms and relations exist within discourse and representation, we could start from there instead. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) made such an argument around the concept of hegemony in political theory. Rejecting the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, and instead insisting upon 'the material character of every discursive structure' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 107). Breaking from Marxist political economy allowed them to point to the importance of representational keywords, such as 'democracy' and 'the people', as rallying concepts for the formation of cross-class alliances, in an approach that has proven important for understanding contemporary populist political movements.

A comparable move was made by John Hartley in his account of the *mediasphere*, developed in *Popular Reality* (Hartley, 1996). In the context of a historical analysis of the rise of journalism as the 'sense making practice of modernity' (Hartley, 1996: 33), Hartley identifies journalism as constituting the forms of discursive practice that bring together the producers of meaning, the spaces – physical and discursive – where knowledge is distributed and circulated, and populations that are both the consumers of media and potentially empowered citizens of modern nation-states. For Hartley, the relationship between knowledge producers (journalists and other cultural producers), media forms and their audiences constitutes the mediasphere, which 'connect[s] the public (political) sphere and the much larger semiotic (cultural) sphere, within the period of modernity' (Hartley, 1996: 78).

This framework allows Hartley to argue, as Grabe and Myrick do, that any understanding of contemporary politics and political culture needs to go beyond the domains of mainstream news, traditional journalism, political television etc. – the public sphere as traditionally defined – to include entertainment media, fashion magazines, advertising, and other forms not considered to be ‘hard news’. It also allows Hartley to reassert the centrality of the readership, or the consumers of media and culture, to the generation of meaning. The people are thus not only the citizens of a nation-state, or of a national polity, but also ‘citizens of media’ (Hartley, 1996: 71), capable of deploying the means of communication to advance democratic political objectives. In later work, Hartley would propose that such ‘media citizens’ are taking advantage of digital technologies to produce new forms of collective association, and self-organisation, around politics as much as around entertainment (Hartley, 2012: 143-145). Such an analysis can be seen as anticipating some of the more ‘populist’ political formations that have emerged in the wake of the ‘Occupy’ movement, such as the rise of Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K., which have challenged traditional hierarchies within established political institutions as much as they have proposed new strategies for gaining and using political power.

Medium Theory and Media Ecologies

One very interesting debate in media history is that between the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan and the British cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams about how best to understand media technologies. For McLuhan, the media are fundamental to shaping human culture, and technologies are first and foremost extensions of our human capacities: ‘The personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology’ (McLuhan, 1964: 23). Since the ways in which we communicate, and hence our culture, are embedded within the technological forms that we use, the media influence not only what we think but also how we think.

His work explored the proposition that how societies communicate with one another through media technologies in turn shaped both the society (the social body) and the individuals within it. In other words, media form shapes its content. For McLuhan, the key to understanding electronic culture is neither in the technologies themselves, such as machines or computers, nor in the uses of their content or alleged 'effects', since the content of a medium is always another medium: 'the content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera ... the "content" of writing or print is speech' (McLuhan, 1964: 26). Rather, the key issue is to understand how media technologies subtly transform the environment in which humans act and interact.

McLuhan's work was famously critiqued by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams, 1974), which may be considered to represent the core counter-propositions from media and cultural studies. Williams argued that we have to see technologies as socially shaped by the political economy of the institutions that are engaged in their development. As a result, how a technology develops, and how it is used, is a matter of social and political choice; Williams discounted the idea that technologies themselves may shape such choices as ideological, believing that it obscured the element of social choice in ways that implicitly endorsed the control being exercised by existing powerful interests (Williams, 1974: 131).

In the context of the Internet and digital media, the frameworks developed by Williams and McLuhan generate important differences in focus. The social shaping of technology approach that Williams championed draws attention to the decisions made in the development and adoption of new media technologies; which people, groups and social institutions have the power to make such decisions, and what are the possible alternative uses of these technologies. It thus draws attention to the political economy of communications media and technology. By contrast, McLuhan's approach stresses the extent to which cultures become so immersed in modes of being and behaving that are shaped by their wider technological environment that our very ways of being human are inherently linked to the technological forms through which we extend our capacities and senses. Such an approach questions the extent to which we can therefore seek to understand culture independently of the technological forms through which it is always already mediated.

The approach associated with Williams has been the dominant one in critical media and cultural studies. But approaches that owe at least some debt to McLuhan have had some influence. One example is Manuel Castells' highly influential theory of the network society (Castells, 1996, 2009). Endorsing McLuhan as well as the postmodernist theories of Jean Baudrillard, Castells proposed that a network society is one where 'reality itself ... is increasingly captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting ... in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience' (Castells, 1996: 373). Drawing a similar link between culture and communication to that identified by McLuhan, Castells argued that 'because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves, that is our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes, become fundamentally transformed, and will be more so over time, by the new technological system' (Castells, 1996: 328). The implications for Castells are not confined to questions of culture and identity: the network society is based upon new forms of economic relations, while communication power is seen as shifting from the territorially based institutions of the nation-state to globally integrated networks and assemblages (Castells, 2009).

Joshua Meyrowitz (1994) used the term *medium theory* to refer to works that focus upon 'the potential influences of communication technologies in addition to and apart from the content they convey' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 50; c.f. Ellis, 2009). Such work includes the communication histories of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, histories of print literacy and the origins of the book associated with authors such as Walter Ong and Elizabeth Eisenstein, and work on how 'electronic media ... altered thinking patterns and social organisation' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 53). Meyrowitz argued that such work needs to be complemented by consideration of how communications media reshape forms of social interaction, with particular reference to the relationship between group identity, socialization and hierarchy.

A related approach comes from what have been termed *media ecology* theories (McLuhan & Zhang, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015). Such approaches understand media 'not only as means of communication, but more as social environments akin to any other social environment' (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen,

2015: 2). Their proponents argue that ecological metaphors are particularly relevant to an age of the Internet, and of mobile and social media, since 'media as social environments [are] analogous to physical social environments' (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015: 1-2). The idea that the platform is the content, which appeared incongruous to many of Marshall McLuhan's original readers in the 1960s when used with regards to television, may make a lot more sense in an age of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, accessed from multiple mobile media in ambient everyday environments.

Mediatization

The final approach to be considered is that of *mediatization*. This has been most commonly referred to in political communication, with the *mediatization of politics* thesis, which has proposed that the changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are increasingly dependent upon media and conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Esser & Strömback, 2014). But the mediatization of politics is for a number of key authors part of a wider mediatization of culture and society (Lundby, 2009; Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013).

According to these authors, the growing role of media to all aspects of public life has been a feature of the 20th and early 21st centuries. In order to differentiate this approach from media theory more generally, it is important to distinguish *mediatization* from mediation. Couldry and Hepp (2013: 197) observe that *mediation* 'refers to the process of communication in general – that is, how communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction'. In the field of political communications research, such mediation goes back at least as far as the studies of public opinion and media influence by Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Paul Lazarsfeld and others. But whereas mediation refers to technologically mediated communication in general, *mediatization* 'refers more specifically to the role of ... media in emergent processes of socio-cultural change' (Couldry & Hepp, 2013: 197). In relation to political communication, it marks the difference between what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) referred to as the 'second

age' of political communication, marked out by the rise of broadcast television as the primary medium through which political information was provided and its consequences understood, to the 'third age' of political communication, where the public sphere itself, and hence the world of political action, is increasingly constructed through the media.

Mazzoleni and Schulz argued that the mediatization of politics did not in itself entail 'a media "takeover" of political institutions' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 248). It was instead part of a process where politics 'has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media', so that 'the language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251). Aeron Davis observed similar trends in arguing that the spread of promotional culture in the 21st century saw that 'politics, markets, popular culture and media, civil society, work and individual social relations have all adapted to promotional needs and practices' (Davis, 2013: 4).

Key indicators of the growing mediatization of politics include: politicians being increasingly focused upon how their actions play out in the media; the capacity of media institutions to shape the political agenda; political actors being increasingly aware that they compete for attention in the news with celebrities, human interest stories etc.; the growth of market research and public relations strategies within political parties; and the 'professionalization of political advocacy' (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: 213) in order to 'gain control over the media' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 252). The mediatization of politics is facilitated by wider trends in society and culture, the media, and politics, including an increasingly competitive media environment, the challenge of the Internet and social media to traditional communications channels, a polarization of political engagement between the highly engaged and the disengaged, the decline in traditional forms of political affiliation, and the associated decline in the membership of political parties.

The 'mediatization of politics' thesis was associated with political leaders such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, who promoted 'post-ideological' politics, were comfortable

with the growth of an 'entertainment frame' in political news, and invested heavily in the political communications strategies both to gain public office and after they were elected (McNair, 2011). There have been subsequent refinements of the mediatization of politics thesis, with one issue being whether 'the media' should be treated as a homogeneous bloc, while in practice important distinctions exist between public service and commercial media, 'quality' and 'tabloid' media, print, broadcast and online etc. (Lundby, 2009). Another issue, raised by Block (2013), has been whether the institutional model developed by Mazzoleni and Schulz rests upon an overly functionalist understanding of the role of media in democratic politics, and whether there is a need for consideration of the cultural dimensions of how citizens interact with mediated political communication.

Between the 2000s and 2010s, there have been important developments in both politics and media that indicate the need to modify the mediatization thesis, at least with regards to politics. The rise of the Internet and social media platforms as alternative modes of political communication have been linked to other shifts in politics, such as the rise of populist leaders and movements, the election of Donald Trump as an 'outsider' U.S. President in 2016, and the resurgence of candidates from the traditional left such as Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. Whether this is related to the decline of traditional news media outlets such as print newspapers, and the rise of alternative online news sources – sometimes erroneously labelled 'fake news' – is a subject of ongoing research. But certainly, if the argument is that politics and other areas of public life and culture are increasingly shaped by the media and by 'media logic', then we need to register that changes in the overall media ecology can be expected in turn to reshape those relationships.

Conclusion

In considering the various media-centric approaches to understanding the relationship of media to the wider society, my purpose has not necessarily been to advocate on behalf of these approaches. As is widely acknowledged (e.g. Meyrowitz, 1994: 70-73), there are a common set of critiques of media-centrism, including questions of technological determinism, an absence of consideration of

institutionalized power relations, and the question of social and political choice related to the development and uses of technologies. In this respect, Raymond Williams' critique of Marshall McLuhan continues to have contemporary resonance. There is also the difference of time scale. As Meyrowitz observed, the observation that the rise of print culture was associated with a long-term decline of religious authority 'would give little comfort to the family of William Carter who, after printing a pro-Catholic pamphlet in Protestant-dominated England in 1584, was promptly hanged' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 72).

My purpose has been instead to suggest that a new journal dealing with media theory should be open to consideration of those perspectives on the media that come from within the study of media itself. Concepts such as media-centrism, the mediasphere, medium theory, media ecologies and mediatization challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of more traditional social theories as applied to the media, such as the primacy of news to the public sphere, or the idea that technologies are always subject to purposive human agency. Even concepts that have been central to contemporary cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's notion of hegemony, register a degree of ambivalence about the structures of representation that frame social and economic relations. A new *Media Theory* journal could be an exciting space in which to engage in more speculative accounts of where our media technologies may be leading us socially, culturally, politically and economically. If so, it will be an exciting addition to the communication and media studies field.

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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 'producer' 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 'producer' to address arising forms of creativity and expression within contemporary networked media.¹

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, "producer" 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?² 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?² 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”³ – 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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”⁸ – 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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

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

² 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).

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

⁴ 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.

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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).

⁸ “Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (2010, amended 2016), http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf, 1.

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

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

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

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

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Going South and Engaging Non-Western Modernities

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Do we really need another journal theorizing media? While the quick response might be to say, “not really, we have too many,” I want to say that “we do.” From my perspective as a postcolonial scholar, who is concerned with what I will loosely call the Global South, and with mediated spheres of Non-Western modernities, I remain sensitive to the fact that while we have a plethora of journals on various aspects of media, it is the case that we still know too little about media in the Global South. And we also know too little about media’s functioning in spheres of Non-Western modernities. When I use the term Global South I do not of course mean territories that are South of the equator – that is, a territorial approach is not what I am discussing. Rather, I approach the South (and thus North) as a matter of power structure. The South constitute sites of gross economic inequality (too often due to histories of colonialism) in relation to the affluence of the Global North. Such economic inequality is intertwined with historical, geopolitical and cultural disempowerment. Further, the South and North are not binaries; even in nations and contexts (say Bangladesh) that we may designate as South, relations of the privileged (capitalistic) North are constantly circulating. That is, the South and North are intimately proximate. In Mumbai, in India (as in many other metropolitan cities in Africa or Asia), for instance, we see the power structures of North and South intimately working together, or existing together in one city, rupturing the neat binary through which they are often framed.

The reader will note that along with Global South I am also using the term “Non-Western modernities.” This is because I would like to also see a focus on Non-Western modernities and they are not always in the Global South or cannot be positioned as being the same as the Global South. Singapore, Dubai, Seoul, cannot be seen as the South if we understand the South to be sites of gross economic disempowerment. Despite having spheres of the Global South within them, these are for the most part affluent sites. Yet, they manifest mediated relations of modernity that require attention because of their very different functioning and logics that exceed North Atlantic frames of modernity through which we are so habituated to engage media. Such sites constitute mediated relations of Non-Western modernities about which we also know too little. And they too require attention if we are to understand modernity as not just being the province of the North (or West).

What I want to note at this point is that sometimes when the Global South (or Non-Western media spheres) is focused on in media studies (especially in the Communication discipline from which I work), there is often an “invisible West”¹ underlying our frames of reference and assumptions (and sometimes we do not even recognize that). Two examples come to mind here. One is the “comparing media systems” approach that has now become popular, especially after the works of Hallin and Mancini (2004; 2011). Despite the numerous merits of this approach, it is worth asking whether mediascapes in the Global South (or even many parts of the Non-West) can be studied through the neat frame of “systems” (and the predictability and dehistoricization suggested in the term). In the Global South, media spaces are extremely heterogeneous; their usage is very unpredictable. Access to them by diverse populations is not only grossly unequal but often situated in illiberal, illegal (and hence invisible) spheres. This, for instance, has been brilliantly demonstrated in Ravi Sundaram’s (2009) work on pirate modernity in India. Here, among other things, he focuses on illicit, “illegal” (and we could also say “illiberal”) and pirated use and circulation of media commodities by the urban poor in Delhi (which are deliberately overlooked by the State or others in positions of authority). But side by side also exist “legal” media circuits, flows and practices that are under the State’s regulatory power and are part of the formal, capitalist, consumerist media economy. The utilitarian functionality and seeming transparency embedded in the notion of

“systems” does not work in the Global South (as in this example), or even in spheres of Non-Western modernities. In such modernities and mediaspaces, multiple temporalities, histories, and spatialities constitute mediascapes and their “modern” logics (see Shome, 2016 for further elaboration). Where then is the “system” in such sites and media cultures? The question it seems to me is this: What is at stake in attempting to think of media in terms of “systems”? (see also critiques by Terhi Rantanen [2013] and Wendy Willems [2014])? From what gaze or epistemological vantage point are we even able to identify something as a media *system*?

Another example is the huge “media/communication and development” literature, or approach. Even outside of university spheres, this approach is common; in big NGOs, such as UN organizations or the World Bank, for instance. More recently, one is seeing the term “communication and social change” also used as substitute. This approach, with its focus on a developmental logic (“building up,” making “progress”) focuses a lot on the Global South indeed. But it implicitly ends up placing a lot of faith in media and communication as sites and instruments for social change or empowerment in the Global South. This is simultaneously a faith in the logic of (western) liberalism (and its naturalized association with democracy, empowerment, and liberation). But whether the logics of (western) liberalism, as they are attached to our engagements with media in the Global South, or in Non-Western spheres of modernity, can accurately tease out the numerous complexities of those mediascapes, is the question to be asked and examined. Eminent postcolonial scholar, Ashish Nandy (2015), once noted that we often assume that “the ideology of secularism [which is the inherent logic of media liberalism] is prior to the goals it is supposed to serve” (p. 241) [insertion mine]. But secularism can also sometimes betray elitist logics and be mobilized to secure particular social hierarchies.

My assertions in the discussion that I have offered thus far should not be seen as being the same as moves that have been made about “dewesternizing media studies” that are currently in vogue. While such calls have been important indeed, the concept of “dewesternization”, however, often positions the Global South, or Non-Western media, as an “opposition” or “difference” to/from the North or the West. Or sometimes, as Wendy Willems (2014) notes, such calls proceed in a manner that indirectly ends up suggesting that media, and media studies, are originally rooted in

the West [and *now* we are looking at them in the Global South, producing thus a notion of what Harry Harootunian in many places has called the “time lag” – that is, the perception that the Global South or the Non-West is always behind “our modernity” (i.e. Western modernity).] Further, such calls can sometimes end up suggesting that there are no histories of media studies in the Global South, when in fact scholarship has existed but has been unrecognized in globally dominant circuits of knowledge (Willems, 2014; Wasserman, 2010).

Given this huge “assymetric ignorance,” to use Dipesh Chakraborty’s (2000: 28) pithy phrase, that informs media studies (we know far more about media’s functioning in North Atlantic nations than in the Global South and in Non-Western modernities), *we need so many more journals* that are committed to rectifying this inequality in knowledge production. For at the end, as at the beginning, this is not just a matter of theorizing media; *it is centrally about the geopolitics of knowledge production and how we can intervene in that to reorient the unequal directions of knowledge flows and re-engage or rediscover histories of media that were never allowed to be histories* (Shome, 2016). My hope is that this journal can act as a site or forum that allows for such interventions and reorientations in knowledge production about media worlds.

I want to throw in a qualification. It is not that there no journals on media and the Global South, or on Non-Western Modernities. For instance, in 2012, I guest edited a special issue on “Media and Asian Modernities” (Shome, 2012) for the journal *Global Media and Communication*, whose executive editor Daya Thussu generously supported this initiative. This is a journal that, along with a handful of others, such as *Critical Arts*, *African Journalism Studies*, or even *Bioscope* (although *Bioscope* focuses more on South Asia, and India in particular, and exhibits a preference for cinema cultures), publishes work on the media and the Global South, or on mediated modernities of Non-Western worlds. But this is just a handful. We need more journals that can focus on the Global South (and Non-Western modernities) *on their own terms and through a nuanced engagement with their own contexts*. This assertion is not new. Outside the field of media studies, scholars such as Jean and John Comaroff, Achille Mbembe, Raewyn Connell or even Kuan Hsing Chen have been asserting this for some time now in relation to Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Social Sciences more broadly.

In media studies too, scholars such as Brian Larkin in media anthropology, Ravi Sundaram, or more recently Herman Wasserman, Keyan Tomaselli, and Wendy Willems (in the field of Communication Studies) have been making these arguments. But their application continues to be very limited in media studies. Jean and John Comaroff (2012), invoking Homi Bhabha and Achilles Mbembe, write that:

Theory from the South is NOT about the theories of people who may be wholly or partially of the south, least of all ourselves. Nor is it...simply theory “about” the south. It is, as Mbembe has stressed, about *the effect of the south itself on theory*, the effects of its ex-centricity²” (emphasis mine).

In other words, it is about understanding how the complex contexts of the Global South (where those contexts cannot be defined a priori) impact and compel us to rethink what may even count as media or media relations that would be simply unimaginable in the Global North or from the epistemological frames furnished by the West. This means paying attention to “how we have known what we have known about the media so far.” It means being reflexive about how complex contexts of the Global South compel us not just to know “differently” but also to drastically shift (in fact disrupt) the points of epistemological reference through which we “know” about media.

My Wish List (Agenda?) for this Journal

So, I would like this online journal, *Media Theory*, to play a significant role in addressing the inequalities in knowledge production about ‘other’ media worlds – whether in the Global South or in spheres of modernities that exceed North Atlantic modernities. I would like this journal to *consistently* devote expansive space to *making visible* the cultural politics and relations (including of history) of media in the Global South *on their terms* and where the Global South is not seen as an always already “known” context (for its contours shift and slide according to shifts in geopolitics and national politics). Such foci, I hope, would encourage us to rethink what media means, what it can mean, its histories, its scope of operations, and *even the objects* that may count as media in ways we have not thought of before (see, Shome, 2016).

For example, as migrants from the Global South – in particular Africa – come onto European shores in their boats, can those boats be considered as media? What kinds of geopolitical relations do they mediate? What communicative spheres and communities do they open up, as migrants are huddled in these boats for days (and sometimes denied entry into the ports), often running out of food and water or medical supplies; are they forced to create some sense of community? Consider another example. In India, wearing astrological/energy rings is common. The idea is that they channel particular modes of energy into your body which has physical and emotional healing effects. This is considered to have a “scientific” basis as most educated astrologers would aver. Can such astrological stones – pearl, coral – be considered as media objects? Such a kind of rethinking and questioning requires a *textured, situated, and grounded* engagement with contexts of the Global South and of modernities of the Non-West. It requires engaging, and even sometimes building, epistemological references and frames for understanding media, its scope (that is, what may count as media) that thus far may not exist.

Relatedly (and as suggested in earlier sections), I would like this journal to explore and excavate logics of media modernity outside of logics of Western liberalism. In India, for instance, devotional ringtones are regularly downloaded and used in mobile phones. The vibrant mobile phone culture in India at one level enables religious minded people (which most of India is) to reconnect to their gods and faiths through new modes providing immediate forms of psychological and emotional comfort. For the poor and lower class populations, many of whom may have second hand mobile phones, and who feel increasingly cut off from the wealth and affluence they see around them in upper/middle classes, such intimate access to devotional hymns (for example, they may be woken up in the morning by the ringtone of the famous Gayatri Mantra – one of the most powerful Hindu chants that exist – and not have to visit a temple for that) may enable them to continue to “hold on” and find emotional comfort through that media object they hold in their hand – and the devotional affects it generates for them. This is a very different promise of modernity being delivered by technology (here the cell phone). Here the promise being delivered is that of greater and quicker religious connection to their “gods”, as well as the sense of religious intimacy that can be produced by pressing the button on their

cell phones to generate devotional songs. Who is to say here that this is not an experience of mediated modernity? Who is to say here that religion, magic, faith and so on cannot be brought into the regime of modernity, and media modernity, to be more specific? But once again, such reconsiderations require a drastic unsettling of our epistemological frames of modernity through which we even attempt to understand what media does and can do for “the people.”

I would also like this journal to publish work that focuses on South to South media relations. That is, rethink media transnationalism, taking the Global South as the central frame of reference. While there is an explosion of work on media transnationalism, most of this work has focused on media flows in a manner where the “West” is always a location. But we know so little about the kinds of media connections or disconnections being produced by South to South flows. Knowing this would once again enable us to produce more epistemological frames of reference that can widen the scope of media studies in a productive manner and give us glimpses into mediated lives, relations, usage, objects, and flows that thus far have escaped our intellectual radar screen.

Last but not least, I would like a journal of this kind, in its attention to the Global South, to *link media studies to issues of environmental justice*. Sites in the Global South – India, parts of China, Nigeria for instance – have become grounds for the dumping of electronic waste from the North. Despite all kinds of regulations in the North, this still goes on. I have myself visited one such site in India – Sangrampur, a small town 25 miles outside of Kolkata. The poor mine the minerals from computers and other smart products without any protection gear. These are then sold back, often illegally, into the global economy. The work is toxic to begin with, causing all kinds of health risks and even death. While we celebrate digital life in metropolitan spheres of the world, in so many parts of the Global South that same digital life produces what I term “digital death”. My hope is that this is something to which this journal can provide significant attention.

At the end, my wish is that this journal will be disruptive, that it will geopoliticize and decolonize media studies in order to produce new, unknown or unrecognized epistemological frames through which to engage media, so that we can glimpse into

those impoverished lives and worlds whose desires and despairs rarely come up to our mediated screens. My hope is also that we can also discover logics of *mediated modernities* in the Global South and in Non-Western spheres that can unsettle what we have known to be “modern” in the North (or the West). This is not simply a matter of trying to say “we have never been modern.” It is perhaps one of asserting that “we” have never always been “modern” in ways that the North (or West) has taught or forced us to be. This in itself would be a huge accomplishment for the journal.

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¹ Clearly, I am not the first to note this. In various fields, this has been noted by some scholars in their corresponding fields. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell, Jean and John Comaroff, Tejaswini Niranjana, Kuan Hsing Chen, Wendy Willems (in the Communication discipline) also have expressed this concern. In 2009, I offered a similar critique on Cultural Studies, especially as it is attempting to "internationalize" itself.

² The term "ex-centricity" is from Homi Bhabha.

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**Prolegomenon to a Media
Theory of Machine Learning:
Compute-Computing and
Compute-Computed**

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In this paper, I outline a groundwork for a media theory of machine learning by introducing two new concepts, *compute-computing* and *compute-computed*, and a framework for their interaction.¹ *Compute-computing* (computing as generative) is here understood as the “active” learning component of a system, whereas *compute-computed* (computing as generated) is understood as the “passive”, coded, imprinted or inscribed aspect of a system. I introduce these two concepts to help us to think through the specificity of algorithmic systems that are more than just the operative, sequential or parallel systems of computational processing to which we have become accustomed. Indeed, in the case of machine learning systems, these systems have the capacity to be self-positing in the sense of generating models and data structures that internalise certain pattern characteristics of data, without the requirement that they are translated into formal data structures by a human programmer.² That is, they are able to capture the abstract form of data input into the system, identify key characteristics, frames or patterns, and store this for comparison and classification of other data streams or objects.

In a sense, these systems could be said to have an additional agency which is the ability to create new algorithms, as *compute-computing*; that is, that they can construct a model of a “world” of data and functions to transform them. Due to limitations of space, I can only give the broad outlines of the theoretical and conceptual work that needs to be undertaken to think through this new computational form and its

implications. Nonetheless, I do want to point towards the possible future directions for thinking about machine learning that this preliminary work suggests. Consequently, in this paper I am forced to bracket out the broader societal and political economic implications – which are of course, substantial and estimated at \$26-39 billion in investment in machine learning in 2016 alone (Bughin et al., 2017) – in order to concentrate on a new framework for thinking about machine learning, but also as a contribution towards critiquing it. In particular, I want to think about machine learning in terms of its capacity for self-writing, or automatic model-building, and the problematics for thinking about the complexity of code, software and algorithms when the “code” is, in some sense, wrapped again inside another level of complexity. Machine learning appears as a “riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”, particularly to those outside the field, and this morphology of obscurity and complexity requires theoretical and empirical unpacking.³ By presenting a different conceptual model for thinking about machine learning, we can begin the critical work of understanding what is happening beneath the surface of these new computational forms and how their deployment matters.

The difficulty of researching algorithms and software have been the focus of a number of scholarly works (for example: Berry, 2011; Berry and Fagerjord, 2017; Chun, 2006; 2010; 2011; Fuller, 2008; Manovich, 2001; Marino, 2006; Wardrip-Fruin, 2009) but here, by concentrating on machine learning as a specific problematic in relation to software more generally, I want to pull attention towards the particular issues for a media theory of machine learning. There are already some useful examples of scholarly work that are thinking about machine learning, but these are usually overly general (Alpaydin, 2016; Domingos, 2017), focused on issues of black-boxing or technical classification (see Burrell, 2016; Domingos, 2012) or are popular texts concerned with broader themes (Carr, 2016; Ford, 2016; Kelly, 2017; McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2017). In contrast, here I develop what we might call a theoretical and philosophical prolegomenon for a new set of concepts for thinking about machine learning structures and processes.

In the first section, I want to look at the specificity of machine learning in relation to the larger field of artificial intelligence research. In the second section, I introduce my conceptual framework and explain how it is linked to the work of Baruch Spinoza.

Finally, in the last section, I explore how this conceptual framework provides a means for discussing machine learning in relation to problematics raised for media theory, digital humanities and social theory more generally. As previously noted, this paper, by virtue of its restricted length, will be limited in offering a broad overview of very complex subjects; nonetheless, it is hoped that this helps to concentrate the discussion around the theoretical concepts I want to outline.⁴

I

In 1959, Arthur Samuel is claimed by many who work in the area to have defined machine learning as a “field of study that gives computers the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed”. I say claimed, because although widely cited in the literature to Samuel’s work (1959), the phrase does not actually appear in his article. Nonetheless, this definition is an accepted (and repeated) origin point in the field and often used to show how machine learning is particularly geared towards the self-learning capacity of a machine and how it differs from artificial intelligence, that is, the application of computation to symbolic tasks that are usually undertaken through human cognition.⁵ In 1997, Mitchell updated this definition to describe machine learning as “a computer program [that] is said to learn from experience *E* with respect to some class of tasks *T* and performance measure *P*, if its performance at tasks in *T*, as measured by *P*, improves with experience *E*” (Mitchell, 1997). In essence, he argues that it is the performance indicator that is crucial for the development of the “learning” capacity, that is the ability to undertake the processing work within a shorter period of time. We can only note here that this notion of “learning” is very specific and technical in its deployment, and relates to the ability to undertake skills or tasks, not to wider humanistic connotations of learning as understanding, interpretation, etc. Indeed, it is this focus on specific domain problems that is said to delimit machine learning in relation to the wider knowledge problems of general artificial intelligence.

Machine learning as a specific area of artificial intelligence research has received a great deal of interest, not only from academic researchers and corporations, but also in terms of the public sphere through the media since 2010 (see Donnelly, 2017;

Economist, 2017; Lewis-Kraus, 2016; Tufekci, 2014). Partly, this has been due to changes in hardware and software capacities that enable some of the promises of artificial intelligence to be realised across the entire landscape of media ecology. The turn to machine learning has also been driven by the limited capacities within disciplines to cope with an ever-growing mountain of digital data, so-called Big Data, combined with a political economy that sees huge economic potential in mining this data for insights and profit. As Burrell explains, “machine learning algorithms are used as powerful generalizers and predictors. Since the accuracy of these algorithms is known to improve with greater quantities of data to train on, the growing availability of such data in recent years has brought renewed interest to these algorithms” (Burrell, 2016: 5). It is certainly the case that machine learning is finding its way into a myriad of devices, from cloud computing centres, to translation services, televisions, phones and talking assistants. Indeed, the deployment of machine learning has increasingly begun to resemble other kinds of computational services, with a notional layering of abstractions available as code libraries and application programming interfaces (APIs), and also as services available from third parties.

To create systems in this way is to already begin to reveal the depth model that is implicit in computational layers, often wrapped inside each other. Whilst the notion of layering in computational systems is very common (see Berry, 2014: 58; Kitchin, 2016: 20), this is also very much the logic of producing a “black box” that can handle machine learning processing with a simplified interface for inputs and outputs (Berry, 2011: 15-16). However, if we move away from the external perspective on machine learning and focus on its internal system structure, here it is interesting to observe the way in which machine learning is structured rather like an onion, with the outside layers, usually programmed in a conventional computer programming language, creating an internal software machine that constructs abstractions of data that can be created, linked, programmed and weighted in a number of important ways. Machine learning algorithms have three main aspects which need to be implemented in the development of machine learning systems. These are: (1) *Knowledge Representation*: Machine learning algorithms implement a model of knowledge, using knowledge representations such as decision trees, sets of rules, instances, graphical models, neural networks, support vector machines, or model ensembles; (2) *Evaluation*:

Machine learning systems are trained to become classifying systems using inductive learning techniques, and are evaluated through techniques such as accuracy, prediction and recall, squared error, likelihood, posterior probability, cost, margin, and entropy k-L divergence; and (3) *Optimisation*: the algorithms are optimized using techniques such as combinatorial optimization, convex optimization, and constrained optimization.

Most machine learning systems use a model of inductive cognition to produce classifications. Here, induction is understood as “the process of inferring general rules from specific data” (Mooney, 2000: 1). Machine learning can be organised using *supervised learning* with training data, *unsupervised learning* with clustering techniques, *semi-supervised learning* with a smaller amount of training data, or through *reinforcement learning*, whereby feedback into the network reinforces internal structures based on the success of its output. In all cases, the aim is that the system learns to create the function that transforms the input data into an output, to create so called *local generalisation* as opposed to *abstract generalisation*. The output can take the form of *classificatory systems*, where the function creates discrete outputs, *regression systems*, where the function is continuous, and *probability estimation systems*, where the output is a probability value.

For example, where the knowledge representation is a neural network, a “connectionist” system is constructed. In the case of neural networks, a different paradigm for computing is introduced based on processing/memory abstraction that is inspired by the “parallel architecture of animal brains”. The neural net systems work by taking a given input A and translating it into B through intermediate, sometimes called hidden, layers of neural nets. Traditional computational systems are usually procedural (or imperative); a program starts at the first line of code, executes it, and goes on to the next, following instructions in a somewhat linear fashion.⁶ A true neural network does not necessarily follow a linear path. Rather, information is processed collectively, in parallel throughout a network of nodes (the nodes, in this case, being neurons, or small program units connected together with weights between them). By using techniques such as feed-forward (i.e. no loops in processing) and back-propagation (allowing the output to be weighted back into the

network to correct anomalies), these systems can become better at pattern recognition and classification.

The actual internals to the functioning of machine learning might be thought of as analogous to the notion of “sandboxing”, whereby the machine learning model is contained within another structure of code. Sandboxing is a technique used in computing to separate application code into differing levels of access and control so that different security levels can be applied and only the appropriate level of access is granted to the application. The key aim is to prevent unauthorised access to computer resources, but it can also be used to normalise the computational architecture so that the same code can run on different systems, as was done with the Java language, for example. In the case of neural nets, it is not computer security that is the issue as such; rather, it is the creation of an abstract machine that models in software the operation of a simplified notion of neural cells, and which can encode and store a functional transformation within a network data structure. With machine learning, one could say that a different form of “sandboxing” is being undertaken, whereby the “learning” or “training” processes are required to generate an algorithmic model embedded in an abstract machine. This in turn is constructed from software neural networks to generate a function for analysing data inputs and computed outputs (whether classification, regression or probabilistic). This structure allows the network to learn to identify similarities, and as such move from the training data to completely novel data that it can pattern match based on the training data it has seen before. Thus the “fundamental goal of machine learning is to generalize beyond the examples in the training set” (Domingos, 2012). That is, machine learning is essentially an inductive process based on the original empirical training data fed into the network inputs and carefully reinforced so that the network pattern matching achieves the desired aims.

These systems have a broad range of uses, but some include: *pattern recognition*, with examples such as facial recognition, optical character recognition, etc.; *time series prediction*, so that machine learning can be used to make predictions; *signal processing*, so that machine learning can be trained to process an audio signal and filter it appropriately; *control*, so that machine learning can be used to manage steering decisions of physical vehicles; *soft sensors*, so that analysing a collection of many

measurements can be abstracted into one machine learning algorithm by processing input data from many individual sensors and evaluate them as a whole; and lastly for *anomaly detection*, so that the machine learns to recognize patterns, and can also be trained to raise an alert when something is anomalous. These various use cases have endeared machine learning to a number of real-world systems, from financial marketing forecasting, fraud detection and identification systems to anti-terrorism surveillance.

2

Now I want to change register and turn to conceptualising the underlying structure in machine learning, by briefly thinking through the work of the philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).⁷ Whilst there is not sufficient space to give a deep outline of Spinoza's philosophy, what I want to bring forward is his development of the medieval notion of *Natura naturans* (Nature naturing), particularly in relation to Spinoza's notions of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. The notions of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy and through Augustine and Scotus Eriugena as a distinction between God and world. Spinoza uses these concepts but with the intention to introduce a distinction between the part of nature that he argues is generative, and related to a traditional notion of a creator God, that is *Natura naturans*, and the part of nature that is the result of an act of creation, *Natura naturata* (see Demasio, 2003: 329). Thus, for Spinoza there are two sides of Nature. There is the active, productive aspect of the universe – what Spinoza calls Substance and its attributes, and from which all else is derived and which Spinoza calls *Natura naturans* – ‘naturing Nature’. There is also the other aspect of the universe is that which is produced and sustained by this active aspect, which Spinoza calls *Natura naturata*, or ‘nured Nature’ (see Nadler 2001: 100).

Spinoza uses these terms in *Ethics* (1, xxix) where he explains that “by *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is ... God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.” That is, that *Natura naturans* is productive of an objective *Natura naturata*. In other words, there is “causal and epistemic

dependence of all things upon God” (as *Natura naturans*) (Nadler, 2001: 100). Whereas he argued that “by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from God’s attributes, that is, all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.” So, *Natura naturans* has traditionally designated God, insofar as he is understood as the creator and principle of all action, while *Natura naturans* is understood as the totality of beings and laws he has created (see Hadot, 1995: 262). This construction, as Hadot notes, has had a lot of interest from artists for conceptualising their practice, such as Klee who argued that “*Natura naturans* is more important to the painter than *Natura naturata*” (Hadot, 1995: 255). So, Spinoza understands *Natura naturans* as ‘Nature’ – a creative potency-in-act as God. This is Nature creating itself, nature as “naturing itself”. In contrast, he argues, *Natura naturata* is a determinate totality of determinate being, it having received a form – that is, nature ‘natured’.

3

This distinction can be understood as being of a constitutive (*Natura naturans*) and an operational (*Natura naturata*) form and it is this constitutive and operative distinction that I want to argue is helpful for thinking through machine learning. To this I want to introduce these two new concepts. (1) *Compute-computing*, understood as a generating level of activity in the machine learning system, which can be understood as “active” and analogous to Spinoza’s notion of *Natura naturans*, in as much as it creates the conditions for the neural network. That is, it forms a constitutional level in the computational structure which creates the conditions of possibility for the network as such. This is in operation mostly in the training or learning phase of the machine learning system. This is analogous to what Spinoza understands as the constitutional structure and patterns, what he calls the “attributes” of *Natura naturans*. And the second concept of (2) *compute-computed*, understood as that which is or has been generated and as such is “passive”, as in Spinoza’s notion of *Natura naturata*. This forms the operational level of the machine learning system, what Spinoza understands as the operational “modes” of *Natura naturata*. So here, passive does not mean inactive; rather it points to the performative aspect of the *compute-computed*, that which has been produced and which can be made operative in relation to the

function of pattern matching by the network. This, then, is the network following training with data, and which cannot, of itself, produce another network. With the notion of *Natura naturans*, Spinoza and other philosophers pointed towards the fecundity of Nature (and by extension God) in its creative, dynamic capacity. Similarly, here I want to point to the creative potentiality offered by *compute-computing* for generating multiple modes of *compute-computed*.

We might note that there are a number of different machine learning algorithms. We can think of these as multiple attributes of *compute-computing*. Examples include decision tree learning, association rule learning, artificial neural networks, deep learning, inductive logic programming, support vector machines, clustering, Bayesian networks, reinforcement learning, representation learning, similarity and metric learning, sparse dictionary learning, genetic algorithms, rule-based machine learning, and learning classifier systems. Broadly speaking these algorithms are generative and allow a machine to learn using a learning data set so that it can work with new, unseen data. The idea is that through the learning process the algorithm is able to create a *compute-computed* which enables some form of prediction or pattern-matching related to new presented data.⁸

Now I want to change register again and think more broadly about the wider use of machine learning techniques in examples which will be more familiar. I will briefly introduce deep learning algorithms, particularly those which use convolutional neural networks (CNNs). I focus on these because CNNs have application in natural language processing but also in image and video recognition and, therefore, applicability in relation to digital humanities projects.⁹ The wider public are becoming familiar with the generative capacities of so-called deep convolutional networks, such as DeepDream, due to its appeal to popular culture in the generation of seemingly hallucinated images that are dreamlike in form. DeepDream is a system created by Google using a CNN to find and enhance patterns in images via algorithmic pareidolia. The software is designed to detect faces and other patterns in images, with the aim of automatically classifying images. However, once trained, the network can also be run in reverse, being asked to adjust the original image slightly

so that a given *compute-computed* (e.g. the image for faces or certain animals) is placed back in the original image.

CNNs work by modelling animal visual perception, and can therefore be applied to visual recognition automation. They are made up of multiple layers of individual software sensory neurons (so-called receptive fields, which are made up of clusters of these neurons). The word “convolution” comes from its use to describe a mathematical operation on two functions which produces a third function. The new function is a modified version of one of the original functions. For image analysis, convolutional filtering plays an important role in many important algorithms; for example, in edge detection, sharpening an image and adding blurring. Convolutional neural networks cascade convolution functions to create high-definition and detailed image analysis. They can also be used to identify and analyse textual inputs, and can recognise different letter forms, typefaces, characters, etc. and generate visualisations based on these contents. One example of their use in a digital humanities project is in Patricia Fumerton’s work (UCSB) in the English Broadside Ballad Archive.¹⁰ Here, CNNs are used to process and classify woodblock images and text automatically. The use of machine learning creates a pattern library for finding like woodblocks but also opens up the possibility of discovery of new links between the woodblocks.

Another example of these systems is recurrent neural network (RNN), a class of artificial neural network where connections between networks form a directed cycle. Unlike feedforward neural networks, RNNs can use their internal memory to process arbitrary sequences of inputs. This makes them applicable to tasks such as unsegmented connected handwriting recognition or speech recognition. One such RNN, long short-term memory (LSTM), is a recurrent network that excels at remembering values for either long or short durations of time. Indeed, it is for these reasons that they are used by Google for speech recognition on the smartphone, for the smart assistant Allo, and for Google Translate. Apple also uses LSTM machine learning for the “Quicktype” function on the iPhone and for Siri, and Amazon similarly uses LSTM for Amazon Alexa. These machine learning supported systems are very much becoming more evident in everyday life, and I hope that, by showing these links between what seem like complex and esoteric paradigms in computing and their growing importance as elements of mediation and experience in everyday

use of phones, computers and technology, we can see the urgency for media theoretical work in this area.

This short paper can only give a very brief introduction to these questions and to the theoretical work I am developing in this area. With machine learning we have the broad outlines of a new computational paradigm which is likely to have a major impact on the kinds of media systems the public uses over the next decade or so. As I have outlined in this paper, this is a complex technical field but needs to be addressed urgently. I have sought to rethink the technical issues at play by rearticulating their major contours through Spinoza's concepts of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* to develop the analogous concepts of *compute-computing* and *compute-computed*. These bring to the fore the major advances for thinking about computation in terms of its generative and pattern-matching capacities in recent technical work. This paper has only given broad outlines and examples of this new and rapidly growing field and much work remains to be done. Indeed, if we have only just started asking questions about the medium specificity of algorithms and software, then it is clear that the added complexity of machine learning is going to challenge media theory into engaging with new forms of computation which have important consequences for human attention, reading, learning, and instrumentality more widely.

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Notes

¹ There are also interesting resonances of Heidegger's notion of things thinging.

² Many of these machine learning systems still require handcrafting by "engineer-artisans" who are required to optimise the networks internal to these systems.

³ Winston Churchill in a radio broadcast in October 1939 declared, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

⁴ Journals that engage with theoretical and philosophical concepts and ideas, such as *Media Theory*, are important sites for the exploration and explication of what we might call theory-work, and as such crucial to the development of the field of media philosophy.

⁵ This definition is contested, of course, and many scholars and practitioners think of machine learning as a subset of the wider field of artificial intelligence. The term *artificial intelligence* itself was coined in 1956 at Dartmouth College at the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence by John McCarthy, then an Assistant Professor of Mathematics.

⁶ Object oriented programming and related approaches extend these techniques but continue to require human understanding and programming of its linear operation, albeit in this case distributed over a system of software objects.

⁷ It might be noted that there is an interesting tension in using the work of a rationalist such as Spinoza for thinking through the empiricism of machine learning, particularly in light of the emphasis placed on the inductive model of reasoning machine learning relies upon. In this paper, there isn't space to develop this issue and think through the tension in any depth, but I look to engage with this question in a later paper. Many thanks for the discussion by participants at the Visualisierungsprozesse

in den Humanities conference which took place in Zürich, Switzerland, from 17-19 July 2017, where this issue and others were raised.

⁸ An important area for digital humanities is that of topic modelling, which gives a good example of this distinction between the constitutive (*compute-computing*) and the operative (*compute-computed*) in its use and deployment. Both the discriminative and generative machine learning forms of topic modelling can be helpfully understood using these concepts.

⁹ There are also a number of open source projects available to use off-the-shelf: Caffe, DeepLearning4j, DeepLearning-hs, neon, TensorFlow, Theano, and Torch.

¹⁰ English Broadside Ballad Archive: <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu>

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**Paranoia is Real:
Algorithmic Governance
and the Shadow of Control ***

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In some ways the media question has become more uncertain than ever. Media theory seems eclipsed by the ubiquity of its objects. As technologies of mediation increasingly find their way into societies of sensation and economies of calibration, the monopoly of knowledge hitherto enjoyed by the discipline of media and communications is now harangued in a world where everyone is an expert. Within the academy, many disciplines claim the authority to speak about digital technologies – mathematicians, urban planners, engineers, biologists, health scientists, sociologists and architects, to name just a few. Across society at large we are all invited to comment and find it increasingly difficult to extricate ourselves from the pressure to connect. Yet a crystallization of thought often enough emerges from moments of crisis – if that is indeed the current situation of media theory. While many of us identify with transdisciplinary methods or embrace forms of disciplinary promiscuity, there remains a distinction of media theory within environments governed by digital objects. As media approach a universal condition of integration with labour and life, the organic and inorganic, the question of power becomes amplified. Media theory asserts its ontological and epistemological dimensions when a curiosity in the material properties and tendencies of communications media is coupled with a critical interrogation of the operation of power.

What follows in the text below are speculations on the status of fake news and post-truth as media-technological conditions for experimenting with paranoia as method.

In his economic history of the present, Philip Mirowski writes the following:

In the topsy-turvy world of neoliberalism you may think that you are busily expressing your innate right to protest the cruel and distorted state of the world; but in most cases, you are echoing scripts and pursuing an identity that has already been mapped out and optimized beforehand to permit the market to evaluate and process knowledge about you, and convey it to the users with the deepest pockets.¹

Let's unpack this statement a little more. What are the scripts that predetermine our action in the world? Well, most immediately, they are socially acquired behaviours that we learn and reproduce across a range of institutional, cultural and political settings. We rehearse and perform various identities throughout our life. But what of the algorithmic dimension to such scripts? What are the rules and parameters by which our gestures – political or otherwise – are signalled to people and machines, animals and things? Can a distinction be made between real or true gestures and their fake equivalents? All gestures and actions are necessarily rehearsed and performed. Even spontaneity has its precedents. There is never an original to which a reproduced gesture may refer back to. Rather, we inhabit what Baudrillard impressed upon readers of so-called postmodern theory a couple of decades ago as *the simulacra of the real*. Baudrillard was never a believer in fakes. Neither was Warhol. Or rather, fake for them was the new orbit of reality.

So why, now, have notions of post-truth politics and fake news gained a renewed currency? Of course the immediate reference here is to Donald Trump. One can also point to the ways in which platform capitalism organizes our experience of the world through parametric architectures predicated on the logic of the filter. But it seems to me that the post-truth, fake news world is more symptomatic of the return of positivism and the pervasive reach it holds across disciplines that should know better. Knowledge has submitted to regimes of measure and calculability that are the techno-ontological core of the digital.

An epistemic horizon of neo-positivism conditions the legitimacy of post-truth, fake worlds in which the analytical capacity to decide and distinguish is subordinate to the

power of affect coupled with the vulnerability of subjectivity parsed with algorithmic machines. To orchestrate a foundation for legitimacy, discourses, practices and imaginaries are correlated with technologies of extraction and calculation. Subjectivity is modulated in ways that gravitate toward collective self-affirmation and the promise of security. The modern history of fascist movements demonstrates this well, as does the popular story by George Orwell, which is why Trump is so easily drawn into that trajectory of control.

Critical interrogations often invite us to explore fake tactics as a mode of intervention. I would like to flip this around and consider strategies of coping. I'm less interested in therapies of the self here than what I would call *paranoia as method*. This is an idea and analytical proposal to which I only gestured at in my book from last year on logistical media theory.² So, I thought I would take this opportunity to develop a method of paranoia as a diagnostic device that might assist our political and subjective orientation in worlds of algorithmic governance and data economies. Consider this to be a form of shadow-knowledge.

With the Snowden revelations of the National Security Agency's (NSA's) PRISM surveillance machine, the scale and scope of paranoia is grafted to the modulation of affect, intensity and uncertainty to the extent that new techniques, methods and tactics are required if political movements, corporate secrets and government communiqués are to design cryptographic systems robust enough to withstand the analytic reach of NSA surveillance programs and their kin.

The British filmmaker, Adam Curtis, is probably one of the most consistent practitioners of paranoia as method. Helped along by repetitive strains of eerie Brian Eno soundscapes that tie Curtis's tantalizing editing of archival news and documentary footage, his series of films exploit the verisimilitude of the documentary genre in an analysis of geopolitical power and the manufacturing of society gone to the dogs. Key titles include: *The Century of the Self* (2002), *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007), *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) and *HyperNormalisation* (2016). This last film in particular hones in on the systemic production of fakeness.

Yet the question of fake news seems to me predicated on the logic of representation. But if we are in general agreement that, following Félix Guattari, our epoch is one that has moved from a logocentric world to a machinic world, a world of “complex assemblages of individuals, bodies, materials and social machines, semiotic, mathematical, and scientific machines, etc., which are the true source of enunciation,”³ then the critical question for today becomes how to register fakeness when meaning is no longer tied to representation but rather the algorithmic production of subjectivity and the politics of sense and sensation (or what more frequently goes by the name of affect).⁴ Probing just one component of media-ecological regimes of governance and control takes us to the operation of algorithms. Governance within the general ecology of our media condition is orchestrated by algorithmic calculations of anticipation and pre-emption.

For German media philosopher, Erich Hörl, the “general ecology” of the technosphere analyses the contemporary condition of governance and cybernetic control in a technical world. Hörl maintains that we are in an:

...environmental culture of control that, thanks to the radical environmental distribution of agency by environmental media technologies, ranging from sensorial to algorithmic environments, from bio- to nano- and geotechnologies, renders environmentality visible and prioritizes it like never before.⁵

Yet environmentality, understood as a new idiom of control, is only visible inasmuch as it manifests on a scale of perceptible transformation.

If we adopt the paranoid precept that everything is open to inspection, then our next move would be to ask what, then, is made visible and knowable? And, who cares? The infrastructural and technical components of environmental media are more often highly secluded and inaccessible data facilities, or computational systems operating in the background of routine transactions, processes and practices. The political question of power goes beyond a philosophical politics of sense, theory and concepts.⁶ To attribute a politics to such struggles of thought, we would need to

identify the institutional and geocultural terrains in which conceptual dispute is materialized. And that's when paranoia begins to set in.

I agree with Hörll that a techno-environmentality paradigm succeeds and displaces the primacy of human agency and bind of reason. There's an embarrassing juvenility that attends the human pretence of control. Though I would side-line the question of politics as a problem for theory ("decision design") and instead ask how environmental media relates to the organization and politics of movements. This is a question I have been addressing with Geert Lovink in our writings on organized networks (or orgnets) over the last decade or so. In terms of a program for orgnets operating within these sorts of parameters, one critical question concerns how to organize in ways that are responsive to new infrastructures of distribution and new agents of power.

A techno-ecology of robots and automation receives a steady stream of reporting in the mainstream press and tech-magazines. The eradication of jobs is the common narrative across these reports. The displacement of the human as the primary agent of change in the world is thus coincident with the increasing extension of technical environments that manage social and economic life. Why don't we switch our attention instead to architectures of inoperability? One tiny (unknown) disruption and the robot falls silent – that's the new certainty of our age, where "the 'assembly life' [has] replaced the assembly line."⁷

With this idea of assembly life in mind, and in pursuit of paranoia as method, I will now briefly look at security aspects of logistical media and cloud software services, particularly enterprise resource planning software (or ERP) used to organize human resources, staff productivity, student activity and general organizational matters relating to the management of universities and the optimization of performance.

The worry over back-end access is a common one for adopters of ERP software. SAP, one of the largest developers of enterprise software, are also known for their backend access to organizational operations. Like other players in this sector, they justify it on the basis of customer support services, though it is not hard to envisage

instances where such access is exploited for purposes of insider trading, jumping trades in the stock market, and so on. I mean, why not?

Microsoft Office 365 claims not to do it: “Microsoft builds no back doors and provides no unfettered governmental access to your data.” But a well-known feature of enterprise software, including Office 365, is telemetry, which enables organizations to collect usage data about documents and software. These data are stored in a central database and accessed via dashboards to provide “comprehensive analytical and reporting capabilities.”⁸

In one tech-vert spruiking the benefits of Office 365 and data loss prevention technology (DLP), Sean Gallagher – “a former Navy officer, systems administrator, and network systems integrator with 20 years of IT journalism experience” – tells us that:

Exchange 2013 and Office 365 (O365) include a new feature that can peek into e-mail messages and enclosed documents and then flag them, forward them, or block them entirely based on what it finds. This sort of data loss prevention technology has become increasingly common in corporate mail systems, but its inclusion as a feature in Office 365’s cloud service makes it a lot more accessible to organizations that haven’t had the budget or expertise to monitor the e-mail lives of their employees.⁹

But really, we already knew that our email was open to inspection, even before the Snowden leaks. So what are some of the core problematics that we face as researchers, teachers, artists and activists when it comes to the digital production of knowledge? And how does the question of fakeness play into them? One key issue at stake here is epistemological, the other is infrastructural. Both are political.

As Noortje Marres observes in her recently published book, *Digital Sociology*:

... when social researchers take up online instruments of data collection, analysis and visualization they enter into highly troubling relations of

dependency with the infrastructures and organizations that make them available. As social researchers take up online tools, we too sign up to the terms of use stipulated by digital industries, whether we are aware of it or not.¹⁰

So what's to be afraid of here? Data extraction and financialization are central to the economies spawned by digital infrastructures of communication. Noortje's focus is on the ethical implications that attend the generation of data and knowledge from online tools that are integrated with technologies of capture that seek to extract value from populations under scrutiny. There is also the political question of how to organize in ways not dependent on the digital infrastructures of platform capitalism. But who's got a plan? Over the past decade the geopolitical shift to global markets and centres in East Asia has impacted enormously on the economic and social fabric enjoyed in North America, Australia and Europe for a few decades following World War II. With new technologies of automation now impacting employment prospects across the world, what happens when 20%, 40%, 60% of the population is written off, without a job, and sliding into a life of destitution below the poverty line? Democracy, as an orchestrated ensemble of the elites, falls apart. Even the seeming stability of authoritarian capitalism in countries like China will rapidly struggle to govern populations in conditions of mass crisis.

The creation of new institutions will only happen once the old ones have gone. Foucault's criticism of revolution was that inevitably the new guard simply end up occupying the warmed up seats of the old guard.

In order to be able to fight a State which is more than just a government, the revolutionary movement must possess equivalent politico-military forces and hence must constitute itself as a party, organised internally in the same way as a State apparatus with the same mechanisms of hierarchies and organisation of powers. This consequence is heavy with significance.¹¹

While an element of structural determinism lurks within Foucault's response to his Marxist interlocutors, his statement nonetheless invites the question: what is the

difference between revolution (as a reproduction of the same) and taking control of the infrastructures of those in power? Neither result in an invention of new institutional forms. When movements organize as a party the possibility of alternatives is extinguished. This is the brilliance of Foucault's analysis, and a position that Jodi Dean reproduces in her valorization of the party as the primary vehicle for political articulation.¹² In both cases, however, there is nowhere left for radical politics within organizational apparatuses of equivalence.

The issue I raised earlier around the correlation between neo-positivism, data analytics and the epistemological status of knowledge as either fake or true also requires a bit more fleshing out. We have invested so much epistemological weight in the power of numbers and the calculability of things that fake power is now super-hegemonic, it is the norm, and this was years before Trump came on the scene. Much of what counts in assessments of research impact rests on the ability to persuasively mobilize statements supported by statistics. Preferably, a researcher is able to justify their claims with reference to rankings and citation statistics produced by the major commercial entities who confer legitimacy upon university declarations of quality and excellence.

What, then, are some techniques and tactics we might deploy to combat the regime of fakes that command and insist authority over the world, in our jobs and over our lives. How do we tell fake power to fuck off? As bitcoin critic, Brett Scott, recently tweeted:



Of course, Scott is right to remind us that the spectrum of life cannot be subsumed by technologies of metricization. There is, indeed, life beyond data economies and

parametric architectures. But, regrettably, data are the new oil. So the trick is to learn how to live with it. One strategy is to raise the stakes of the fake. This would be a Baudrillardian gesture, I guess: to amplify the fake and foreground the limits of phoney regimes of governance and control by showing how all-too-real they are. There is a long history in theatre and performance that undertakes this work and we have a prime example of that with us today in Simon Hunt's anti-hero of Pauline Pantsdown. The Yes Men would be another. Years earlier, renegade philosophers, pranksters, artists and activists associated with Guy Debord and the Situationists were among the many who belong to a tradition of unsettling perceptions of the given.



In search of antecedents for paranoid methods, one exemplary cinematic text is John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Featuring a remarkable Frank Sinatra who embodied so well the disturbing intensity of the paranoid subject, Wikipedia tells us this “neo-noir Cold War suspense thriller...concerns the brainwashing of the son of a prominent right-wing political family, who becomes an unwitting assassin in an international communist conspiracy.”¹³ The film navigates

the tension between refusal and capture, between situation awareness and the clawing intuition that things are not what they seem, but you're not really sure why. The latter most closely approximates paranoia as method.

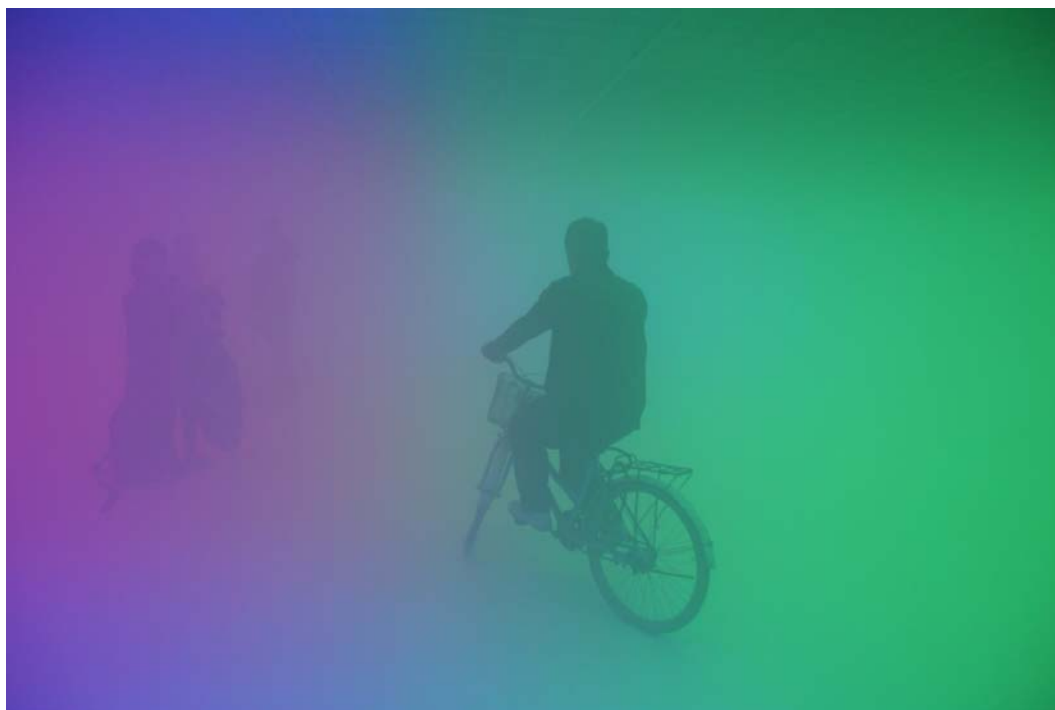
We know, or at least are told often enough, that algorithms increasingly govern our encounter with the world. But most of us have no idea how they do that, nor the extent to which our tastes and predilections, our desires and fantasies are shaped by machinic operations devised by some sweaty-palmed nerd strapped to his console. At least that's the general imaginary we draw on to explain alienation in the age of algorithmic control.

Paranoia need not be treated exclusively as a personality disorder. In the assessment of social normativity, disorders of many kinds are situated on the edges of bell curves that index the distribution of personas. But rather than cage paranoia as a condition of psychotic illness, self-grandeur, conspiratorial fears or, as William Burroughs put it, "delusions that your enemy is organized," my preference is to unleash paranoia as a widespread sensation of impending disaster. How might we "program the sensory order"?, as McLuhan asked in his review of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and "the new electric environment."¹⁴ Here's McLuhan's elaboration:

The central theme of *Naked Lunch* is the strategy of by-passing the new electric environment by becoming an environment oneself. The moment one achieves this environmental state all things and people are submitted to you to be processed. Whether a man takes the road of junk or the road of art, the entire world must submit to his processing. The world becomes his "content." He programs the sensory order.

The idea of "reprogramming" the sensory order is not something new to do with code and scripting, but is fundamentally about repetitive and ritualistic exposure of self/others to the same variables over time. It is a cybernetic operation that lies at the core of human society and the technics of modelling the world in ways that produce sensory regimes specific to the arrangement of technical devices, social systems and the generative force of contingency. The exploration of sensory order is a topic of investigation for many artists. They produce environments in which the technics of

perception and experience, sense and sensation are tested in ways that signal the media-technological horizon of the future-present.



Feelings are Facts, 2010. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Studio Olafur Eliasson GmbH.

Before moving to a conclusion, I would like to briefly survey the work of a few artists engaging the paranoid logic that underscores contemporary modes of orchestrating experience. Some of these works take us back to the fundamentals of vision. Light in James Turrell's work, for instance, is explored for its properties – not as that which illuminates things, but for the thingness or spectral properties of light itself.¹⁵ The earlier work of Olafur Eliasson, which is about “seeing yourself seeing”, explores a similar theme of over-exposure.¹⁶ Examples such as these prompt us to ask how the quality of light produces regimes of vision that inflect knowledge within a particular spectrum.



Feelings are Facts, 2010. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Studio Olafur Eliasson GmbH.

Other works, such as Sophie Calle's *The Detective* (1980), have a kind of Douglas Sirk quality to them, where an interior world of daily routine is peeled open to expose the banal melodrama of suburban life.¹⁷ Vitto Acconci's *Following Piece* from 1969 explores a similar theme, as do countless films of suspecting wives and cheating husbands (or cheating wives and jealous husbands).¹⁸ In the case of Calle's work, she asks her mother to hire a detective to report on Calle's daily activities, providing photographic evidence of her existence. The artwork consists of a series of photographs taken of Calle in the street, in a park, at a café, and so on. The photographs are accompanied by a ledger reporting briefly on both the detective's and Calle's activities across the hours of the day. We read that at 8pm "The subject returns home. The surveillance ends." Unbeknown to the detective, Calle has requested that François M., a friend or acquaintance of Calle's, wait outside the Palais de la Découverte at 5pm and follow whoever appears to follow Calle.

The artwork ends with a series of pictures of what is presumably the detective, camera in hand, and a short note reporting on what François has observed. This recursive instance is designed to reassure the viewer that the staging of Calle's documentation by a detective really did happen. But it also has the effect of

reiterating that the entire work may also be an exercise in the production of fake truth. What we read and see on display might just as well be a demonstration of expectations vis-à-vis the fidelity of convention with regard to the genre of detection and surveillance. The work is also highly media specific. Today the paradigm of control correlates more approximately to an algorithmic imaginary of the NSA surveillance machine that penetrates the depths of code to punish subjects who don't conform.

The repetition of experience, action, documentation and deduction across these various works has an algorithmic dimension in as much as algorithms are also repeatable routines executed with consistency over time. As Tarleton Gillespie reminds us, the term algorithm for software engineers “refers specifically to the logical series of steps for organizing and acting on a body of data to quickly achieve a desired outcome.”¹⁹ While there is often nothing particularly quick about decision-making within government institutions, the idea of governance beyond the state would, I think, overlap considerably with this computational definition of algorithms.

The fake news distributed through contemporary digital meme culture holds a temporality of the instant. The aesthetic keys in the works of Acconci and Calle register a mode of distribution with considerably longer duration. So what am I trying to extract from these various accounts of cultural production is the manner in which *media determine our situation*. The temporality of the signal/message/reception ratio is stretched, even if the spatial distribution is far more contained within the circuit of the art system and its economy. Yet the eleven-year interval between the works of Acconci and Calle also extends into the time and space of Hollywood's dream machine, and then again into other world cinemas exploring *noir* themes of paranoia and self-inspection. We could also carry this over to the cultural industry of pulp fiction.

In a way, fake news has no regard for scale anyway: the so-called intention to mislead through the cultivation of post-truth truths is often enough an exercise in self-affirmation for individuals, communities and populations. Whether this happens for one person or one hundred million people is perhaps beside the point, since both the

effect and affect are the same: the yearning for imaginaries of security in a world underscored by chaos and destruction.

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Notes

- ¹ Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 331.
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- ¹² See Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016).
- ¹³ Wikipedia, "The Manchurian Candidate (1962 film)," 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Manchurian_Candidate_\(1962_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Manchurian_Candidate_(1962_film))
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- ¹⁵ ABC News, "James Turrell exhibition: art lovers asked to sign a waiver before viewing work," 11 December 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-11/james-turrell-exhibition-opening-at-national-gallery/5961876>
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- ¹⁷ Sophie Calle, *The Detective*, 1980, http://scottbankert.net/UrbanArtsParis/Readings/Additional%20Readings/Sophie%20Calle_The%20Detective.pdf
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What Are the Theoretical Lessons when Agnostic Hacker Politics Turn to the Right?

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The debate is on what role media theory has played and should play in the aftermath of the US presidential election campaign, especially as concerns the surge of alt-right neo-fascism. Particularly distressing from the point of view of media theorists is that the alt-right movement spawned from Internet subcultures and discussion forums, which had previously been seen as allied with left-liberal causes. As culture-jamming tactics swing from the left to the right, the theories and philosophies underwriting these phenomena need to be re-examined too. Indeed, the question must be brought to theory itself: how did it fail us, and what theoretical responses remain at this point in time?

What has carried on undistorted in the transition from left to right is the framing of one's own standpoint as that of David in a cosmic fight against Goliath. This goes to the heart of hacker self-imagery, which revel in rhetorical figures and visual graphics of themselves as the born Outsider. In this, hackers are not so unique, but they are rather just one exponent of a more general predisposition in political struggles from 1968 and onwards, where the authentic Self stands opposed to a vaguely defined, and hence, omnipresent, System. While this is a constant, what is shifting is who the Philistines are in this epic battle. The freedom to write-in just about any subject position in this struggle is what makes this kind of hermeneutical suspicion so slippery.

The once towering influence of the Free Software Foundation within hackerdom helped to stabilise the ethical commitments of hackers around a core set of issues: opposition to proprietary software and associated intellectual property rights (such as software patents), paired with a rejection of surveillance and censorship, as well as network architectures that compartmentalise Internet traffic (i.e. the net neutrality question). Here the opponent was fixed on the computer industry, pointing the broader political outlook in a leftist-reformist direction. Since then, corporate media outlets have been planted within the hacker subculture, diminishing the capacities of every new generation of hackers to develop an independent analysis and self-understanding. The birth of the “maker”-identity is a case in point. But the reason that a consensus could be reached around these limited issues – to the point that they got the appearance of apolitical common sense – might owe as much to self-preservation, what Chris Kely once named “recursive politics”. That is to say, consensus is built around the technical and legal preconditions for the “geek public” to sustain itself. Recursive politics is geared towards strengthening and expanding the conditions for the geek public’s continued existence (Kely, 2008).

With reference to an older tradition of philosophy, the same thing could be described in terms of the self-determination or autonomy of the hacker collective vis-à-vis external entities. The fending off of social media platforms, intellectual property laws, or business strategies that would integrate hacker projects as an appendage of some other structure or process, are resisted on the basis that it would deprive the community of its autonomy. But this leaves us with the troubling question, what becomes of so to speak “non-recursive” politics? For instance, gender equality in the high-tech industry, or solidarity with maquiladora workers producing consumer electronics (Toupin, 2014)? While both have bearing on the existence of the computer industry and its auxiliary “underground”, they are not implicated in sustaining the autonomy of that subculture. On the contrary, gender equality or issues of economic redistribution are often seen by hackers as something being imposed on them from an outside. In other words, it threatens their autonomy as much as the introduction of software patents. This has long been a source of tension

between (left-leaning) activists and politically engaged hackers, on one hand, and hackers of an avowedly apolitical persuasion, on the other (Coleman, 2003).

One may recall Lenin's complaint about restricted 'trade-union consciousness' in relation to the public good of the whole. Indeed, once we put aside our prejudices against the lack of direct reimbursement in the free-labouring software development community, its aspect as a form of union strategy can be more clearly seen. It serves as a pool of for-hire employees and as a source of life-long learning (Irani, 2015). It is a back-handed form of union politics, perfectly adapted for a profession whose privileged position in capitalism comes from selling the means for undercutting the demand for the labour of others.

Even when hackers stick with the narrow set of recursive politics that have grown out of their practices, internal fraction lines reappear. This is because the points of contestation that they rally around, i.e. software patents, net neutrality, etc., must nevertheless be made sense of, and there are competing interpretative frameworks for doing so. In contrast to a traditional social movement, where it is the interpretative framework that the members gather around, hackers are drawn from diverging, sometimes opposing, ideological backgrounds. The solving of engineering problems is instead their common ground, and playing down ideological differences is what enables contributions to flow from the edges of the network, unhindered by political colours. Every engineering project must make a claim on the David-vs-Goliath struggle (from the '1984' video of Macintosh against Big Brother to Makerbot's "reclaim the means of production"-rhetoric), as elementary hype management, and every project must at the same time remain vague in defining who that opponent is, in order not to alienate the next contributor with the "better idea."

These ambiguities hunt the long tradition of politicised engineering culture. It extends back to that original drift towards populist, one-leader authoritarianism, "Bonapartism." The engineer-trained followers of Saint Simon started out as utopian radicals and enemies of the state, only to do the biddings of Napoleon III later in their careers. An explanation might be that the ambiguities in political outlook mirror the ambiguities of the engineering practice itself. The two most important ones concern whether or not technology is a destiny or a vector for changing society, and

whether the profit motive is at odds with instrumental rationality and the public goal of betterment, or rather, if cost reduction is a neutral benchmark against which technical efficiency can be measured.

Where does all of this leave media theory? Theory shipwrecked when its flag was nailed to the mast of David. If reasoned scepticism is subjugated under politics of affection, as so many post-theories and post-philosophies demand of us, then the alt-right will harvest what was sown by the self-abdicating intellectual. But the opposite stance has not fared much better, i.e. the hyper-theoretical and paranoid attitude which, partly an artefact of the logics of academic publishing, spirals into a search for the more-critical-than-thou high-ground. The hopeful stance that the hacker movement and its many off-shoots once inspired media scholars to adopt needs to be critically re-examined in light of the recent, right-wing drift of hackerdom, but it must not be debunked.

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The Ends of Media Theory

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I. The end is nigh?

Since its original publication in *Wired* magazine nearly a decade ago, much has been said about Chris Anderson's article 'The End of Theory'. In this provocative piece, Anderson describes a technological present in which algorithms and software generate insight in ways that human experts and specialists cannot. For Anderson, the truth regimes of theories and theorists are "becoming obsolete" because high-performance and high-speed computational operations are now driving both invention and discovery. It is data – in fact, "massive amounts" of it – that offers a key to uncovering the secrets of the world. Computing possesses an ability unlike anything before it to collect and manage this Big Data into patterns for human consumption. It does so with no need for experiments, models and hypotheses, but rather by merely allowing the "numbers to speak for themselves" (Anderson, 2008).

Under different guises, the prospect of the end of theory that Anderson described in 2008 has been resonating in a variety of intellectual conversations about new technologies. It is mirrored, for instance, within debates in the digital humanities, where the slogan 'more hack, less yack' has been circulating for some years. The prospect of the end of theory is also reflected in popular concerns about the end of cognitive work due to algorithmic automation, and in related worries about the shrinking of human intellectual faculties in a society where rational decision is increasingly delegated to machines. Moreover, the prospect of the end of theory returns in the never-fulfilled methodological gaps between practical work and theoretical work, or in the never-resolved conflictual dichotomy between thought

and action. It also thrives in the present emphasis on ‘making’ as a more authentic mode of both individual and public engagement with the digital.

In what follows, I wish to take the launch of a new journal of media theory and its inaugural issue as an opportunity to reflect on this condition, and to address the concept of ‘theory’: a concept that has been celebrated by some, but which has been declared to be dead by others. My ambition here is not to offer an exhaustive treatment of what ‘theory’ might be in relation to media and media studies. Instead, I will signpost a few issues that demonstrate, in my view, how a post-mortem for theory is not necessary, as the patient is in fact alive and well. My aim is thus to offer some reflections on the role of theory in general, and on the role of media theory specifically, in order to show the continued relevance of some form of theoretical enquiry or speculative endeavour.

2. Creating an Abstract System

Anderson’s ‘The End of Theory’ was not the first announcement of theory’s purported demise and, most likely, it will not be the last. An ambiguity inherent in the term ‘theory’ can be considered to be at least partly responsible for the bad press that the concept often receives. Although the origin of the word is clear (it derives from the ancient Greek *theōria*, meaning *contemplation* and *speculation*),¹ the use to which the term is put is often less so. There is in fact a contrast between its technical and colloquial usages. Scholarly speaking, a theory is as sound as its power for generality. In common speech, however, ‘to have a theory’ often indicates nothing more than having a glorified guess or a lucky hunch. In my view, this discrepancy is interesting, for it highlights how, in both cases, it is the speculative and at the same time totalising aim of theoretical work that appears to cause concern or disaffection.

¹ In the essay ‘Science and Reflection’, Martin Heidegger gives an etymology of the notion of theory. He writes: “The word ‘theory’ stems from the Greek verb *theōrein*. The noun belonging to it is *theōria*. Peculiar to these words is a lofty and mysterious meaning. The verb *theōrein* grew out of the coalescing of two root words, *thea* and *horaō*. *Thea* (cf. theater) is the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself, the outward appearance in which it offers itself. Plato names this aspect in which what presences shows what it is, *eidos*. To have seen this aspect, *eidēnai*, is to know [*wissen*]. The second root word in *theōrein*, *horaō*, means: to look at something attentively, to look it over, to look it closely. Thus, it follows that *theōrein* is *thean horan*, to look attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences becomes visible and, through such sight – seeing – to linger with it” (Heidegger, 1977: 163).

To theorise is indeed often understood in terms of moving away from the reality that the theory was meant to account for. On this somewhat caricatural view of the activity of the theorist, to engage in the production of theory is to refuse to participate in the world, and to choose instead a life of the mind that bears little resemblance to that of the world. To call for the end of theory, then, or to refuse to engage in theoretical work, is often seen as an attempt to protest such detachment: empirical or practical work is seen as more concrete, and making ‘stuff’ is regarded as more honest than just thinking about it.

In order to explain and expand on this point, one can consider how Fredric Jameson distinguished between theory on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. The latter, for Jameson, is “always haunted by the dream of some foolproof, self-sufficient, autonomous system, a set of interlocking concepts which are their own cause”. Theory, by contrast, “has no vested interests inasmuch as it never lays claim to an absolute system, a non-ideological formulation of itself and its ‘truths’; indeed, always itself complicit in the being of current language, it has only the never-ending, never-finished task and vocation of undermining philosophy as such, of unravelling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds” (2009: 59). Jameson’s distinction can be seen to be epitomised in and by the intellectual efforts of poststructuralism, whose challenge to institutional and ideological forms of knowledge is accompanied by a particular attention to and care for the minoritarian, material and genealogical aspects of thought. When looking at the role of theoretical research in contemporary technoculture, I believe that it is necessary to acknowledge these debates. The prospect of an ‘end of theory’ should thus be situated within the broader context of long-standing critiques of rationalism and logocentrism. After all, long before Anderson’s article (and to a very different extent and aim), postmodernism announced the imminent collapse of all master discourses, grand narratives and metalanguages, and cast a cloud of deep suspicion over universalist and universalising modes of thinking.

For the scope of the present discussion, however, I will not pursue the postmodern opposition between philosophy and theory in a rationalist/universal or, conversely, relativist/particular key. This is partly because I need to make this immense topic a little more manageable in the limited space at my disposal. Most importantly,

however, this is because *I wish to stress the similarities between philosophy and theory, rather than their differences*. Instead of following Jameson in distinguishing between the transcendence of philosophy and the immanence of theory, I will focus on the relation between theoretical work at large (including philosophy), on the one hand, and the concept and activity of abstraction on the other. Of course, postmodern and poststructuralist theories might employ very different abstractions than those mobilised by Enlightenment philosophy, for example. Still, whilst all philosophy is, to an extent, theory, and whilst not all theory is philosophy, to theorise, in my view, inevitably involves abstracting. Attempts at generality might be exercised to different degrees, and denotations of the concept of an ‘abstract structure’ may vary greatly. Yet, I would say that it is the capacity of all theoretical work (philosophical or not) to abstract that remains, if not transcendent, then at least transcendental.

In this sense, I propose that in order to address what theory in the twenty-first century might be (or what its frequently announced end might amount to), one should address the ways in which the act of theorising is often understood, both scholarly and popularly (and, as seen above, by Jameson himself), in terms of creating an abstract system. This system might be closed and absolute, open-ended and relative, or neither; nonetheless, it still involves a degree of (theoretical) distance from the very same reality that that system was meant to describe in the first place. This distance has often alienated people and generated aversions to theoretical work amongst students and university departments. The task, then, which I cannot fully take on here, but which I can at least point towards, is that of exposing a false conception pertaining to this distance; i.e. the view according to which, if to theorise is to abstract from observation, then to abstract or speculate is in turn to disengage from matter and facts. My aim is to show that abstraction is not some kind of contemplative removal from the world, but is in fact intrinsic to the latter, and to how we experience it.

3. Theoretical Distance

My argument for the salience of this task involves turning to an old, but still relevant differentiation: that between ‘traditional theory’ on the one hand, and ‘critical theory’

on the other. I am of course referring here to Max Horkheimer, who first made that distinction and posed it as the programmatic cornerstone for the intellectual project of the Frankfurt School.

Horkheimer's 1937 essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', defines theory as "stored up knowledge, put in a form that makes it useful for the closest possible description of facts" (2002: 188). The aim of theory is to systematically explain and interpret facts via conceptual structures and deductively enclosed systems of propositions. In this respect, "[t]he real validity of the theory depends on the derived propositions being consonant with the actual facts. If experience and theory contradict each other, one of the two must be re-examined" (ivi). In the essay, however, Horkheimer exposes the weaknesses of this methodology and definition of theory. What he calls 'traditional theory' uses unquestioned concepts and modes of thought to test hypotheses vis-à-vis facts. Horkheimer argues that the conceptual apparatuses of 'traditional theory' are indeed instrumental to types of knowledge that are already looking for particular kind of results. In this sense, traditional theory does not recognise that "bringing hypotheses to bear on facts is an activity that goes on, ultimately, not in the savant's head but in industry" (196). To put this otherwise, traditional theory misses that science (and theory at large) always works "in the context of real social processes" (194), and according to the needs of the latter. By refusing to acknowledge its historical dimension, traditional theory ends up perpetuating the ideological assumptions of the society in which it is situated. To traditional theory, then, Horkheimer opposes an emancipatory 'critical theory' of society, which is "dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life" (199), and whose purpose, by contrast, is to assess the individual's "web of relationships with the social totality and with nature" (211).

Detailing the specificities of critical theory goes beyond the aim of my essay. It should suffice here to say that Horkheimer's argument is interesting in the context of the present paper because it helps us to highlight how theory, and the act of theorising, are not necessarily operations that are meant to leave reality behind, but are instead concerned with how to live in the world, and with how we can avoid being so absorbed in it as to lose any critical perspective upon it. It is then relevant, in my view, to address Horkheimer's differentiation between traditional and critical

theory. This is because, whilst the former is satisfied with operating within an existent social framework, the latter is instead concerned with questioning the characteristics of that framework in order to change it. In this sense, doing theory (in its critical mode), or adopting a theoretical distance, involves going beyond the mere observation of a given datum and towards *self-reflection*. This self-reflection, in turn, amounts to recognising oneself as different from one's object of study and yet part of a mutual self-determination.

It is useful here also to situate these considerations within the context of the Frankfurt School's fierce condemnation of 'positivist thinking'. In brief: *positivism* is a doctrine that was developed in the mid-nineteenth century by the French sociologist and philosopher, August Comte. It holds that true, valid or 'positive' knowledge should be based on the quantification of sensory experience. For positivists, all things are ultimately measurable, and all knowledge is ultimately objective. Famously, the Frankfurt School of critical theory interpreted positivism as a "trend towards the hypostatisation of science" (Horkheimer, 2013: 41). Thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer took issue with the idea of a value-free theory. They contested the pretence of objectivity of positivist sciences in general and, more specifically, the epistemological commitments of 'logical positivism' (i.e. a rationalist version of positivism developed in the early twentieth century, which championed the reduction of all knowledge to logical statements). Indeed, for the critical theorists, positivism epitomised a traditional mode of thought (and of theory) that confronts the world through fixed categories, and which has little regard for the specificities and contingencies of history. Moreover, and most interestingly from the perspective of the argument that I wish to develop, the Frankfurt School denounced positivism's scientific focus on bare factuality, and attacked its lack of engagement with the subjective reasons (rather than objective causes) for how these bare facts came to be in the social world or as an act of the human mind. Positivism, in other words, is seen to uncritically and instrumentally accept empirical facts whilst bracketing out the possibility of addressing any of the contextual human and social abstractive structures that shape such facts. The positivist conformism to facts, then, is viewed as a sort of dogma or truth, expressed "under the distortion of making it

exclusive” (Horkheimer, 2013: 64), and under the expectation of obtaining certain results, geared towards specific needs.

The theoretical work of the Frankfurt School profoundly challenged the assumption that data (or numbers, as Anderson would want to put it) can speak for themselves. Rather, it pushed for a reflective distance from the datum of experience: a reflective distance that would allow for a deeper, more meaningful way of engaging with said experience, in manners that would not just simply suit predetermined operational schemas. Thus, although the critical thought that the Frankfurt School proposed is not praxis (and Adorno in particular was keen to stress this point; see Adorno, 2010), neither is it mere contemplation. Instead, thinking is already acting in the world. Abstractions, in turn, are not to be discarded but understood, perhaps through the production of more abstractions, which are never identical with facts. This is because the assumption of a bare factuality is already, for the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, a fiction. On this view, therefore, theoretical distance is necessary in order to prevent an object of study from becoming frozen or fixed, and to integrate it into the conceptual structures that afford an explanation or interpretation of it (but which never naturalise it).

4. Knowledge Without Thought

In order to bring these observations into the field of media theory, it is necessary to say something about the relation between the latter and abstraction. This involves addressing what a theoretical distance might be, and what it might entail if one is to adopt such a distance within or in relation to a media theoretical context. First of all, it should be stressed that just as there is no a single conception of theory, so too is there no unified understanding of media theory either. Moreover, just as theory often has a contested status in the academy, it sometimes seems that media studies would happily do without its theoretical side. This means that asking what theory in media studies aims to achieve entails considering this theoretical specificity in relation to other intellectual enquiries (such as those of cultural studies, sociology and science and technology studies, for instance) that also inform much of our current understanding of technological mediation.

I propose now to do precisely this by returning once again to Anderson's *Wired* article (Anderson, 2008). This article was not aimed at media theorists, but the way in which such theorists might respond to it can help us to clarify the scope and implications of media-theoretical debates. In this respect, we must begin by observing that Anderson's argument for the end of theory is an argument about the obsolescence of the scientific method. Anderson is concerned not with the role of speculation in the humanities, but rather with that of hypotheses, experimentation and, above all, models in the sciences. This is not to deny that his claims pertain to work in the humanities. In fact, they seem intended to carry distinct implications in that regard. However, it is interesting to note that Anderson's explicit target is the methodology of theoretical science, which is pitched against that of applied technology.

Anderson observes that we are living "in the most measured age in history". This condition, he claims, calls for "an entirely different approach" to knowledge. The modus operandi of Google exemplifies, in Anderson's view, the epistemological turn offered by computation. Google did not assume, or indeed know, anything about advertising before becoming the biggest player in the business. Rather, it became so simply by using "better data" and "better analytic tools". Testable hypotheses, then, are a thing of the past, insofar as Big Data allows the luxury of not caring for objective causes or subjective reasons, and of focusing solely on *correlations*. The key example that Anderson advances is the gene-sequencing work of the American biotechnologist and geneticist J. Craig Venter. "Enabled by high-speed sequencers and supercomputers that statistically analyze the data they produce", Anderson explains, "Venter went from sequencing individual organisms to sequencing entire ecosystems", discovering, in the process, "thousands of previously unknown species of bacteria and other life-forms". Venter, however, is not a modern-day Darwin, for he is not stuck "in the old way of doing science". In distinction from Darwin, Anderson continues, Venter does not know what these new species look like, their behaviour or their morphology. In fact, Venter "can tell you almost nothing about the species he found." All he possesses is "a statistical blip", which nonetheless, helped him to advance biology "more than anyone else of his generation".

For Anderson, this example illustrates his contention that “[we] can stop looking for models”, for we can “throw the numbers into the biggest computing clusters the world has ever seen and let statistical algorithms find patterns where science cannot”. These comments are indicative of the sense in which Anderson’s article implies a perspective that would welcome the prospect of our contemporary world becoming a kind of ‘Chinese room’. In John Searle’s famous thought experiment, a monolingual English speaker is locked in a room and given sets of Chinese writing, plus rules for correlating their elements with each other. Searle’s point is that the English speaker could become “so good at following the instructions” (1980: 418), that “from the point of view of someone outside the room” his or her responses are “absolutely indistinguishable from those of native Chinese speakers” (ivi). Yet, this person does not really speak the language, and does not understand it; he or she only correlates symbols, without much care for meaning.

Searle used this thought experiment to claim that AI programmes might have syntax, but they lack semantics, and thus might present correct answers and yet still lack understanding. However, in relation to the epistemic prospect of an end of theory, delivered via computational automation, this concern does not seem to matter, and surely does not matter to Anderson, who is attacking the role of models in science because they constitute an abstraction from the immediacy of the correlation. Indeed, as argued by Morrison and Morgan (1999: 11), models in science are investigative mediators that represent “some aspect of the world, or some aspect of our theories about the world, or both at once”, and thus, one can comment, a humanist residue of the activity of thinking that, for Anderson, one must dispose of.

Most illuminatingly, the philosopher, Bernard Stiegler (2016), has described this epistemic vision as a form of knowledge without thought.² This description is as conceptually poignant as it is alarming, for it implies that the end of theory, as announced by Anderson, might spell the end of understanding, and consequently, that of cognate faculties such as literacy and judgment. I would add to this that Anderson’s interpretation of current technoscientific practices can be understood as

² “The automated ‘knowledge’ celebrated by Anderson no longer needs to be *thought*. In the epoch of the algorithmic implementation of applied mathematics in computerized machines, *there is no longer any need to think*: thinking is *concretized in the form of algorithmic automatons that control data-capture systems* and hence make it obsolete” (Stiegler, 2016: 49).

a form of ‘hyper-positivism’, because of its total trust in data. However, his vision also challenges the twentieth-century positivist project, insofar as it discards the verifiability (or falsifiability) benchmarks of science that are considered key to ‘positive knowledge’. Equally, Anderson’s account of the end of theory carries an explicit empiricist character that, whilst celebrating the instrumentality of technoscientific observation (and the computer as the instrument of all instruments, in this case), also in a sense rejects empiricism by denying the usefulness of any observer, thus ultimately emptying empirical research itself of the source of its inferential power.

5. Media Theory After the Computational Turn

What, then, could media theorists do when faced with the prospect of knowledge without thought? In my view, they should defend the possibility of thought in knowledge even after the computational turn in culture and society. If to work theoretically is to work with understanding as an aim, then, to borrow Adorno’s words, “one should hold on to theory, precisely under the general coercion toward praxis in a functional and pragmatized world” (2010: 273). I would also add, however, that one should hold on to media theory in particular, and that the need to do so is exacerbated by the present compulsion for (Big) data to functionally and pragmatically replace hermeneutics. My claim here is thus as follows: although I would certainly recognise that not all media theory is ‘new media theory’, and that not all of that field is strictly preoccupied with the digital, media studies, in its theoretical dimensions, is in a privileged position to understand the epistemological implications of computational technologies.

In this respect, media theory opens up, and can also overlap with, what is now frequently referred to as *media philosophy*. Within academia, the expression ‘media philosophy’ might denote the specific German-speaking context from which it emerged, and might thus refer to those scholarly efforts that have attempted to create a discipline capable of rethinking the ‘medium’ in relation to human and non-human subjectivities. However, the term ‘media philosophy’ might also be appropriated and used more broadly, in order to indicate a multifaceted theoretical

investigation of modes of experience and being that are engendered by, or which exist in relation with, media systems in general. It is in this sense that I adopt the term here, whilst also acknowledging the break that it might signal from the agenda of communication studies, which media studies has, in part, adopted for historical and genealogical reasons.

Media philosophy, understood in the sense proposed here, is not opposed to media theory, but is instead its ally in the pursuit of the creation of concepts suited to addressing the way in which we act, perceive and think in a highly techno-mediated world. Returning to my previous claim that the act of theorising can be understood in terms of abstracting, I would now add that the relation between media-theoretical work and abstraction is one of concept-making. In other words, one of the key ‘ends’ of media theory, in terms of its aims and purposes, is *conceptualisation*: it is to create conceptual structures via abstractive means, and to explain and interpret facts through and in relation to these structures. A theoretical and reflective distance is important to allow for conceptualisation to follow from *problematization*. I understand the difference between a concept and a problem in the same manner that Gilles Deleuze did. For him, “concepts are only created as a function of problems”, in the sense that “concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 16). Problematization then precedes conceptualisation because the concepts of philosophy (and of theory alike) are meant to do something: they must address a problem that ‘we’ (as culture and society, or simply as thinking subjects) are confronted with.

For Deleuze, the freedom to identify and constitute a problem is the freedom that characterises both the nature and the destiny of philosophy (and theory). This Deleuzian argument, which draws from Bergson, is quite an unusual stance in the history of thought, which, arguably, would rather make philosophy (and theory) the intellectual space where solutions (and not problems) are to be found. However, for Deleuze, the questions that intellectual work might pose are more important than their respective answers. For him, “it is the problem which orientates, conditions and engenders solutions”, although “these do not resemble the conditions of the problem” (Deleuze, 2004: 264).

In relation to this Deleuzian position, it can be argued that media theory (and media philosophy as well) offers the intellectual space to think computation precisely as a problem; as a problem in need of relevant concepts. Media theory can then think the computational, and its epistemological implications, because it does not take digital technologies as instruments or tools for knowing more, but as objects of study which we should know more about. On this view, what computational media can explain is not so important; rather, it is these computational media themselves that must be explained. Moreover, the Deleuzian argument about problematisation can provide further evidence that to adopt a theoretical stance is not a withdrawal from the world, but is instead a form of commitment to it. It is then possible to expand on Deleuze's position in a manner that accords with a very different tradition of thought, that of the Frankfurt School, discussed earlier, in order to continue to claim that media theory can cast thought as part of the process of generating knowledge (to refer to Stiegler's argument) after the computational turn, precisely because it can think the transformations of thinking by 'thinking technologies'.

In the little space that I have left here I want to bring to the fore yet another voice that can help us to make this claim, and to thereby show once again the relation between theory and abstraction as one that is key to determining the ends (and not 'the end') of theoretical projects. This is the voice of the mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, who published his masterpiece, *Process and Reality*, in 1929, less than a couple of decades before Adorno and Horkheimer wrote theirs (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944), and who had different, but equally strong, motives for refusing to endorse the positivist trends of his time.

Whitehead's work is not a critical theory of society, but a cosmological endeavour to construct an ontology that could work vis-à-vis the mathematics and science of the twentieth century. Yet, like the Frankfurt School writers, Whitehead also profoundly disagreed with the contention that something like a "brute fact" (Whitehead, 1967: 8) could ever exist. There are many obscure and technical elements in Whitehead's philosophy, whose introduction and explanation exceed the scope and focus of the present essay. All I wish to draw attention to here, however, is the manner in which

Whitehead stressed, forcefully, that *data is not actuality*, but quantifiable records of it. What the ‘scientific materialism’ (i.e. positivism) of his time celebrated as ‘matter’, then, is already an abstraction from the immediacy of experience. The latter is seen by positivism as a collection of empty and neutral factualities in need of interpretation. For Whitehead, however, thought (or any mental consideration or ‘pole’, in Whitehead’s vocabulary) is not external to facts, but internal to them, and to the constitution of the world.

How do these considerations relate to our concerns? First of all, Whitehead allows us to understand the central role that procedures of abstraction play in every act of experience. Most interestingly, Whitehead’s argument is both epistemological and ontological: to exist is already to be abstracting. Whenever theorists are accused of being too abstract, one can refer to Whitehead and consider his view that there is no such thing as a non-abstractive access to facts. Indeed, it is abstraction that allows us to ‘ingress’ (a very Whiteheadian verb) reality. So, to abstract is not to move away from the real, but rather to enter it, and to construct it in terms of its actuality.

Secondly, introducing Whitehead’s position allows us to move from critique to *speculation*, i.e. to highlight the speculative side of what theory can do. In this respect, I would say that the Whiteheadian observation that abstraction is a fundamental mode of experiencing can be linked to media theory in this way. It can be stressed that the abstractions of media theory are addressing what is, ultimately, another abstraction: technology. This is, in turn, an abstraction that should be situated amongst many more abstractions, such as language, for example. In this sense, abstraction becomes not only a mode of enquiry but an object (or part of the object) of enquiry in its own right. We move then from epistemology to ontology by highlighting that abstraction is constitutive not only of how one might *know* in the world, but also of how one might *be* in the world. Abstraction is not outside and apart from the object, but can be located within it. With Whitehead, the theoretical distance that this essay has addressed becomes the space necessary for the actuality (of technology, as an abstraction alongside other abstractions) to emerge and develop.

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The End of Ontology and the Future of Media Theory

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Without our even realizing it, a new kind of human being was born in the brief period of time that separates us from the 1970s.

(Michel Serres, 2016: 7)

Heidegger's lifelong dream to destroy the binary opposition between form and matter may be easier to attain with the help of mathematics and computer science.

(Friedrich Kittler, 2009: 29)

I The End of the World

With media theory at a moment of development that suggests possibly conflicting directions, the arrival of an open access media theory journal can provide a speculative forum for establishing ways by which the future of the media and of media theory might be addressed. In what follows, I sketch two different kinds of contemporary approach to the media that, while caught within a classical framework, privileging either a formal or a material emphasis, nonetheless look forward to the dissolution of the opposition between form and matter and to the establishment of new categories derived from attempts to grasp the technical aetiology of the media's sensible surface.

“It is surely not difficult to see,” writes G. W. F. Hegel, in the wake of momentous social revolution, “that our time is a time of birth and transition to a new period” (Hegel, 1997: 20). This statement, from the ‘Preface’ to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), announces a philosophical development that will famously struggle to keep

pace with the movement of history in the apprehension of imminent change. But it will do so in the confidence that the revolution in thought, the culmination of more than 20 centuries of philosophical development, will be as momentous as that manifested in the social history with which it forms its dialectic. One can assess Hegel's prefatory remarks alongside comparable statements made throughout the modern age, each time addressing a sense of catastrophic and yet stimulating social turbulence, and expressing the need to match the rate of change in an unnerving dance with advancements in knowledge that at once reflect and contribute to the changes with which they aspire to keep in step. Echoing Hegel, Terence Hawkes in the 'Editor's Introduction' to each volume of the New Accents series of edgy critical theory text books (first published in 1982), writes: "It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those academic disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it" (xii). The series comprises books intended to introduce emerging intellectual ideas to a non-specialist readership (particularly undergraduate students) and, although published under the rubric of literary theory, it includes topics relating to innovations in areas of cultural studies and media theory: Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television*, Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

In 2017, some of these New Accents texts remain current and belong among key references in media history and media archaeology. Coming shortly after Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979) and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981), the series marks a moment in the history of a field of knowledge, a symptom of a kind of accidental tradition, which retrospectively might be collected under the idea of a critical media theory. It becomes clearer that no attempt to grasp the character of the "rapid and radical social change" (echoing Hegel's "birth and transition to a new period") could begin without acknowledging the role of the intricate and yet fundamental connectivity of the technical media in every aspect of social life. Such a tradition would include the seminal texts of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Paul Virilio, as well as, more recognizably, those of Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis. But more recently the eruption of attempts to, in various ways, and on various platforms, engage media and advance media theory, manifests what I perceive as a tension in the field that tends to show up as a contrast,

within critical media theory generally, between: 1) a tendency to engage more intimately with the physical technology of the media, on its own terms, to engage with the seductive, concealed, other side of the visible surface or interface of the technical media; and 2) turning aside from such seductions, various attempts to comprehend (to grasp and in some way to contain) a developing media knowledge within an albeit transformed theoretical framework with its roots in ancient ontology. In both tendencies, the very idea of an ontology, a science of existing, even physical, things, including variously numbers, hardware, electronic architecture, the material logic of the media itself, comes under severe strain. It is therefore desirable to identify the stakes of this tension.

In a brief late essay, ‘Towards an Ontology of Media’ (2009), Friedrich Kittler addresses what he sees as the fatal error in classical ontology: the form/matter dichotomy. And, following Heidegger, he looks forward to its eventual dissolution. If we suppose that everything – statues as well as trees and people but also technical objects – can be comprehended as a formal arrangement of some material, as *actively* formed *passive* matter, we are constrained by a framework that must fail, if our aim is to comprehend the *being* of the media generally. Kittler’s suggestion is that contemporary mathematical science can come to the aid of such aims. Kittler’s ontology seeks the “dark side” of the technical media rather than its “visible face,” which means putting into question the still tenacious opposition between form and matter (still alive in kinds of contemporary materialism and in words like “information”) and in the end replacing it with a new trinity made up of the categories of the technological hardware, “commands, addresses and data” (30). The suggestion resonates a bit with the practice of an albeit diverse ‘digital humanities’, concerned more with learning and exploiting the physics and technology of design as it is with developing a social or philosophical critique of media. Kittler writes:

But if an ontology of media wishes to be informed by the technical state of the art, it should know how to read blueprints, layouts, mainboard designs, industrial roadmaps, and so on, in order to learn its very categories from scratch, namely from the hardware of high tech (30).

And so, in the dissolution of old ontologies, a new ontological dawn approaches. But it does so, of course, while we are still in the dark. Kittler's suggestion here provides an opportunity to assess the stakes as well as the challenges of ongoing attempts in the field to address the future in the intimacy of the technological details of the physical media.¹ The physical facticity of the media in its esoteric complexity is thus drawn into the range of the critical response. I will return to Kittler's argument shortly.

Attempts at a wider theoretical approach persist, but in forms that we tend to receive as *eccentric addresses*, which come often late in a thinker's career, represent a long commitment to an intellectual field that they have informed, and offer innovative frames of thinking on the contemporary situation. Some recent instances include Jean Baudrillard's final book, *The Lucidity Pact or The Intelligence of Evil* (2004), Peter Sloterdijk's epic *You Must Change Your Life* (2009), Michel Serres's small but impactful *Thumbelina* (2012), and Werner Herzog's short film, *Lo and Behold: Reveries Of The Connected World* (2016).² These authors have contributed a lifetime questioning the media (often in the forms and formats of the media under question), yet their overarching concerns remain philosophical and deal in sometimes bizarrely different ways with the state we find ourselves in (Martin Heidegger's use of the phrase, *Befindlichkeit*, directs us to the most developed account of how one approaches a condition in question³). Sloterdijk, for instance, hardly mentions the media as such in *You Must Change Your Life*, but his call for a "general immunology" implies that any attempt to engage with the media must understand the history of the race as a history of *practices*. And so, in the later stages of his book, it is precisely the media dominated present that stands to be transformed. The key factor that unites these works, and others that might be included among them, lies in their negotiating an environment and condition of being that in their understanding has without precedent undergone a kind of revolutionary change affecting fundamentally the connectivity of beings in the world, and thus the ontology of the transformed world itself. Serres takes as his premise the experience of a generation, who from the neo-nascent state inhabit a world not so much mediated but rather saturated by media, and who thus inhabit the *mediasphere* itself. Borrowing the language of the media, Serres writes of this new generation, "they are formatted by the media...they are formatted by advertising" (5). The language of formatting, alert to the heritage of cybernetics and algorithmic

determination, nonetheless recalls more than a century of existential speculation, which long before the now familiar language of computing proposed that subjects are produced by choices made in whatever environment historically predominates. The theme of choice, and of freedom of choice, has not prevailed in philosophy, since the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre began to fade in the light of the cybernetic upheavals of the decades following the Second World War. We exist in an ethical universe that *produces* its subjects in increasingly uncertain contexts. Much of the language of existentialism reclaims ancient arguments, like those of Aristotle, whose ethics establishes a notion of character in the repeated habits of political subjects who practice the craft of the self in their always contingent social, legal, and cultural environments. Here already the theme of *choice* plays only a constrained role within an ethics of habit and repetition (habituation, inhabiting languages, media) that will eventually lead a subject to a condition from which, and only after which, such ethical choices become possible. And now conditions that vastly exceed those imaginable even for Sartre, let alone Aristotle, put the grounds of ethical choice into an abyss.

It is not so much the case that the classical categories have failed in their task of supporting the sense of a substantive world, as it is that a world whose existence had indeed been supported by traditional categories has been replaced with an entirely novel one and with entirely alien categories. This view represents a significant difference from Kittler's, who supposes that our inability to comprehend the media ontologically lies in errors that date back to the classical era. Rather, and echoing Hegel again, we are in a time of new birth and transition to a new period. Serres, with his grandchildren as theoretical examples, writes:

Without us even realizing it, a new kind of human being was born in the brief period of time that separates us from the 1970s.

He or she no longer has the same body or the same life expectancy. They no longer communicate in the same way; they no longer perceive the same world; they no longer live in the same nature or inhabit the same space.

Born via an epidural and programmed pregnancy, they no longer fear, with all the palliatives, the same death.

No longer having the same head as their parents, he or she comprehends differently (2016: 7).

Alongside the wearily common theme of the end of a world a new theme emerges, that of the dawn of a new media era. Passages like this from Serres represent a quite widely shared conception that is seldom stated quite so baldly. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (again after a lifetime of media oriented philosophy) rivals Serres in this. For example, *And: Phenomenology of the End*, demonstrates a similar temporal separation (Bifo identifies 1977 as the chief cut-off point) and a correspondingly post-apocalyptic formula in a notion of the "cyber sphere" that can no longer be comprehended by its receivers:

Humans have already experienced the end of the world, or the end of a world. A world ends when signs proceeding from the semiotic meta-machine grow undecipherable for a cultural community that perceived itself as a world.

A world is the projection of meaningful patterns on the surrounding space of lived experience. It is the sharing of a common code whose key lies in the forms of life of the community itself.

When flows of incomprehensible enunciations proceeding from the meta-machine invade the space of symbolic exchange, a world collapses because its inhabitants are unable to say anything effective about events and things that surround them (2015: 331).

The "semiotic meta-machine" does not refer to the physics of contemporary computer science, but to the effects of contemporary communications on the symbolic environment. Bifo builds a lexicon from the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari and others to address the situation as he finds it. The lexicon of culture, community, semiosis has already lost its purchase on a world so changed that one must speak again of the end of the world and the beginning of a new one. Any attempt to build a media theory from such energetically diverse positions will benefit

from attempting to negotiate the conflicting demands of a philosophical framework and an adherence to the factuality of the media.

II Media Ontology

Perhaps the construction of a coherent theory of media does require a ground, a set of principles on which the otherwise rapidly dispersed histories and protean forms of “the media” could be theoretically anchored. Perhaps such a ground is necessary in the aim of comprehending the media as a force among the social and political relations with which and within which technical mediations form an inextricable mesh. If so, then one would need to respond to a general sense that such a ground does not yet exist. Attempts to develop a critique or critical theory of new media, and of the Internet, necessarily stretch existing frameworks beyond their capacities. Such a theory would in its emergence pose a challenge to existing grounds for theorizing media.

Friedrich Kittler begins his enquiry into a possible “ontology of media” with a challenge of this kind (Kittler, 2009: 23). The many existing “technological or mathematical theories of communication media” suggest at first that this may be more a problem for philosophy (by which Kittler means Western Ontology from Aristotle to Heidegger or, in Heidegger’s own words, “European Metaphysics”), except that it soon becomes clear that the technological theories also fall into the errors typified by metaphysics: “McLuhan’s lecture on Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’ turns their true meaning upside down” (25). McLuhan’s realization, that “philosophy systematically excludes *techne* from its meditations,” fails therefore to observe that metaphysical categories applicable to living and natural forms – like matter, form, and entelechy – originally stem from “technical things” (25). The problem resides in a distinction between matter and form that continues to hover like a shadow over all our attempts to *think* things, to think especially the media, which in Aristotle’s teaching do not have an ontological status. But McLuhan’s error, while historically correct in the sense that the form/matter relation has systematically relegated technical objects to a lesser status, also fails to notice that Aristotle’s philosophy, once one strays from the *Metaphysics*, contains evidence of a concern with the media

as *physical* and *natural* necessities: the air that conveys sound from voice to brain, “between the thing and the eardrum as well as between the eardrum and the cochlea” (25); the air between “thing and iris” and the water between “iris and retina” that accounts for seeing in Aristotle’s description (25). Kittler thus identifies Aristotle as the *inventor* of the term *media*: “he is the first to turn a common Greek preposition – *metaxú*, between – into a philosophical noun or concept: *tò metaxú*, the medium” (26). An ontology of the media, which currently suffers from an inability to “destroy the binary opposition between matter and form” (29), might thus be developed based on this recognition of the physical existence of the between, not a *nothing* or *void* but a thing itself, and so a *being*.⁴

In a further twist (Kittler observes that “the basic narrative remains unaffected by this”), inevitable distortions disturb the story of the coinage: 1) Aristotle’s coinage in fact belongs to Democritus (so *to metaxú* “is also that between the texts of Democritus and Aristotle”); and 2) the translation of *to metaxú* by the Latin *medium* “occurs first in Thomas Aquinas’ shaky command of Greek (“what he calls *medium* is not identical with Aristotle’s ‘between’”). No doubt “the basic narrative remains unaffected” but nevertheless another question emerges. Does the interval (between languages, across historical distance, from one text to another) operate in a way that is equivalent to how the air and water of Aristotle’s *betweens* operate? Can the paraphrase of Democritus by Aristotle and the shaky translation of Aristotle by Aquinas be considered to take effect across *physical* media? These instances do not belong to the musical and vocal environment to which Aristotle’s account of the physics of seeing and hearing refer, but instead describe situations governed by the inherent possibility of a *break* from such present environments, a break which extends the reach of the interval, the *between*, beyond finite calculability. Kittler’s answer would be something like: *yes*, we account for the possibility of such an interval, a transfer, a transport, or a translation, by reference to the physical medium – especially in the case of the technical (as opposed to the “natural”) media – which we regard as their *precondition*:

Even in Aristotle, the distinction between phone and graphe, voice and writing, was drawn just once when he wrote that, while speech sounds are signs of beings, written letters are only secondary signs of these

sounds. Thus, metaphysics – as Derrida justly, albeit much too generally, has remarked – always already forgets technical media, from writing itself up to the written book, its own precondition (26).

In this apparent agreement with Derrida, and the almost simultaneous dismissal of his “much too general” remarks on the philosophical forgetting of the technical media, Kittler manages to make light of the powerful philosophical challenge that the 1967 texts, like *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology* (which is where Derrida picks up the same Aristotle reference), pose to anyone with a desire to construct a coherent theory of media and communication. Kittler makes light of it, dismisses it, neutralizes it, softens it with backhanded praise, but above all he seems to want to deflect any suspicion we might have that the Derrida text is forcefully at odds with him on this point. Metaphysics (or European Ontology), as is now well known, represses, domesticates, or excludes the very condition on which its key values are simultaneously built and yet threatened with ruin: the interval which breaks from all present context thus enabling illimitable repetitions in unimagined future contexts. If Derrida discovers this force animating Ontology in its *generally* contradictory attitude towards writing (for example mixing hyperbolic praise with dismissive scorn) it does not follow that Derrida’s understanding of writing (which he contrasts to “the book”) is the same as Kittler’s.

Indeed, Kittler exhibits a considerably more variegated sense of the technical media and yet brings a more deterministic attitude to how the physical properties of the media serve as precondition for the content of a message, its ideas, its philosophy (to the extent that, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphoristic philosophy can be traced to the emergence, and his use via secretarial help, of the typewriter⁵). That’s not to diminish the attention that Derrida consistently dedicates to questions of the nature of a given kind of media archive: the disruption by writing of the way a book captures sense in its organized formal closure; the experiment with this disruptiveness in the formal adventures of texts like *Glas*, *The Truth in Painting* and *The Postcard*; patient meditations on the transformation of the archive from say an epistolary arrangement to an electronic one in, for instance, *Archive Fever*, *On Hospitality*, and ‘Faith and Knowledge’, in which the electronic media perform an

instrumental role; and throughout, the connections between drawing, writing, and photography in so many texts. But in none of these cases can the *mediational* element, that which grounds communication (for instance) on the *between*, be reduced to a physical platform. To the contrary, the element that in all rigour one would have to be able to isolate as *mediational* escapes ontology in every existing sense of that category, from Aristotle to Heidegger, to the extent that the physical platform is always that from which the interval – the *between* of the transport – must be able to break, in a repetition that gives to all media their specific quality. This is no doubt why Kittler dismisses the “remark” Derrida makes “much too generally,” about the forgetting in writing of writing itself. There would be no instance of media communication free from the property described by its general repeatability, and so each platform – whether the typewriter, photography, broadcasting, email or the internet – would be destined and displaced by its own form of mediatic disruption and the inevitable distortions that infect it but that also serve as its condition of possibility.

How, then, can this condition of possibility cohabit with something like the media ontology that Kittler’s text looks towards? Kittler fixes on the idea (the “dream of...solid state physicians”) of a future computer, “based on parallel and tiny quantum states” (30). Can critical media theory proceed with an ontology that is anchored in the hope of future scientific hardware? The *inability* to ground the media ontologically corresponds to the media’s *capacity*, and the consistent performance of this capacity, this ability, to escape ontological determination. Aristotle does not so much exclude or forget the technical media in his metaphysics, as he turns a blind eye to their corrosive force already in the domain, the physical here and now, which he must nevertheless try to protect from them. The media are inherently destructive of ontology, of physical continuity in space and time. In the 1960s, this theme in various guises represents the unmistakable crumbling of ontology generally. It had begun already in the aphorisms of Nietzsche, and in the essays on the media by Walter Benjamin. Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology” remains functional at least in name, for instance in philosophical essays by Slavov Žižek, Alain Badiou and others, but if the strange domain of the *between* has had any purchase at all in the last sixty years, then this has been at the cost of having to awaken from the *dream* of ontological grounds, of the various ways of establishing or grounding *things* and

relations, whether this dream takes on an empiricist character, builds itself into the connective silicone structures of the contemporary hardware, or builds its substantial reality in a more abstract domain. The media cannot be dissociated from abstraction either. The inevitable and immediate disincarnation of the message, even as it is inscribed or uttered (on a cave wall, on the page, in breath and voice, on screen, in the von Neumann architecture), defines a precondition for arithmetic and grounds logic on repeatable methodologies. The physics of water and air cannot, therefore, serve as a model for the impalpable domain of mediation.

As Jean-François Lyotard had established by 1979 in *La condition postmoderne* (and in this he was at once late to the game but also oddly prescient), such dreams are formed of a doubled glance of false memories and anxious desires, never far from a fear of social disintegration and “the paradisiac representation of a lost ‘organic’ society” (15). Instead, and with some room for speculation on a more fortunate future, Lyotard identifies the field as one in which each of us is mediated. The *between* is everywhere: “A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before...one is located at a post through which various messages pass” (15). Consequently, a great difficulty in the development of a coherent and effective media theory, if one were desirable, would lie in the sheer heterogeneity of the elements that it would need to bring into its view. And so, universities and other institutes of knowledge that foster the study of media do so through specialization, following a kind of historical rule of default by which the sphere in question, the media in general, has manifestly contributed to the tendency towards a division into specialisms in *every* domain. How does one develop a theoretical knowledge of the media when the development of media over an age a little less than 200 years old has itself largely influenced, if not steered, the development of knowledge into sometimes powerfully specialized particularities? Lyotard’s celebrated report on knowledge identifies some of what marks these trends, in the critical problem of the legitimization of knowledge, trends that have sought legitimation, variously, in narrative, pragmatic, systematic and parological forms. Lyotard’s method, in a developed account of language games, brings him to the conclusion that not only must we recognize that language games are “heteromorphous,” but also that “any consensus on the rules defining a game

and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation” (66). Increasing institutional support for the self-legitimation of disciplines (largely through indicators of excellence focused on the relevance of citation indexes) brings knowledge (still often regarded under the postmodern rubric) without struggle into an economic sphere of heteromorphous activities. Appeals to interdisciplinary research justifying an essential heterogeneity in knowledge, either by extension to or contained within an ethical or political discourse, do not advance beyond an in principle (yet often unintentionally) anti-philosophical, anti-theoretical, standpoint, happily adrift among a disjunction of activities, specialisms, and experiments in the field of media, which loosely holds together studies of languages, theories, formats, cultures, networks, technologies, societies, communities, and aesthetic discourses, and comprises an apparently illimitable range of methods (empirical, historical, theoretical, mathematical, ethnomethodological, experimental, and so on). Perhaps we at last need this final renunciation of the classical theoretical impulse. Nevertheless, the stakes of the problem seem great.

The old story that describes the crumbling of the old and the dawn of the new is rejuvenated in the merging of techno-scientific and critical knowledge. But because these trends are in each case implicitly or explicitly (intrinsically, essentially, helplessly) antagonistic towards the other, an alternative, as yet indeterminate and spectral, position begins to appear. It makes sense for media theory to come to grips with this emergent position that would be neither ontological nor merely empirical.

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Notes

- ¹ We can here only acknowledge, in lieu of a more extended analysis, furiously eclectic work, especially in the last ten years, that in divergent but always critically provocative ways experiments with the intricacies of such a challenge: e.g., Azuma Hiroki's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*; Jodi Dean's *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*; Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack: on software and Sovereignty*; and Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*.
- ² Herzog in an interview during which he discusses his *Lo and Behold*, his short documentary on the internet, says, "We have to be prudent when we look at social media ... and of course they have some extraordinary sides to it as well ... but on average it only is a manifestation of stupidity and banalities ... it's mostly banalities ... which is okay because our lives are composed of a chain of banalities" [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAkjiIMqBeo&t=81s>]
- ³ "In der Befindlichkeit ist das Dasein immer schon vor es selbst gebracht, es hat sich immer schon gefunden, nicht als wahrnehmendes Sich-vorfinden, sondern als gestimmtes Sichbefinden" (*Sein und Zeit*: 135). "In Befindlichkeit, Dasein is always brought before itself, and it has always already found itself, not in the sense of perceptive self-finding, but in the sense of finding itself in its moodiness" (*Being and Time*: 174). In the language of *finding* (*Befindlichkeit*, *Sich-vorfinden*, *Sichbefinden*) the concept of *existence* resonates with the concept of *mood* or *attunement* (*die Stimmung*, *das Gestimmtsein*: attunement, mood), and this distinguishes for all serious philosophical thought since Heidegger between a concept of self, focused on perception, and an account of being-in-the-world, discovered existentially in Dasein's "moods" or "modes of attunement."
- ⁴ See Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011.
- ⁵ In its early days, the word *typewriter* designated both the machine and person operating it. For the reading of Nietzsche, see "The Mechanized Philosopher" (195-208).

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Contiguity and Interval: Opening Media Theory

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This brief commentary on the need for an open access media theory journal hinges on the concepts, *contiguity* and *interval*, and concludes with an exploration of the *topological turn* as a recent method for thinking through the boundaries of mediation. Contiguity and interval are the terms I choose to describe the most generalizable manifestation of mediation. To theorize media then should be an exciting opportunity for scholars from a broad range of fields to explore the manner in which borders touch and how that touching becomes interrupted. The reason I point to the topological turn is as a creative exploration of how the boundaries of mediated environments are expanding and collapsing in continuous variations, and how these new modes of theorizing are bringing to the table new modes of thinking through the most generalizable definitions of media that theory should be able to offer.

Mediation

Mediation is contiguous, but it is also interrupted. It oscillates between coming together and coming apart. Mediation is impossible without connectivity but through connectivity produces its own possibility for rupture. When mediation implies touching it also implies a space for participation, a space which reinforces the boundaries of mediation as well as their negotiability and flexibility. Mediation means both here and there, placed and displaced, stretching over and outwards while into. Mediation signifies temporality and edges, depth and surface, as well as traces of those surfaces as they rub up against one another in a continuous mosaic. Edge,

contour, expansion, change, sense, sensation of the empirical: this is mediation; it is interference, but everything involved in the interference gathers up in the contiguous. And media theory is empowered by openness and contiguity, while the participation it requires is a negotiation of and a critique of those contiguous formations and deformations. Media theory is not a reflection on the state of “mass media” or “digital media”, but an active engagement with new modalities of contiguity that those media produce, experimenting with space, and experimenting empirically with the concepts that new arrangements make.

Contiguity: A Point of Direct Contact

Media archaeologist, Siegfried Zielinski, has claimed, for instance, that media ‘are spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separated’ (2006: 7), which brings us first to the concept of contiguity. His statement exposes a particular problematic about theorizing media, because media assemble and reassemble new configurations of the experiential, leaving less room for abstractions than concretions; this is an assessment similar to Mark Hansen’s interpretation of Gilles Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism as proffering ‘the conditions for real experience without exceeding the domain of experience, without being, properly speaking, transcendental at all’ (2006: 297). Currently, under the so-called digitization of everything, we are undergoing another renewed sense of the contiguous as this digitization commits to our connections with wholeness: Google Books has scanned over 20 million books and are keen to scan everything ever written (Chalmers and Edwards, 2017); Cornell University’s Macauley Library intends to record and digitally archive the sound of every bird species in the world (Gallagher, 2015); responsive media are becoming attuned to users’ ‘micromoments’ that shape consumer preferences (Ghose, 2017). Media theorists thus have the opportunity to define and redefine (in various guises) this notion of contiguity, which is a notion that holds that *all* forms of mediation, transduction, or networking involves some form of contact, virtual or actual. That is, contiguous properties are more in the form of media than the content they appear to communicate (to uphold McLuhan’s *the medium is the message*). To mediate is to participate, and to participate (from the Latin *shared in*) is to actively engage with the contiguous; participation is creative, embracing supposition,

as well as destructive, resisting and refusing. Is not participation motivated by the anticipation for change and the need to collectively formulate new modes of contiguity in the first place? This is what makes *Media Theory* as a journal so important: shared, open, participatory media represent the invention and reinvention of contiguity, of attempting to connect that which has become separate, to revisit Zielinski. But those rearrangements are impossible without the *interval*: jerks, fits and starts, glitches and skips.

Interval: An Interruption in Contact

Mediation is impossible without the persistent interval (the rupture, accident, flub, moment of stupidity found in YouTube Fail Video vortexes and endless 4chan scrolls), that underlies the design and social life of mediation. We are reminded of Paul Virilio's (2007) warning that every technical design has an accident built into it; further, that every design also anticipates and is built to prevent its own self-destruction. Any conception of mediation (conceived broadly) must include the interval. And the everyday world is often unprepared for the successes or embedded sense of media that the interval produces (e.g., Netflix's success, or the 3M tape of German WWII intelligence becoming a dominating American entertainment commodity). This unknowability might briefly draw our attention to the paradoxical idea of anticipating unexpected change. In a manner that resonates strongly with Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* ([1912] 2004), the past, present and future are co-constitutive entities whose pre-arrangements remain governed by a particular principle endemic to both interval and contiguity: *participation, which is the requirement for mediation to rearrange itself*. For change to happen, the interval is inserted as unfamiliar patterns and shapes in the mediation experience. Where *sleep* is lately considered to be Netflix's most significant competition (Hern, 2017), mediation is entirely dependent on continuous variation, which means parts need to be separated, discontinued, discarded, before mediation can be reconfigured. The interval is more than an interruption by a perceptible thing; it is the reorganization of space and time at the most subtle and massive levels simultaneously, the big data on micro-movements. Indeed, if there is a consistent relation between contiguity and interval, it is that of a continuous variation.

Topologies: Variations in Contact

Sha Xin Wei has written recently on *topology* as an alternative to the contiguity/interval themes commonly found in media theory. Topology has made its rounds lately as a useful analytic filter for mediation, insofar as it represents ‘one of the most primordial modes of articulation available to us’ (Sha, 2013), by complicating the spatial situations in which the continuous change of shape or size of figures renders the geometric properties of the whole relatively unaffected; under the topological perspective, there is no division between the contiguous and the interval, but rather these terms are nodes in a network of continuous variation that underlies an evolving definition of media. Topology cuts through the assumptions of ‘media studies’ that mediation undergo a peculiar alienation from touch, and that its ultimate return to touch is only going to be circumvented and mediated through elaborate technological assemblages. Such a conception seems to suggest a necessity to amplify our ideas of media and mediation. The topological is intended as a challenge to the notion of mediation or the contiguity/interval partition that is so often the point of critique for cultural studies – it presents us instead with the opportunity to theorize media as a fluid and open site. Sha Xin Wei poses the question of the topological by asking that we consider any contiguity to be based on a primordial continuous variation without representation. This exemplifies a push for new filters and methods that emphasize morphogenesis and cultural dynamics over fixity, the *anexact*: ‘As we dwell in the phenomena, site, event’, Sha writes, ‘we can successively identify salient features of the phenomena, and then successively invent articulations that trace the phenomena. We do not pretend at any stage to completely capture what we articulate’ (Sha, 2013: 223-224). Mediation does not necessarily ‘capture’ what was already present but rather forces voice into perception, every technological assemblage a new orientation.

Openness: Fluid Contact

My account of contiguity and interval is thus characterized by a sensitivity to the ontological, epistemological, and practical effects of interior and exterior relations, and for finding the contours of continuity between otherwise disparate entities, such

as the outlines between connections and their ruptures. Intervals, in conventional wisdom, are taken as fissures in need of mending, as touch is the most fundamental testimony to corporeality, to the presence and co-presence with others. To revisit some of the more commonly accepted foundations of media theory, Marshall McLuhan's (1955) theory of auditory space is aligned directly with the openness and participation of contiguity and interval. Every extension is reassembled into a new configuration (such as that from a medium to a fold), one that does not place media at a distance from consciousness, but understands media as the reassembled *socius*, wherein which our sense and sensations of the empirical undergo negotiation through participation. Intervals do not stage interruptions. They anticipate the intertwining places of future contiguities. The current dialectic between contiguity and interval is what constitutes auditory space – indeed, *Media Theory* is assuming the responsibility to engage with the further malleability of concepts and ideas that will shape our theorizations, and is engaging with the idea *through* the form that its dissemination is taking shape. In support of openness, McLuhan proposes that contemporary media shape auditory space, which, McLuhan writes: 'has no favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions, moment by moment' (1997: 41). To theorize media means to live through the micro-moments of contiguity and interval. The visible borders that demarcate territory (outlines of bodies) do not operate in isolation of the intervals that interrupt the space between those bodies that contiguity pushes together.

Contact

The theorization of contiguity and interval could use an interval in its own right. The purpose of this short exploration has been to elucidate this pair in the context of media theory, to speak to them separately, and to suggest an alternative that accounts for the topological mediations that a new open access publication in media theory could bring to our field. There is no need to abandon the pair, but there is the necessity to imagine their relations in an increasingly enfolded manner. While there is no lack of venue for a robust discussion of media theory, the field sits in the margins of other disciplines that already have reputed and internationally recognized journals

devoted to them. As discussed above, the topological imagination is one (of many) development(s) in media theorizations that would cast doubt over the continued bifurcation between connection and disconnection that media theory toils over.

What I hope this brief exploration of contiguity and interval might do is provoke more discussions – by no means has there been a lengthy and much needed exploration of how the topological imagination has benefitted media theory (see Phillips, 2013). This topological imagination has caused us to rethink media, body, environment, place, space and time in new ways. Xin Wei’s poetic sensibility to responsive environments is one of many pieces that are currently elucidating the kinetic mobilities of media and mediation, a new corporeality that stands redefined in the context of the digitization of everything, including that very corporeality itself. More research needs to be done to evaluate how contiguity, interval, connection, flow, openness, access, and place are coming together and bursting apart simultaneously. The need for a concentrated environment for media theorizations couldn’t find a more obliging place than such a journal as *Media Theory*.

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Media Theory:
How Can We Live the
Good Life in Strata?

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We do not know what it is to live a good life in the layered, stratified and mediated world of many (local and global) scales, contending histories and futures that haunt our present as anxieties. The question of the good life is an ancient one, from the Ancient Greek philosophers' *Eudamonia*, to the Protestant ethic of deferred gratification, to the Wall Street ethos of greedy individualism. Traditionally, these address the question of the good life in terms of an individual's own life and their direct relationships. However, today the power and reach of individuals is both more expansive and more indirect. We are told that our actions have global consequences but there is a mismatch between the scale of individual local action and later, global, long-term outcomes. Our efforts to mindfully elaborate ethical relations result in a much more abstract, fuzzy and delayed outcome.

Recent writers have identified media as relevant to these questions because it is located at an ontological and ontic crossroads between the human and non-human. Parikka (2013) pushes this to embrace not only technology (as in the work of Kittler, 1990; 1999), networks (as in Latour, 2005) or non-human animals (as in the work of Haraway, 1992; Serres, 1982; and others) but the Earth as a stratified geological record. Olsson argues that this changes the 'space of media':

This spatial expansion also entails a temporal transformation. Since modern geology's formation in the 18th century with scientists such as James Hutton and Charles Lyell, who authored the *Principles of Geology*

(1830), it has operated with an idea of the earth as a stratified system into which different epochs and temporalities are inscribed. Consequently, a geology of media will address and analyze different time scales than those that frame “history”. If Siegfried Zielinski’s media archaeology (or variantology) has paved the way for an analysis of the “deep time of the media” – an analysis that follows alternative routes and excavates other strata than those displayed in a linear success story of technologies – a geology of media will extend this approach to encompass a nonlinear history (Olsson, 2015 online).

Drawing on images and ideas of stratification and mediation, I would like to consider the simultaneity of these two processes. I contend that the interest in strata and sedimentary layers suggests one of the distinctive elements of contemporary time-space, which is the paradox of having to theorize and act across different levels or scales, whether they be local and global scales or different traditions that are in conflict. This requires thinking relationally. This is not only a result of the spatialization of difference onto planes where identity is juxtaposed rather than understood hierarchically as lack – for example, lack of piety, civility or capital. It is a juxtastructure (Sève, 1974) of difference that is simultaneously vertical in a hierarchical temporal order, but also visualized as a continuum, such as an exposed cliff-face that gives us a view that cuts across many sedimentary layers.

Consider our dilemma today: global media condemn us to live in perpetual impotence as we are informed of distant atrocities that have implications for us which are hard to pinpoint, equivocal and located at an indeterminate point in the future. This is a structural feature of political orientations and opinion. The stratified differences of power and distance defy our attempts to comprehend and intervene. But we must attempt to translate or project across and between strata, across and between places and spatial-temporal contexts. Consider Turkey in 2016-17: at what point does the attack on democratic institutions and the firing of academics who have proffered thoughtful critique, and even just commentary, threaten the security of our own persons and families from abuse by representatives of our States? We may forget that this is only the most recent step that follows on the violent purging of diversity from the public sphere in Turkey. To what extent can distant

developments be understood as models that could be transferred locally? Extrapolating across contexts and strata: is it possible to compare the hardening of conservative attitudes in Turkey with the United States which appears to be following a similar course? Both of these are what Lyotard would refer to as ‘paralogical operations’. They exceed any rational and deductive procedure even while they have a clear logical structure.

We do not know what it is to live the good life *in this stratified situation*. It involves both local and global, intimate and foreign, at the same time, as well as a blending of sedimentary layers of past, present and future. Horizontal layers, such as spatial scales from micro to macro, or from inside to outside, are formally distinct but often impinge on each other. Adding to this topsy-turvy situation, the hierarchical, temporal layers and successions are also formally mapped but diachronically interlaced in everyday life. This takes various forms of ‘return’, of haunting, promissory statements about future outcomes, anxiety in the present about the future, or the present distracted by nostalgia for the past. American political rhetoric, for example, revels in the formula, ‘Some day in the future, we will make the present great again (as was in the past)’, as a return to a teleological path that leads towards a predestined salvation.

Media not only inform but *organize* information. Knowledge, however, can be definitionally isolated even if it is structured by the epistemological infrastructure of, for example, tables of knowledge or spatializations of difference that code identity to geography. The rules of knowledge formation as a human process of understanding the significance of information are challenged by the juxtastructural and relational qualities of contemporary media and the mediated sensorium. We need to discover the working methods that stand in for the absence of a viable Cartesian logic that works through difference. Is the individual logical savant replaced by a dialogue in a collective? Is the incommensurability of facts and features of different strata compensated for by topological rules? For example, projected down from multi-dimensional processes to more flattened, manageable, diagrammatic visualizations? Are there emergent praxes for imagination that are the reverse of projection and that

move from lower to higher strata, local to global? Would this respond to the challenge of the Turkish example above?

Media *stratify*. It has been long argued that they do not only classify and relate, but isolate and juxtapose. Life in strata today is an empirical reality. However, it is not a matter of living in some sort of positivist, Euclidian striated space that pre-existed media – like a kind of cultural ‘upstairs-downstairs’ set of distinctions and prejudices. Stratified space is created by media as much as by any other force. This ontological sense is discussed across the work of Innis, McLuhan, media ecologists, media archaeologists, including Kittler and *Kulturtechniken* theorists, such as Siegart. Collectively, they argue that media structures our grasp of the past and imagination of the future. That is, media allows the flow of experience and transmission of messages in time to be translated to a spatial medium (such as the surface of a sheet of paper), which allows information to be stored and thus permits experiences to be revisited, overcoming the irreversible flow of time. Thus, a photograph can be understood as a spatialization of a temporal moment: it makes the past moment of the snapshot available simultaneously in the present, rather than disappearing in the succession of temporal instants. However, non-human recording technologies favour a calculating, diagrammatic vision that spatializes information. This implicitly spatializes the world, not just as a table of knowledge but as a social spatialization of places-for-this and places-for-that. Peters refers to ‘logistical media’:

These are “prior to and form the grid in which messages are sent [...] Logistical media establish the zero points of orientation, the convergence of the x and y axis” [(Peters, 2008: 40, cited in Young, 2015)]. In ancient societies, technologies like the calendar and clock established grids through which time came to be experienced, measured and calculated (as Mumford understood in 1934). The tower established terrain as a visible field over which power could be exerted. Time and space converge in these objects: towers render the time required to move over terrain as a spatial horizon that can be processed by the eye; the discrete, spatialized movements of a clock’s hands freeze the ephemeral arrow of time; the calendar renders cultural cycles into a spatial form by which these can be

standardized and canonized (for a discussion of media and ‘the geometry of time’ see Winkler, [2009]) (Young, 2015 online).

However, what is significant today is the way in which media not only differentiate but mediate between and across what has been differentiated. This creates the situation described above as blended, interlaced or even topsy-turvy, of simultaneous separation and mediation, distinction and de-differentiation, partition and bridging. This is in strong contrast to the earlier 20th century confidence with which Simmel could oppose these pairs in a temporal succession. Speaking of the development of group identity, he argued that the same separatist practices by which a group differentiated itself would be later used to link to other groups (Simmel, 1994). Is Simmel’s metaphor of the drawbridge, first up as a ‘door’ and later down as a ‘bridge’, one obsolete page of a previous century’s social science? Media now operate simultaneously as both ‘bridge’ and ‘door’ at the same time, not sequentially.

Mediated strata demolish the certainties of modernity. Places and scales are in relationships that are mediated. It can be understood ideally as the interaction of scales, as well as an actually material set of exchanges. *Media Theory* is thus more than questions of transmission and storage. In as much as media creates new relations, new strata bridge together in a juxtastructure. This is simultaneously a sort of systematic ‘table of knowledge’ as a set of supposedly incommensurable epistemological and ontological realms together with a set of contingently emergent practices and ethics for working across the table. This ethics strives for a good life that resolves the contradictions that have been created by the same media.

These norms and practices complicate questions of ‘reach’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2010). They show the multiple translations required for mere understanding, and are more than mere ‘action at a distance’ that presumes a smooth, undifferentiated global space. Media create not only an ontological scene but an ontic, performative ecology. This is a space and tempo of agency – or agencies, plural: the agency of organizations, states, groups, individuals, children, animals, even insects, such as bees. These agencies are actions, routine and exceptional; banal and significant. This

demands not only a politics but an ethics of the relations across these spaces and between these strata.

We do not know what it is to live a good life *in strata*. Ubiquitous mediation removes the option of merely compartmentalizing between levels: us and them, the West and the rest, the blessed and the cursed or pitiable. It is this that was understood to have made Hillary Clinton's distinction between the enlightened and the 'basket of deplorables' impossible in practice. It condemned her platform to absurdity even in the face of a more ridiculous opponent. We are mutually inter-related. Impotence was once coupled with blindness and willful ignorance. In the face of relatedness, impotence is the general condition and affect that must raise demands for new understandings and strategies for mediating agency to reconstitute a ground for an effective citizen and political actor.

We do not know what it is to live the good life *in mediations across strata*. What is it, for example, to construct, organize and orchestrate mediations? This is not simply a rhetorical problem of constructing new knowledges but a pragmatics of everyday life, which is as much lived locally as a process of interaction at a distance. We cannot presume that 20th century social science captures the whole story of life today. Postmodern relativism suggested that we pick and choose between elements of many strata in an attempt to create new stratifications, new moral and political categories, but had trouble justifying and naturalizing these hybrids. Canadian indigenous cultures have called upon humanity to honour pasts and traditions but in a present and context where elders themselves acknowledge the lack of purchase traditional knowledge may have on a changing present (Coulthard 2010). The question of the good life is thus an open challenge.

Media calls out for theory because it mediates not only abstract categories and intangible realities such as audience communities of perception and taste, but media channel life chances. Mediation and relationality are today as much about what exists within what category as they are about the finitudes of processes, the death sentences passed on intellectuals and activists, the purging of possible futures despite the unsustainability of current trends. Spaces of experimentation, of new ways of living, require spaces of imagination that support the discovery of new practices,

understanding and knowing. How to live the good life in and across strata is as much a question today as it was for the Ancients. *Media* needs *Theory* to think along and across strata.

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Manifesto:
Graphic, Sonic, Affective Object

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A manifesto is commonly accepted as a public declaration of policy and aims. Whilst it is primarily a written document, the notion of declaration transports us back to the voice; to the thrill of the soapbox and the megaphone; to the spoken word as public affirmation and promise. Although the modern *political* manifesto is a policy document that is too long and convoluted to be read out by politicians in full, key points are voiced by party leaders and officials, and the printed manifesto is ritually waved in front of TV cameras: an *illusion* of promise through the mediated presentation of a material object. But these objects have become corporate in style and language. They add to the countless examples of the grey literature that surround us today, produced by governments, universities and other similar institutions. A different rendition of the manifesto is the one put routinely forward by art students everywhere as a part of a project, often set early on in their course, where they inventively state their aims and intentions in a very material way.

I want to examine the graphic, sonic and affective authority of the manifesto-object, with particular reference to the *Blast* Manifesto of 1914 that was included in the first issue of *Blast*¹, a journal published in 1914 and 1915 by the British Vorticist movement – this is, after all, an opportune moment to discuss a manifesto that is sited within the first issue of a journal. As well as being a work of art in its own right, and the inspiration for many student projects, the *Blast* Manifesto is a genuine attempt to set forth change; it is a substantive declaration through content *and* form.

Blast was short-lived, with only two issues produced. The Archive at the University of Southampton where I spend one half of my working life has a good copy of each of these two issues, bound together – probably in the 1950s – but with issue one still retaining its startling pink cover, emblazoned with the word ‘BLAST’ in heavy, black, diagonal type: Ezra Pound described the journal as this ‘great MAGENTA cover’d opusculus’². With a strong nationalist and imperialist slant, it is a politically questionable yet desirable object that I regularly take off the shelf to handle, to admire and to be stirred by. It is not yet out of copyright in the UK, so excerpts are provided here using recommended transcription techniques for scientific and technical texts³. Meaningful formatting – but not type style – has been preserved. (The extract from the Mayakovsky poem presented later is treated in the same way). A good quality digitized copy of the first issue of *Blast* is available within U.S. copyright at <http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1143209523824858.pdf>.

Blast was in large part motivated by Marinetti and the new Italian avant-garde, and was initiated with the aim of founding a new movement in literature and art in Britain – a riposte to Marinetti over his attempts to assimilate the British avant-garde into his own movement. The first issue is edited and mostly written by Wyndham Lewis, assisted by Ezra Pound, and with contributions from Rebecca West, Ford Madox Ford, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Edward Wadsworth and Jacob Epstein. Despite its short life, *Blast* is regarded as a seminal pre-World War I modernist journal, ‘the quintessential modernist little magazine’⁴. It contains poems, woodcuts and a play by Wyndham Lewis entitled ‘Enemy of the Stars’, but significantly here, it presents what has become known as the Vorticist Manifesto, including a page of signatories at the end, taking up the first 43 of the 160 pages. The Manifesto is clearly titled, and begins with lists of things to be blasted, cursed, blessed and damned – this is arresting and non-negotiable language from the beginning.

This first section is bold and experimental in both content and design. It is highly typographic, taking inspiration from works of contemporary concrete poetry such as Marinetti’s own *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1912), but very different in form to the most famous Futurist Manifesto (one of many produced), which was published in a fairly

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BLAST HUMOUR

Quack ENGLISH drug for stupidity and sleepiness.

Arch enemy of REAL, conventionalizing like

gunshot, freezing supple
REAL in ferocious chemistry
of laughter.

BLAST SPORT

HUMOUR'S FIRST COUSIN AND ACCOMPLICE.

Impossibility for Englishmen to be
grave and keep his end up,
psychologically.

Impossible for him to use Humour
as well and be persistently
grave.

Alas! necessity for big doll's show
in front of mouth.

Visitation of Heaven on

English Miss

gums, canines of **FIXED GRIN**

Death's Head symbol of Anti-Life.

CURSE those who will hang over this
Manifesto with **SILLY CANINES** exposed.

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conventional way on the front page of the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, on 20 February 1909. However, both these manifestos lament the tepid state of art at the time. They call for, and indeed presage, a far more vibrant and experimental modernist culture.

Continuing on through *Blast* issue one: at page 30 the title 'manifesto' appears again, this time in smaller type, a hierarchical typographic operation that suggests a manifesto *within* a manifesto. What follows is a seven-part text, each part comprising a list of orderly numbered points. Although still black, stark and visually striking, this

sub-section is less diverse in layout – perhaps moving more towards what we expect of a manifesto in style – but still experimental in language terms.

- 7** It is intelligence electrified by flood of Naivety.
- 8** It is Chaos invading Concept and bursting it like nitrogen.
- 9** It is the Individual masquerading as Humanity like a child in clothes too big for him.
- 10** Tragic Humour is the birthright of the North.
- 11** Any great Northern Art will partake of this insidious and volcanic chaos.
- 12** No great ENGLISH Art need to be ashamed to share some glory with France, to-morrow it may be with Germany, where the Elizabethans did before it.
- 13** But it will never be French, any more than Shakespeare was, the most catholic and subtle Englishman

Not only is the *Blast* Manifesto a bold example of typographic experimentation that is highly visual and extremely important to the history of visual culture – especially what we now know as Concrete (or Visual) Poetry, a practice continued today by artists / writers / poets such as Derek Beaulieu⁵, for example – it has sonic qualities as well. It speaks to us directly. At times it even shouts, with a voice and an urgency that incites passion and zeal. The blackness of the type and variations in scale and position replicate the intonations, the emphases and the pauses of the human voice. We scan the text and we simultaneously hear it: it is a double assault on our senses.

Of course, we already have in mind the performance poetry of the Italian Futurists. Marinetti's performances of *Zang Tumb Tuuum* were particularly remarkable and left audiences stunned. Marinetti's experimental 'novel' was set in the Balkan War, which he had witnessed firsthand as a war reporter, and it used *parole in libertà* (words in freedom): distinctive typographic devices and layouts that would define the futurist style. But it was *performed* as an experimental sound poem, using different speeds and permutations of voice to give an extraordinary rendering of the sounds of battle. A manifesto is anyway a performative text, an affirmation and a declaration – and 'bless', 'blast', 'curse' and 'damn' are performative words – in line with the early designation by J.L. Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words*, where the 'saying' and the 'doing' are one and the same thing (famously, the utterance of 'I do' in the course of the marriage ceremony)⁶. The Futurist Manifesto is a model of this notion of performativity, with its declarations, such as, 'We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed', forming the foundation of futurist thought and action.⁷

The heavy, black imprint of *Blast*, its imperfect, squashed ink letter rims, very noticeable in the original, provides evidence of the letterpress printing process and evokes other sounds that must be acknowledged: the click of the moveable type and the loud, repetitive, mechanical noise of the printing press. These are sounds that are fitting as well to the Futurist culture that embraced technology, speed and industry. Kittler would later discuss the noise of the typewriter, describing it as a 'discursive machine-gun'⁸; Marinetti evoked the sounds of battle through *Zang Tumb Tuuum*; and note the reference to gunshot in the first extract from *Blast* provided here. The sound of the battle reverberates through the sound *and* the look of words and through the technology that produces them. The typescript is a visual trace of the regulated and repetitive sound of the machine gun; the typographic diversity of the futurist and vorticist imprints makes visible the sonic miscellany of earlier battles.

In 1923, El Lissitzky and Vladimir Mayakovsky collaborated on a book of Mayakovsky's poems entitled *For the Voice*.⁹ This collection of poems was made for the voice, to be read out at rallies and meetings by supporters of the revolution. This is, like *Blast*, a paradigm of Graphic Modernism and the design and layout of the

poems again function in connection with the human voice. Working closely with the Berlin typesetters, El Lissitzky was responsible for the avant-garde typographics that begin each poem and for the overall design of the book, which includes a thumb-index. Sophie Lissitsky-Küpper writes:

It was Mayakovsky himself who suggested Lissitsky should design the book, in which the poet included thirteen of his best-known poems, the ones most frequently used in public speeches. Mayakovsky wanted the book to be designed in a way that would make it easy to be read aloud, hence the title. Lissitzky's solution to this requirement was a stroke of genius. To help the speaker find the poem he wanted in the shortest possible time, Lissitzky adopted the principle of the thumb index.¹⁰



Form ranks! Forward march!
No squabbling ad nauseam.
Silence, speakers!

For the Voice is not claiming to be a manifesto: rather, it is a score, a *manual* for revolutionary speakers. And Lissitzky's graphics are not mere illustrations in a revolutionary style, they are affective visual poems; tied closely to the poems 'proper' and designed to rally the speaker, to direct the desired mode of address.

As with the sounds of the battle in Marinetti's *Zang Zang Tuuum*, sounds other than human speech resonate in *For the Voice*. The poem 'Proper Respect for Horses' (written in 1918), tells the story of a weary war-horse – a metaphor for the state of the Russian nation – starting with a bold and graphic visualisation of the 'clip-clap-clop-clup' of the horse's hooves and progressing to build a picture of the horse slipping and eventually crashing to the ground. This is all executed through a profound and technically brilliant relationship between sound and meaning of words in the Russian language – and to a large extent in the English translation – that reaches into the conscious and sub-conscious mind. As Judith Stapanian-Apkarian writes, this goes far beyond a simple use of onomatopoeia.¹¹

The appreciation of this material object continues: original copies of *For the Voice* are extremely rare and in 2000 the British Library published its facsimile edition¹², along with a separate translation and an accompanying book of collected essays, *Voices of the Revolution*, which includes information on the poems, the graphics and the translation. The facsimile edition exactly duplicates not only the design elements, including the thumb-index, but also the colour of the inks and the paper stock, resulting in an object that is as close to the original as possible.

Amongst more recent Concrete Poets, John Cage is noticeably influenced by early twentieth-century graphic styles. Although Cage is most recognised in popular culture as an avant-garde composer and music theorist, his practice engages with *visual* culture, not only through his alternative ways of presenting scores and his highly visual performances, but through his experimental writing and Concrete Poetry. Often formed by the *I Ching* chance operations that dominated his musical compositions from the 1950s onwards, Cage's texts frequently defy normal comprehension and so become more concerned with sound and musicality than with language. Cage writes in his foreword to his book of poems, *M*:

Syntax, according to Norman O. Brown, is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language. This demilitarization of language is conducted in many ways: a single language is pulverized; the boundaries between two or more languages are crossed: elements not strictly linguistic (graphic, musical) are introduced.¹³

We can attempt to analyse the words of the *Blast* Manifesto – and *Blast* contains significant references that point to what Wyndham Lewis saw as the complex problems of the contemporary world – but we have to conclude that this text too is partly non-syntactical: it is ‘demilitarized’ in the Cagean sense, yet highly militarised – a call to action – in its form. Poet and critic Craig Dworkin coined the phrase ‘conceptual writing’¹⁴ as a way of including the practices of concrete poets such as Cage, conceptual artists and those of language poets. Dworkin’s co-author, Kenneth Goldsmith, argues that conceptual writing ‘invokes a *thinkership* rather than a *readership*’, maintaining that once the *system* is understood, the *words* do not matter.¹⁵ This notion fits with Goldsmith’s own poetic works such as *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*¹⁶, where radio and TV reports of events such as the assassination of JFK, including jingles, weather reports and all, are flatly transcribed; or *Day*¹⁷, where he similarly handles a copy of *The New York Times*, making no distinction between editorial or advertisement, systematically stripping the newspaper of any graphic or typographic hierarchy¹⁸. This flattening negates – but at the same time addresses – the auditory and visual qualities of the originals. It is the direct opposite of *Blast* in methodological terms. Yet Goldsmith himself, and other conceptual poets such as Christian Bök, give readings that are unexpectedly affective and performative (in the theatrical and phenomenological sense, as defined by Judith Butler¹⁹, for example), although still disciplined in comparison to Marinetti’s performances of *Zang Zang Tuuum*.

In 2009, following a revival of interest in Wyndham Lewis, *Blast* was reprinted by Gingko Press. In 2011, Tate Britain invited the public to submit work on the themes of ‘Blast’ and ‘Bless’ to mark their exhibition, ‘The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World?’. A website²⁰ was created to present the best submissions. Like the *Blast* journal’s own publication span, the duration of this web-based collection was

brief. The Tumblr site is *at the moment of writing* occupied by adverts for skin whitening, stretch-mark removal, wrinkle cream and X-Box, demonstrating a silent and stealthy form of moveable type that is fitting to our age (and our weaponry). Marjorie Perloff, who writes on twentieth and twenty-first century poetry and poetics, including the work of the modernists, uses the term ‘moving information’²¹ to signify the pushing around of language in the digital age, as well as the act of being emotionally moved by the work. The material affect of the written word – and Goldsmith argues that ‘we can choose to weigh it *and* we can choose to read it’²² – is palpable and persistent.

Notes

¹ Wyndham Lewis ed. *Blast* no.1-2 (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914,1915)

² <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/blast-radical-vorticist-manifesto>

³ See, for example, Mary-Jo Kline and Susan H. Perdue, ‘Transcribing the Source Text’ in their book *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 3rd edition (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008). Available at <http://gde.upress.virginia.edu/04-gde.html>

⁴ The Modernist Journals Project at Brown University and the University of Tulsa: http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1158591480633184&view=mjp_object

⁵ For examples of Derek Beaulieu’s concrete poetry, see his blog: <https://derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com>

⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 5.

⁷ *Words in Freedom*, exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/futurism/>

⁸ Friedrich A. Kittler. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press,1986) 191.

⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky. *For the Voice* (Moscow-Berlin: State Publishing House, 1923)

¹⁰ Sophie Lissitsky-Küpper, quoted in ‘Note on the Date of Publication of *For the Voice*’. In Patricia Railing (ed) *Voices of Revolution: Collected Essays* (London: British Library, 2000), 13.

¹¹ Judith Stapanian-Apkarian, ‘Modernist “Vision” in the Poems of Mayakovsky’. In Railing (ed) *Voices of Revolution*, 115-118.

¹² Vladimir Mayakovsky *For the Voice* (London: British Library, 2000)

¹³ John Cage. Foreword to *M: Writings ’67-’72* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973)

¹⁴ Craig Dworkin and Kennerth Goldsmith. *Against Expression: an Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxiii.

¹⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith ‘Conceptual Writing: A Worldview’. Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/conceptual-writing-a-worldview>

¹⁶ Kenneth Goldsmith. *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2013)

¹⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith. *Day* (Great Barrington, Mass:The Figures, 2003)

¹⁸ Dworkin and Goldsmith. *Against Expression*, 249.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,’ in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. A. Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 397.

²⁰ <https://blastbless.tumblr.com>

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, “Moving Information”: On Kenneth Goldsmith’s *The Weather*.’ Ubuweb Papers: http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_perloff.html

²² Kenneth Goldsmith. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34.

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Open Theory

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Listen to the likes of David Bowie, Andy Warhol and Bono!

I still recall the new cohort settling themselves in the large lecture theatre for their first taste of Media 101. What could be more banal? I abandoned the usual script and put on *Zoo TV*. And I couldn't resist the invitation of a table just beneath the large projector screen. I climbed up just in time to meet with Bono (our hands touching) as he arrived on screen, his ironic goose-step rather more eloquent than my clambering. 'This is media,' I announced over the bang and the clatter, as the stadium-composed spectacle spluttered into action across dozens of flickering screens: 'Even better than the real thing'. *Zoo TV* does not give us 'theory', it doesn't give us very much, but it gets us faster to what we already know.

Resist Work.

Roland Barthes was part way right when he told us to abandon *the* Work ('for long – and still – conceived of in a, so to speak, Newtonian way') and urged us instead to consider 'a new object, obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories'. The Theory of the Text he told us (for which we might also think of the Media) 'cannot be satisfied by a metalinguistic exposition', instead it should be 'nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing'. It is not just the Work, but work in general (when theory

becomes ‘work’) that we need to stop. Of course, as Barthes also reminds us, the writer never takes a holiday – any such notion is constructed as an Establishment myth to enslave the writer. We resist, then, the work of writing, in order that writing may still continue to *circulate*.

Do not submit your writing, produce it!

In submitting work to a journal, we are ever positioning ourselves (or the argument of the text) *vis-à-vis* the means of production in our time. Yet, in fact, we ought to be considering its position *within* these forces. The journal is no different to the forces to which we speak. The crucial point, as Walter Benjamin once reminded us, ‘is that a writer’s production must have the character of a model: it must be able to instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal’.

Read where you write.

The critical task of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the seizing of the means of production. The *Communist Manifesto* was originally published anonymously in 1848. And while released with the announcement ‘to be published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages’, its initial printing was only in German. The pamphlet was reprinted three times and serialised in the *Deutsche Londoner Zeitung*. The day after its serialisation Marx was expelled by Belgian police. By its 150th anniversary, it was reasonable for the philosopher Peter Osborne to state it was ‘the single most influential text written in the nineteenth century’. Today, the difficulty is not one of getting published. The difficulty is being read. We lack a shared discourse. In part this is testament to pluralism (and the democratic forces of Marxism), but what does it mean to write more than we can read? If there can be no moratorium on writing, at least our task today can be to read more than we write. In the spirit of the *Manifesto*, the formation of any new readership – such as imagined with *Media Theory* – should be as much about ‘reproduction’ as it is production. We need to take more care. We need to be habitual in reading and re-reading others and to expect more when others read us!

Join a group, not the crowd.

When Barthes wrote ‘the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*’, it was just that: a metaphor. The post-structuralist gesture is now a lived (virtual) reality. However, dissemination through the ‘net’ is not simply about moving (the) Text around. It is also intimately linked to performance. Walter Ong considered the shift from print-based culture to radio and TV as a ‘secondary orality’ (to suggest a return to an oral, performance-based culture associated with Ancient Greece). Similarly, the Internet – and particularly social media – is often considered in terms of oral culture, as being conversational, social and with shifting, informal tones and registers akin to everyday speech. Yet, the performance is arguably more about audience. As David Weinberger suggested, on the Internet everyone is famous for fifteen people. The social graph has come to dominate our every action online. Jodi Dean brings to our attention both the sense of scale and the tonality of the net when referring to ‘whatever blogging’, in which she plays on the vernacular use of ‘whatever’ as ‘an affective, verbal response that deflects another’s comment’. She relates this further to Agamben’s ‘whatever being’ to highlight the a-political notion of community not as a condition of belonging, but belonging in and of itself. This belonging is the crowd (as in crowd-sourcing). In his late writings, Barthes turned to the question of *how to live together*, how to allow for our ‘idiorrhymy’. If large communities are based on an architecture of power, we should turn instead to small groups: ‘I personally think the optimal number should be under ten,’ Barthes suggests, ‘or under eight even’. This is surely a good number for a reading group or seminar.

Be more than content.

Behind every virtual community is a hidden hashtag: #AreWeContent? We enter like Alice in her adventures in Wonderland, never quite sure of our size and distance in relation to others. We might at times be baffled at the nature of conversations, indeed, who lies behind all the voices we ‘hear’? Like Cheshire Cats they appear to come and go. We can make various adjustments (as Alice might) and, in the event we get bored, we might soon declare how preposterous it all is. Yet, to avoid disenfranchisement we generally accept a place somewhere within this labyrinth. But in resigning herself to a club that might accept her as a member, Alice is never really

content, her adventures being more akin to an anxiety dream. The source of this anxiety is twofold. Firstly, she is aware of being unable to control the dynamics that press upon her. Yet, equally, she is aware everything revolves around her. The anxiety dream is of course the manifest of our latent concerns. We are *the* content, and it leads us to try desperately to become more content or at ease. The danger, as Jodi Dean shows in her book *Blog Theory*, is that the more we share, the more there is to read and respond to. The more, in short, we are at the behest of the content itself. 'It's easier to set up a new blog', she writes, 'than it is to undertake the ground-level organizational work of building alternatives'; and so it is we become 'subjectivities that may well be more accustomed to quick satisfaction and bits of enjoyment than to planning, discipline, sacrifice and delay'.

Situate your position.

The enduring lesson of Winston Smith is that there is always a position from which to write. *In small clumsy letters he wrote: April 4th, 1984*. It is certainly not a date he can be sure of, but it is enough to mark a point on from which he is conscious of the enormity of his situation; 'for whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn?'. In our postmodern condition, as Lyotard ably demonstrated, 'militant praxis ... has become defensive praxis. We are constantly having to assert the rights of minorities [...] We have to sign petitions, write papers, organise conferences, join committees, take part in polls, and publish books'. Indeed, today the 'fight for emancipation' is legitimated by the law itself. Just as for Wintson, nothing is actually illegal, yet for us the regularity of 'openness' carries with it the potential for critical collapse. If there is too much openness, the opportunity to make a claim is diminished. This is the paradox of democracy: too much is meaningless.

Remember: Theory is not a thing.

In Jonathan Culler's playful account of 'theory', he shows how even in everyday gossip we can soon spin theories ('My theory is that Laura was always secretly in love with her father and that Michael could never succeed in becoming the right person'). As he puts it 'theory must be more than a hypothesis: it can't be obvious; it involves

complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved'. In short, theory is a form of writing, of making, of thinking, and which only applies each time it is evoked. Its unmasterability has caused many to resist it. Equally the desire to master it has led equally as many to apply theory as if an object or tool. Yet, again, as Culler puts it, 'theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based'. We must remind ourselves: As a form of readership, theory represents a critical forum, not its lingua franca.

Be Open.

We must resist structures of power: Resist the dead hand of institutions that audit knowledge (without any knowledge of their own); resist the publishers' offerings of indentured labour; and resist our own egos, which too often speak over, not with others. Theory is now an open book. Just as we brought to bear a 'mythological doxa' (whereby we are all critics now), so, more generally, theory is *potentially* open to all. We should look outward to a variety of critical voices (and not be tethered to the usual suspects, as is the case with this text!). We must continue to be open *with* theory, to understand its progressive force. For his inaugural lecture as Professor at the Collège de France, in 1977, Roland Barthes described the institution – with some irony – as a place 'outside the bounds of power', and suggested: 'a professor's sole activity here is research: to speak – I shall even say to dream his research aloud – not to judge, to give preferences, to promote, to submit to controlled scholarship'. It is an ideal we must surely appeal to when setting up any new forum for research. Barthes' comments can be brought up to date with Slavoj Žižek's television programme, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006). Arguably as a perfect example of what can manifest when we seek to dream our research aloud, the opening of the programme uses a clip from the film *Possessed* (1931). A young woman (bored with her life in a small rural town) walks up to a railway crossing-point and stares mesmerized by a train which slides past, inches away from her face. We glimpse all sorts of different scenes through the carriage windows, each effectively an alluring cinematic screen. The train comes to a halt and a man holding a cocktail, leaning out of the train/screen, says to her: 'Looking in? Wrong way, get in and look out' – this

is exactly what the arts and humanities ask of us. Research here is not about results and productivity. It is about ways of seeing, ways of inhabiting the world, to look at (and dream) it from the inside out. As Žižek goes on to explain in his commentary, and with reference to the film *The Matrix* (1999), fictions always already structure our reality. We become uncomfortable when we face up to this, as much as any attempt to deconstruct the notion of ‘research’ in the arts and humanities might make for uncomfortable outcomes. As Žižek puts it (toying with the decision to take either the red or blue pill in *The Matrix*): I WANT A THIRD PILL. The reality is in the illusion. If *Media Theory* is but a remediation of what we think journals are, or ought to be, it is still this very fiction that can provide us with new openings...

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The Inhumanist

Manifesto

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The manifesto mode of political writing is associated with some of the themes and topics I've engaged with the most – posthumanism, piracy, Marxism, open access, the commons. Nevertheless, I'm hesitant to respond to your invitation to help launch *Media Theory* by producing a manifesto as to why an open access journal on media theory is necessary, and what I would like to see it do. I'm not interested in setting *agendas* or laying out *policies* with my work. Nor do I wish to get involved in *debates*.

Yet the reason I hesitate to write a manifesto for you is not just because I'm reluctant to promote new ideas with prescriptive notions about how to carry out those changes I believe need to be made. Nor is my wavering due to a concern that the power of this particular textual form of communication may have waned as a result of too much unthinking repetition, and an associated preference on my part for less obvious ways of acting. Having launched an open access theory journal myself a number of years ago – *Culture Machine* – I'm also aware there's a danger of coming across as if I'm telling you what you should do with *Media Theory*.

Sometimes the most responsible decision anyone who has attained even a modest position of authority can make is to step aside after a while. Of course, it can be difficult to relinquish what are often hard-won roles. Nevertheless it's important to do so, *regardless of any success*, in order to create openings and opportunities for others. Which is why my colleagues and I decided to celebrate *Culture Machine's* 15th anniversary by passing editorial control over the journal's future direction on to Gabriela Méndez Cota and Rafico Ruiz, two early career theorists who are located in

Mexico and Canada, respectively. And I would no more consider telling you what to do with your open access theory journal than I would Gabriela and Rafico with what is now theirs.

Still, I would like to take this opportunity to offer you my continuing support. So if a manifesto can be understood as a public declaration of the views, motives or intentions of the issuer, perhaps I can reply to your invitation by briefly making obvious the theory that lies behind the development of *Culture Machine* and some of the other projects with which I'm involved. I will then leave it to you to decide how much, if anything, of this is relevant as far as your intentions for *Media Theory* are concerned.

To put my theory of media in the language of a manifesto, I believe in:

Working collaboratively and collectively – as I do with a number of different actors, groups and organisations, some of which go under the names of [Culture Machine](#), [Open Humanities Press](#), and the [Radical Open Access Collective](#).¹

Operating according to a non-profit philosophy – for example, [Open Humanities Press](#) is a Community Interest Company whose open access books and journals are available for free (*gratis*), and many of them on a reuse (*libre*) basis too.

Acting in a non-rivalrous, non-competitive fashion to explore new models for the economy, for property and for ownership. Witness Open Humanities Press's sharing of its expertise and [publications](#) with other open access publishers and journals (such as *Media Theory*). But these new models also include the unlimited collective use of knowledge and materials associated with online file sharing networks, [shadow libraries](#) and so-called [Internet piracy](#).

Taking a hyper-political approach – not least to [open access](#), [free and open source software](#), [open data](#), [open science](#) and [open education](#).

Gifting labour as a means of developing notions of the community, the common and of commoning that [break with the conditions supporting the unified, sovereign, proprietorial humanist subject](#).

Generating projects that are concerned not only with representing or critiquing the world, but also with intra-acting with the world in order to make things happen. One of terms I've used to characterize these performative projects is '[media gifts](#)'. Along with the already-mentioned *Culture Machine*, Open Humanities Press and Radical Open Access Collective, they include [Liquid Books](#), [Living Books About Life](#), [Liquid Theory TV](#), [Photomediations: An Open Book](#), and [after.video](#).² Together, these *media gifts* form a network of books, journals, videos, presses, websites, collectives and communities that are engaged in organising and shaping theory and criticism.

That said, the projects with which I'm involved are not confined to the world of media theory. One way of thinking about them is as a plurality of forms of intervention that respond to specific issues across a number of different sites: art, activism, education, business, culture, politics, technology and the media. Their shared aim is to disarticulate the existing playing field and foster instead a variety of antagonistic spaces that contribute to the development of counter-institutions and counter-environments. This is why it's important to produce a range of different interventions: because the 'counter-hegemonic struggle is a process involving a multiplicity of ruptures', as Chantal Mouffe puts it.³ What these different performative media projects have in common is that they are characterised by a willingness to open up an unconditional space for thinking about politics and the political beyond the ways in which they have conventionally been conceived. This is what I mean by the '[hyper-political](#)'.

The political here is not merely about the kind of intended consequences and effects that can be articulated in advance. The political is also something that has to be invented and created in relation to specific practices, in particular contingent situations and contexts, by performing the associated decisions, and otherwise doing things that may be unanticipated and unpredictable – and that are thus *beyond* analysis.

There is something artistic and [poetic](#) about this invention: it is not just theoretical or philosophical. Hence my interest in poeticity and [singularity](#), and why I often describe these [media gifts](#) as operating at the intersections of art, theory, politics and media.

My current work-in-progress, provisionally titled *Data Commonism vs ÜberCapitalism*, is to be understood in these terms. It's designed not merely to offer a critique of the for-profit sharing and gig economy businesses of digital capitalism. *Data Commonism vs ÜberCapitalism* is also intended to form part of an expanded, interrupted, iterative text involved in generating a performative media project that intra-acts with the world in order to invent a different, more caring future: for the sharing and gig economies; for our towns and cities; but also for post-industrial, [post-capitalist society](#). The aim of this project is to make a counter-hegemonic intervention by re-articulating the situation in a new configuration, thus affirmatively disrupting digital capitalism so we might begin to replace Uber, Airbnb, Deliveroo et al. with a multi-polar consortium of counter-information and data platforms. Among other things, *Data Commonism vs ÜberCapitalism* asks: how can we as theorists work collaboratively to invent new ways of organising platforms, institutions and communities that don't just repeat the anti-political reductionism, lack of criticality and individualistic, liberal democratic humanism that is a feature of other accounts of community and the commons? (And I include in this those associated with platform cooperativism.) What if we were to devise our own collaborative community or information and data commons as a way of creating an actual, affective point of potentiality and transformation with a view to countering übercapitalism and its for-profit sharing and gig economies?

To this list of public declarations of what I believe, can be added a commitment to:

Interrogating those fundamental propositions that are taken for granted by theories of data, the digital and the commons. The word 'data' has its English origins in the mid-17th century as the plural of the Latin word 'datum'. The latter means a proposition that is assumed, given or taken for granted, upon which a theoretical framework can be constructed or a conclusion drawn as a result of

reasoning or calculation. It's those propositions that our culture assumes as a given in order to construct theories and draw conclusions about data that I'm committed to investigating. They include the '[digital](#)' itself, in many ways now an irrelevant attribute given nearly all media involve *becoming with* digital information processing.⁴ Other datum points are the human, technology, the printed text, the network, copyright and IP. For example, who does the measuring when it comes to data and who is this measuring for? Conventionally, it is the human subject. (It is *people* who are the presumed viewers of data visualizations, for instance. So these visualizations contain an implicit humanism.) With what? With technology and tools seen as separate from the human (which is the case even if the data is machine read). How are the measurements – the data – recorded, published and disseminated? Print texts and computerized information networks. How is this circulation controlled? It is controlled through copyright.

The etymology of the word data thus raises an important issue for ideas of an information and data commons. The datum points that are at risk of being taken for granted in the construction of such a theoretical framework – and that I interrogate in *Data Commonism vs ÜberCapitalism* – include capitalism, liberalism, humanism, freedom, democracy, community, communism, and even the commons itself.

Engaging with the existing institutions (e.g. the law, politics, the press) so as to transform them. Since they are the institutions to which theorists are most closely tied, I focus in particular on the university, the library and the scholarly publishing industry, together with their associated liberal humanist values and practices, based as they are on ideas of the individual proprietorial author, authenticity, the codex print text and the finished (and finishable) static object. The idea is to interrogate and transform what it means to create, publish and disseminate knowledge and research. Some of the projects with which I'm engaged thus concentrate on the [book](#), [fixity](#), and [copyright](#); others focus on [education](#), [teaching](#), the [archive](#) and [academic social networks](#).

[Pirate Philosophy](#), for example, draws attention to the material factors of intellectual labour. In marked contrast to much 'new materialism', the latter includes, for me, the

work of 'publishers, editors, peer-reviewers, designers, copy-editors, proof readers, printers, publicists, marketers, distributors, retailers' (as well as that of the 'agency workers, packers, and so-called "ambassadors" in Amazon's "fulfillment centers"). It also takes in 'the financial investments made' when producing, publishing and distributing knowledge and research, 'the energy and resources used, the plants, minerals, dyes, oils, petroleum distillates, salts, compounds and pigments, the transport, shipping and container costs, the environmental impact, and so forth'.⁵ Meanwhile, '[Disrupting the Humanities: Towards Posthumanities](#)', a special video issue of the [Journal of Electronic Publishing](#) I produced with Janneke Adema, addresses the seminar and seminar series, the talk, paper, or presentation, and the journal issue, as well as the individualistic nature of most humanities (and posthumanities) research.⁶

It is important to actively engage with institutions. Simply abandoning or rejecting them in favour of establishing places outside where 'the common' can be achieved risks our work as theorists being co-opted by these institutions all the more. Consider the way the Autonomist Marxist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri support the aggressive, profit-maximizing capitalist publishing companies [Amazon](#) and [Penguin Random House](#).⁷ There is little sense of these post-operaist thinkers transforming the accepted common sense rules of the game regarding how theory is produced, published, and circulated (i.e., as original, rational, linearly written and organised, copyrighted books), so that a new politics of publishing can be articulated based on communism or the commons.

From this point of view, as Pauline van Mourik Broekman, Ted Byfield, Shaun Hides, Simon Worthington and myself show in [Open Education](#):

- There is no outside to the university in any simple sense, this idea of an outside being itself a university (that is, a philosophical) idea, even if it is one that has not always been theorized rigorously.
- Efforts to occupy a place or space that is autonomous from the traditional university (whether they are physically located outside the institution or not) too often end up unwittingly trapped inside it, in the sense of unconsciously

repeating many of its structures and problems. In particular, such efforts tend to take insufficient account of the way many of those involved in establishing such supposedly *autonomous* institutions are themselves the products of, and maintain a relationship with, the traditional university.

- Attacking the ‘public’ university poses a danger of lending force to neoliberalism’s practice of bolstering global corporate institutions while simultaneously undermining nearly all others.
- There is a case to be made for supporting and defending the university as one of the few remaining public spaces where difficult, challenging and avowedly non-commercial ideas can still be developed, explored and disseminated. As recent protests by university students and cleaners attest, it is one of the few places where the imposition of neoliberalism and its emphasis on production, privatisation and the interests of the market is still being struggled over or even actively resisted.
- Creating autonomous spaces *outside* of the established institutions risks leaving the traditional university—along with the scholarly publishing industry and library – in place and unquestioned.⁸

Using numerous and at times conflicting figures, voices, registers, and semiotic functions – multiple differential authorial ‘I’s, as it were – in order to transform my own work processes and produce something different: not only from the [microentrepreneur of the self](#) that übercapitalism is making us become; but also from the liberal humanist subjectivity that is the default alternative adopted by even the most radical of theorists.

In [Pirate Philosophy](#) I adopt the persona or mask of the pirate, someone who for the ancient Greeks and Romans does not belong to a ‘community tied... to a clearly delimited territory’, but rather lives a more fluid life, and who tries, tests, teases and troubles as well as attacks.⁹ In [The Uberfication of the University](#) – which is where I develop the concept of the microentrepreneur of the self – I articulate my subjectivity more in terms of the experimenter.¹⁰ As Jean-François Lyotard makes clear, the latter differs from the intellectual in that they are not endeavoring to speak for a universal subject, be it ‘man, humanity, the nation, the people, the

proletariat'.¹¹ In fact, an experimenter does not have a pre-given addressee, whether this be an individual, group, or political party that they are trying to communicate with, win over, and seduce. (In this respect there is no subject or referent for them to address by means of the mode of writing that is the manifesto.) Rather, the experimenter is by definition involved in questioning the limits of pre-constituted fields in order to ask, what is art, or writing, or philosophy – or, in my case, what is theory, and what is it to be a theorist?

So I'm not trying to come up with a big, new, masculine philosophical system or ontology of my own; something to rival those of accelerationism, speculative realism, or media archeology, say – which of course is what theorists and philosophers traditionally do. Instead, I am more interested in exploring multiple different ways of being, different ways of doing things as a theorist, different ways for theorists to organise themselves and their [subjectivities](#). This is why, when it comes to articulating my theory of media, I move between a range of concepts and philosophies: new cultural studies, open media, liquid theory, disruptive humanities, posthumanities, pirate philosophy ...

Rather than simply positioning my theory in opposition to that of competing thinkers, I also frequently enact it by collaborating critically and creatively with the work of other contemporary theorists. They include Rosi Braidotti, Jodi Dean, Stuart Hall, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Richard Hoggart, Lev Manovich, Angela McRobbie, Chantal Mouffe, Bernard Stiegler and Raymond Williams. It is a manner of doing things that ensures my theory is not always the same in every situation and circumstance. Instead it responds in singular ways to specific thinkers and specific issues across a number of different sites. Similarly, when I write 'I' here, I am not referring to myself in a naive sense (as if I am still operating according to a model of the sovereign, unified human author as individual creative genius). The projects I characterise as *media gifts* emerge out of my processual intra-active relations with a multitude of different actors, institutions and communities. To build on the work of Mark Amerika and Alfred North Whitehead, they can best be thought of as stimulating the development of a *novel togetherness* that comprises neither singularities, nor pluralities, nor collectivities.

Reinventing the humanities and posthumanities. To decenter the human according to an understanding of subjectivity that perceives the latter as produced by complex meshworks of other humans and nonhumans (be they technologies, animals, insects, plant life, fungi, compost, the environment or the cosmos), [requires us to act differently as theorists](#) from the way in which the majority of those associated with the posthuman, the nonhuman and the crisis of life itself, which are expressed by the concepts of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, act. We need to displace the humanist concepts that underpin our ideas of the author, the book, and copyright, together with their accompanying practices of reading, writing, analysis and critique. And we need to do so by performing these concepts and practices differently in the ways in which *we* live, work and think as theorists. Otherwise we risk the human subject retaining a privileged place at the very heart of our theory, along with an implicit and unexamined humanism.

For sure, everything I have written here can be gathered under the sign of the ‘posthumanities’. Approaches to the posthumanities, however, have been dominated by the [posthuman humanities of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe](#). This is why I propose that the above transformative conception of the human and the humanities may be more productively articulated in terms of the inhuman and the inhumanities. My reasoning being that such a rhetorical and conceptual shift might enable us to better challenge the sovereign, unified, liberal humanist subject that serves as a datum point to so many theories, not just of the humanities, but of the posthuman and posthumanities, too. If the inhuman equals the human intertwined with the nonhuman, then the inhumanities *are* the humanities, only with this intra-active figure at their heart. In other words, the inhumanities are a way of acting, thinking, and working that – rather than trying to ignore or otherwise deny it – actually takes *account of* and *assumes* an intra-active relation *with* the nonhuman.

Proceeding on the basis that a manifesto works by performatively creating the very subject it purports to address, let me put all this in the form of a ten-point written statement. Consider it a gift.

The Inhumanist Manifesto

1. Work collaboratively and collectively.
2. Operate according to a non-profit philosophy.
3. Act in a non-rivalrous, non-competitive fashion to explore new models for property, ownership and the economy.
4. Take a hyper-political approach.
5. Gift labour as a means of developing notions of the community, the common and of commoning that break with the conditions supporting the unified, sovereign, proprietorial subject.
6. Generate projects that are concerned, not only with representing or critiquing the world, but also with intra-acting with the world.
7. Interrogate those propositions that are often taken for granted by theory. The list is a long one. It includes data, the digital, the human, technology, the printed text, the network and copyright. Other propositions that are assumed by theorists when drawing conclusions about the media are capitalism, liberalism, humanism, freedom, democracy, community, communism, and the commons.
8. Engage with the existing institutions – especially those to which theorists are most closely tied such as the university, the library, and the scholarly publishing industry – so as to transform them.
9. Use different personas or masks to experiment with producing multiple authorial 'I's, different to the liberal humanist subjectivity that is the default adopted by even the most supposedly radical of theorists.
10. Reinvent both the humanities and the posthumanities as the inhumanities by adopting ways of being and doing as theorists that actually take *account of* and *assume* an intra-active relation *with* the nonhuman.

Notes

- ¹ *Culture Machine* (<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm>); Open Humanities Press (<http://openhumanitiespress.org>); and the Radical Open Access Collective (<http://radicaloa.disruptivemedia.org.uk>).
- ² Liquid Books (<http://liquidbooks.pbwiki.com/>); Living Books About Life (<http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org>); Liquid Theory TV (<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/354/358>); *Photomediations: An Open Book* (<http://www.photomediationsopenbook.net/>); and *after/video* (<http://www.metamute.org/shop/openmute-press/after.video>).
- ³ Chantal Mouffe, in Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: In The Name Of The People* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016), 40.
- ⁴ For more, see Janneke Adema and Gary Hall, 'Posthumanities: The Dark Side of "The Dark Side of the Digital"', in Janneke Adema and Gary Hall, eds, *Disrupting the Humanities: Towards Posthumanities*, *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, Vol. 9, No.2, Winter, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0019.201>.
- ⁵ Gary Hall, *Pirate Philosophy: For a Digital Posthumanities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 115.
- ⁶ Janneke Adema and Gary Hall, eds, *Disrupting the Humanities: Towards Posthumanities*, *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, Vol. 9, No.2, Winter, 2016, <http://www.journalofelectronicpublishing.org/disrupting-humanities.html>.
- ⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (self-published and originally released as an Amazon 'Kindle single' in May 2012), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Declaration-Michael-Hardt-x/dp/0786752904>; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War And Democracy In The Age Of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2005).
- ⁸ Pauline van Mourik Broekman, Gary Hall, Ted Byfield, Shaun Hides, Simon Worthington *Open Education: A Study In Disruption* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2014), 7-8, <https://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open/file/c04530ce-d16a-46ca-b359-a905195a76cb/1/Open%20education.pdf>.
- ⁹ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Enemy of All: Pirates And The Law Of Nations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), 17; quoted in Gary Hall, *Pirate Philosophy*, n.106, 219-220.
- ¹⁰ Gary Hall, *The Uberfication Of The University* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <https://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open/items/4b7671d5-371f-438b-83c7-9275935550f8/1/>.
- ¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Tomb Of The Intellectual', in *Jean-François Lyotard: Political Writings* (London: UCL Press, 2003), 3.

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**10 Propositions for
Doing Media Theory
(Again)**

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I consider the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as a decisive event in my biography. But the (childhood) memory of the events at the time mutate with the annual rerun of historical coverage in Germany: Images of crowds filling the streets facing special police forces, masses of people fleeing to Hungary, President Reagan's iconic appeal to Gorbachev to "tear down this wall". Although I'd like to believe in the reality of what I heard and saw and felt at the time, many things of those days are not available to me through direct experience or memory. In fact, I can no longer separate what may have been my own perception of the events and what has been a layering of references and images that are only accessible in mediated form. How to resolve this ambivalence of understanding a biographical event as a media event?

My trajectory as a media scholar is concerned with this question: What reality is present in and through media that we cannot access in ways other than exposing ourselves to their specific aesthetic and cultural forms? Looking back at the authors and themes that I studied, this question seems to emerge as a central concern. Starting with Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, then poststructuralism and Jean Baudrillard, moving on to film history and media archaeology (à la Thomas Elsaesser and Lev Manovich) to land at practice-based approaches to journalism history, reading 1830's American penny papers through the more recent experience of the blog. While media theory somehow lingered on in the back of my mind, research interests refocused on history, archives – the durable stuff. All this theorising of

“new media” in various strands of research in the 1990s and early 2000s was tiring after some time and there was a good reason to look back at the trajectories that had taken us there. My current interest in critical approaches to digital methods then involves a theory of media that is much more related to practice.

These inquiries boil down to questioning and investigating the ‘content of the form’ that media confront us with, a term I borrow from Hayden White. Media theory then becomes a forum for interrogating how media shape our perceptions and questioning the ways in which this is commonly understood. For anyone having made their peace with the rampant ‘theorising’ of media and society in the post-structuralist tradition or the heyday of Internet research around the year 2000, the question is: “Why should we do media theory (again)”? The following 10 propositions are an invitation to debate, rather than answers to this question. They are propositions rather than assertions, asking to be challenged, affirmed or dismissed. They manifest observations and concerns that have emerged in the recent years rather than being a manifesto. But you can still pin them on the wall. The virtual wall.

I. Media Theory Is Transnational

It may be a very obvious point to claim that media theory is a *transnational* endeavor. Scholars from all over the world are doing media theory, contribute to *international* journals, go to *international* conferences. Why do we need the concept of the nation at all in such networked and globalised times? Because each scholar is located in a specific research environment, where certain traditions (theoretical, conceptual, methodological) inevitably shape what kind of research can be done (e.g., in terms of third-party funding objectives and policies). For a scholar at MIT (Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.) these traditions and objectives of research will necessarily be different than for a literature scholar working in Würzburg (Germany) or a social activist in Mumbai (India). We engage with scholars who share our interests across nations, but the national traditions in doing media research should not become obliterated in such transnational dialogues. This is an important point to keep in mind as many dialogues are now held in English-language publications. There is a

danger of limiting the plurality of approaches to media theory by assuming that everyone has more or less read the same books and articles. This is a particular problem for non-native speakers of English, not because they can't master the language, but because they need to summarise entire strands of knowledge for audiences outside their own disciplinary or national location. All too often, this non-English legacy is simply dropped from the discourse because it would involve too much explanation, background and reflection. Seeing media theory as transnational offers a way of appreciating these disciplinary traditions and positions, and of understanding the situatedness of scholars who uphold them. *Trust in your voice.*

2. Media Theory Is Interdisciplinary

The dominant strands in media theory go back to critical theory, philosophy, history of communications media, the arts and literature. It is a syncretic field of endeavour, informed by artistic practices and critical traditions, by different conceptions of what a medium is and what historical benchmarks are considered important. While the notion of a discipline is closely tied to a specifically modern view of fields of expertise, media scholars often override and question these boundaries between disciplines. They are interested in the overlaps and juxtapositions between disciplines that have touched on media at some point. In turn, taking interdisciplinary endeavour seriously requires becoming aware of how boundaries operate, and what ontological and epistemological assumptions go into their creation. Media scholars then are ideally positioned to take interdisciplinary thinking into contexts where it is merely advocated but not practiced. *Think across boundaries.*

3. Media Theory Can Be Applied

For scholars working in hermeneutic traditions of Western philosophy, the mere thought of applying theory triggers an immediate defence mechanism. Theory is knowledge creation, pure and simple. You won't find Microsoft Research banging on your door in reaction to a fine, sophisticated piece on post-humanism. Or maybe you will? These days, the transitions between fields occur far more often and frequently, between theory and practice, between thoughts and actions. Activists come together to form a start-up for public interventions. Artists adopt theoretical principles to

create new sensory and aesthetic experiences. The same principles may be taken up by designers and software developers to create real-life products. While you may reserve a place in your heart and mind for doing theory as a purely critical endeavour, which is absolutely essential in these output-driven times, you have to be ready and open for theory to materialise in unforeseen ways. These materialisations can then serve as a trigger and inspiration for doing theory. *Welcome to entropy.*

4. Theory Has a Context (and a Motivation)

In an interdisciplinary setting such as this journal, individual assumptions about what media theory is or should be need to be made transparent. When a scholar in the tradition of critical theory confronts an investigation of montage practices in early Modernist art film, both theories of media need to be set in their respective context beyond a mere literature review. You cannot assume that your audience or interlocutors will share the same assumptions about either medium or theory than your disciplinary fellows. This situation can be a real challenge and a real chance for surprising encounters. We confront theory against assumptions and objectives that we situate and rationalise in personal, professional and theoretical terms. But in an interdisciplinary setting, these tacit assumptions should be put on the table before going into critical engagement with an idea.

A second point about context concerns the historical circumstances in which certain ideas emerge. This may be a point of fervent dispute: We can either ignore context and assume a continuous flow of ideas and arguments that apparently have no time, including the time of our own theorising; or, we can understand certain theoretical positions against their historical relevance, and explain first where a particular theory comes from. We don't need to use context as explanation, and thereby contribute to historical relativism. But I think it makes a difference whether you discuss Baudrillard's notion of simulation against the background of French post-structuralism, the events of May 1968 in Paris or the rise of the Internet. *Situate yourself.*

5. Media Theory Is Not a Field

Acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of media theory, I would like to address the notion of field. Media theory itself is not a field, I would argue, because it attracts incursions from such a wide array of discourses, disciplines and backgrounds, that media theory does not generate a kind of knowledge that would be comparable across contexts. It is hard to assume that someone can do media theory “better” than someone else, if both come from totally different backgrounds. Media theory rather delimits a space of inquiry where positions can meet outside their own disciplinary contexts.

The notion of the field, at least in its sociological understanding following Bourdieu, also entails an argument about positioning actors in power relations to each other. The production of knowledge and theory in relation to fields is here closely aligned to struggles over authority. While such dynamics of established and incumbent actors can be observed in many individual fields (aka disciplines), the fact that media theory itself is not such a field creates a comparatively more even space in which arguments and positions can develop more liberally than in a closer disciplinary corset. In an ideal world then, a junior scholar should here have the liberty and productive environment to formulate and defend his or her position through a critique of established scholars. Media theory is strengthened by drawing on several fields of knowledge and inquiry, affirming the intellectual freedom within a common space rather than disciplinary hierarchies. *Dare to be a commoner.*

6. Debate Needs Positions (but Positions Are Not Everything)

Scholars struggle to attain a position within the fields of knowledge they work in and within the institutions they work for. Obtaining this position is a struggle for recognition, maintaining it is a social skill. But being able to question your own position and being open to new ideas is the backbone of academic inquiry. We need positions to be able to debate. But positions themselves have their own shelf-life. *Speak and listen.*

7. Define Medium/a

Judged from your own position and background, medium/a is probably not a problematic category. For some, speaking of the media covers the BBC, the *Washington Post*, the *Times of India* or *Le Monde*. Others talk about voice and the body as media. Yet, some just mean this or that technical device, such as the telegraph, electricity, television, databases. In different strands of research, media include anything from Alberti's conception of perspective to sensing devices or blockchains. For a journal as interdisciplinary as *Media Theory*, a (working) definition of medium/a should introduce every contribution. Even if it is blown to pieces in the paragraphs that follow or if it merges with other definitions into a new lifeform. *What medium/a?*

8. Media Are Everywhere (but Not Everything Is Media)

One lesson of caution we can draw from the media theory of the 1990s and early 2000s is that the mere proliferation of a technical device or infrastructure does not explain its variegated uses and meanings. One fallacy of the early theorising of the Internet was the assumption that every part of the social would inevitably change and, more importantly, would change in the same direction. At the same time, this period and body of work has been incredibly influential and has contributed to the enormous variety of approaches in which media are nowadays theorised (again). But there is a certain tendency to repeat the prophetic fallacy of new media forms, especially in the fields of social media and mobile media research. Just because a media form or technology appears everywhere at more or less the same time, this need not be a revolutionary moment in a theoretical perspective. With the rich legacies of media theory represented in this journal, the detached theoretical perspective may serve as a cautious marker of critical distance in the face of accelerated technological change. *Think beyond media.*

9. What Media Theory Is Not About

There are legions of journals to pick from when you want to publish results of research. The really good ones manage to foster a dialogue between their contributors and audiences because all can share a common concern, a need to

articulate and reflect positions. When you contribute to *Media Theory*, think of Theory first and be aware of the legacies. The dynamics and economics of research today often create an immediate urge to publish. For an empirical paper, some discussion of theory is usually a sign of good style and disciplinary conventions. But for a journal dedicated to media theory, the dialogue across fields and its representatives is essential for creating an identity. Media theory is not about blowing up an observation or finding about media beyond its proportions. *Think theory.*

10. Media Theory Is Open Access

Open access is going to redefine how scholarship is done and how it is communicated. At the moment, this idea is still in a transition period because of the disciplinary and economic legacies in academic publishing. It takes courage and resources to launch a fully open access journal that can rely on an academic community to support it. But there is an ambivalence here, between open access and being accessible. Natural scientists are very good communicators of their research, I think, because they learn throughout their studies that everything they need to explain to the public will be horribly complicated. The humanities and social sciences have often not made this realisation yet. They address media, the social, communication and so on from an unquestioned perspective of relevance to the wider public. But these individual positions on media, the social, or communication do not necessarily address public concerns because they refer to legacies and concepts which only a few share. One central challenge of media theory is to be accessible without denigrating the quality of theory. As a result of open access, scholars also need to be ready for critique and reactions coming from beyond the realm of the usual suspects. *Be open and be accessible.*

References

This list is open to your imagination and the power of your databases.

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What Is a Journal for?

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A journal needs a project: to survive, to thrive, to matter. Open Access (OA) journals need a project more than any other. OA has yet to develop a business model that will pay for the toil of editors, copy-editors, designers and content managers. Freelance authors have to prefer paying gigs; and academic authors, whose wages pay for the time to write, are under pressure to publish in recognised (established, usually hardcopy) journals with commercial publishers whose subscriptions revenue pays for the labour of publishing. The only possible reason to support an OA journal, apart from a generic desire to support OA as a principle, is that the journal has a project.

Perhaps most of all, a journal needs readers. They don't need to be many. *Art & Language* must have had one of the smaller circulations, but to those in its ambit, it mattered. It broke new ground. We can probably all recall journals whose every issue we seized on hungrily, steering us and our buddies into new paradigms. Some journals had the grace to stop when the work was done. Others turned respectable in middle age. Some began as online communities finding the need for longer, more thought-through pieces. Some have returned to faster, shorter formats. OA online has the great virtue of speed. But it still needs a reason to exist.

So how does *Media Theory* matter? Three challenges: media, theory, and media-theory.

Media, intrinsically plural as object, lie at the centre of an intrinsically interdisciplinary corpus of studies, from social sciences to humanities, professional to creative practice. Coming late to the university, major tracts of media (languages and literature, music, art, photography, architecture, and I would add economics and pretty much every field of the human sciences) had already been colonised, and

others (notably computing and information science) would be colonised at the same time as media and communications were staking out their claims. Each of the competitor departments had developed their own discourses, practices, pantheons, controversies. Throw in emergent discourses of the last 30 years like critical cartography and much of science and technology studies, and broad acres of contemporary philosophy. To matter, *Media Theory* needs to bite the transdisciplinary bullet, refuse the closures effected by disciplinary histories including our own, and demand the right to speak to, through, with and about *all* media. Anything that mediates. Weapons. Sex. Cash. Mosquitoes. Chlorophyll. Seismographs. Neurons. Mediation is not exclusively human, but it is what humans do when they are being human. The ecological principle concerns the connectivity of everything with everything else. What connects, mediates. Media are the materials and energies that connect humans in societies and ecologies. If the project of media theory is to matter, it cannot restrict the object of the study of media to technologically produced, transmitted and consumed media, still less to the sub-disciplinary contest of cinema, TV, Internet, press, radio etcetera. For too long we accepted that as technologies, media were exclusively human and divorced from the physical environment. For too long we ignored workplace media. For too long we believed in the divorce of factual and entertainment media. For too long we failed to insist that geographers and historians worked with and on media, that psychology and the sciences depend on media and mediations. We thought it was okay to be innumerate. We set ourselves apart from business communications. We have colluded in our own multiple alienations.

If media are what connect us, then a profound question about them is: how come we are so disconnected? That is the kind of question about media history and practice that only broad, collective effort could answer. At present, we lack the tools to build collective effort because our theory, like our disciplinary divisions, is composed of diverse, isolated and mutually incompatible schools. We distrust the idea of master discourse, *maîtres-à-penser*, super grand unified theory; but for lack of it increasingly inhabit a field of mutually incomprehensible language games. The terrifying prospect of the 'marketplace of ideas' that our paymasters openly promote in the name of freedom of speech easily displaces claims to academic freedom because collectively

and severally we would rather dump on one another than build an alternative to marketisation. We have no common cause, and no common means to pursue it.

Our distrust of unity actively enables this conversion of a debate that has never occurred into a shopping mall. Our reluctance to speak about truth contributes to the crisis of truth in contemporary democracy. Our reluctance to make value judgements contributes to the general tawdriness. *Media Theory* should absolutely refuse to accept this state of affairs. Theory is distinguished from philosophy by its address to actuality, however we define it. Philosophy starts from axioms: theory, wherever it starts, must always return to the stuff of media: affects, demands, techniques, materials, however we define them. Theoretical schools have become as much echo chambers as the alt-right. We may never reach agreement, but it is absolutely essential to meet and debate, to challenge each other with what we think constitute the object, the method and the goal of enquiry. That is a purpose worth pursuing.

We will only discover whether there is indeed a phenomenon we can call ‘media’ by comprehensively reconceptualising what concerns us as the shared *object* of our studies. An agora of theories is a proposal, not quite for a *method* but for a stage on which the encounter between alternate methods can be staged. The remaining question of media-theory concerns what we might want to produce. Every profession, every discipline, has at its core a specific good: shelter, justice, health, wealth. What is the *good* of a catholic debate about what connects us? Ultimately the goal must be to provide a place where these various goods can be contested. But the more urgent and specific task is to establish a place for that discussion. In the long term, a project worthy of open access engagement and the gifts of work it will demand would be to build a theatre where that drama can unfold. But in the interim, the media skills and knowledge we share collectively are exceptionally fit for debating its design. This is not a demand to abandon specialisation: specialisms have historically led us into the new through narrow gates. Pointing to the marginal and marginalised, the odd and the unique instance have constantly made us pause, rethink, and rewrite our understandings of history and the present. An apparently trivial observation about eyeline matches in classical Hollywood led Laura Mulvey [<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>] to overthrow everything we thought we

knew about how to study film. We are now at a point, however, when specialism defends itself for its own sake, as a value, as connoisseurship all too often framed in the nostalgic desire to regress to an imagined past of genteel appreciation and arcane disputes. Specialisms are not intrinsically valuable. Specialisms achieve value when they reveal a new potential in the stock of knowledge; because potential is power, the capacity to become otherwise, and therefore oriented to the future, not to the past.

The project of a collective media theory might then be to use the dialogue between our specialist objects and schools of thought to unleash the potential each of them has locked up inside its disciplinary firewalls. We may need disputation on the crises of the 17th century Neapolitan baroque as a sketchpad in which we can begin to draft models for the infrastructure of a public debate on the nature of the good and the good life. The debate that never happened between Habermas and Foucault [<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/critique-and-power>] might well have turned out as a dance of dinosaurs, but you have to regret that the apostle of the public sphere never confronted the architect of biopolitics. Or perhaps dead white men send too long a shadow over us anyway. And perhaps dialogue, as in face-to-face disputation between two people, is no longer possible or appropriate in the 21st century. Today, if there is to be any kind of democracy, any politics (if by politics we mean open debate about how we should live together), it will be mediated (the ecological principle implies that the debate be open to non-humans too; technological mediation makes it even more obvious that technologies and natural materials are already implicated). We are media specialists: we should discuss together what different media did, do or can provide to inform the enabling of debate in the 21st century. Popular drama or vanguard architecture? Queer affect studies or big data analysis? How do we end the habit of retreating into our homely circles of the like-minded? How do we create the grounds where disagreement is explicit and fruitful?

A journal has to be a collective enterprise of readers, writers and editors if it is going to live. To do that it needs a project. The excitement of OA is exactly that it opens up the grounds for collective discussion of what we mean by words like 'open' and 'access'. The closed circles of chat among the like-minded about Peircean semiotics or the beta coefficient prediction of social presence in online learning is useful in its

little arena, but if it is to contribute to something less abstruse it must escape its bubble. My own presumptions – such as that the idea of a marketplace of ideas is a self-contradictory insult – have to be up for challenge. Can I continue to dismiss schools that believe the purpose of media is to send messages from here to there, or to return profits, on the grounds that they serve either God or Mammon? Can I go on scoffing at the idea that media have impacts on society with a clear conscience? Or do my declarations that these lines of enquiry are uninteresting, like a student complaining that an event is boring, reveal my failure to discover what is of interest?

Media-theory is not single and it should not be bounded, least of all by its own volition. There should be no agreement that some objects and some modes of enquiry are off-limits, save those that discredit themselves through hatred that refuses dialogue. Media-theory is not a public sphere already defined by consensus to include this and exclude that. Media-theory should not emphasise one of its terms over the other: the most positivist analysis of media is a theory, and the most philosophical statement, by dint of being a statement, is always also a material occurrence. Media-theory does not exist. Any claim that it exists as a defined and circumscribed behaviour is a confession of its failure to model dissent. Media-theory is a project. Perhaps it is interminable. That would be about right, if the goal is not to determine but to enable. Communication is both the means and the goal, a communication which is, if I'm right, going to be rocky, virulent, and always at the brink of scholarly and professional fisticuffs. At least it wouldn't be boring. Only that kind of risk makes a project matter.

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