

Media

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Abstract All media begin as a potential in our bodies, expand into the public domain, creating a world – and finally end again in the body, as a way of being, a range of feeling, a belief system. Media theory studies this trajectory. For media theory, media have two limits. Media cannot, by definition, make contact with the extramedial (because, if they could, they would become intramedial). And when media are translated into software they lose their identity and become part of something beyond media theory.

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Media: General and Specific

Media are means of reaching others; that is the simplest definition. This universal conception of media defines the calls and songs of birds as media, the roaring of animals, even the pheromones female moths secrete to lure males and the ones beetles use to lead each other to sources of food. According to this definition, even the pollen of flowering plants is a medium, because it is a means by which flowers bridge the distance between them. In this general view the entire living world is one big information-processing system whose various parts continuously communicate to each other the states they are in and their responses to previously received messages. The universe itself is understood as a collection of media, for planets, stars and galaxies communicate with each other by means of gravity, light and other kinds of radiation.

'Media are extensions of our senses into the public domain' (Marshall McLuhan). This is the specific definition of media. Every medium amplifies the function of a particular sense – the lens and the webcam extend the range of action of the eye. At the same time, that medium numbs or 'amputates' the remaining senses, such as smell and touch. It's not just that we seldom smell what we see with the help of media. The reason the sound in the cinema is turned up so high is because we wouldn't hear the soundtrack otherwise, so concentrated are we on the overwhelming visual imagery our eyes must process. Media are extensions of elements of the body, of the organs devoted to perceiving, monitoring and regulating that body. The senses are the organs that call forth emotions in the body.

Alongside the externally oriented senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and sense of balance – we possess many senses inside our bodies. These register the states of various chemical and physical equilibria, such as levels of hormones, acidity and sugar levels. The internal senses make homeostasis possible in the internal environment; that is, the dynamic, physical and chemical balance that must be maintained to keep our cells and molecules active. If we include these internal senses in our definition of media, then narcotics and stimulants are also media, and so are medicines. If one continues down this road, one could see perfumes as media of smell, and salt and other flavour enhancers as media of taste.

A more common definition is: a medium is a technological or artificial extension of a bodily faculty. This concept of medium encompasses more than just the senses. Walking is not a sense, but a bicycle is a medium of transport, a technological device which extends the body's capacity for locomotion by means of wheels and handlebars. The message sent with a bicycle

is the cyclist's body. Since energy and matter are two manifestations of the same phenomenon, in this definition of media it makes no difference whether one is transmitting information on a wire or electromagnetic waves or sending things via a transport medium. Electric light is a medium, because it extends vision in time: it lets us see something for longer in what would otherwise have been the dark (for longer than a candle, and with a greater range). The same is true of glasses where age is concerned: glasses lengthen the active life of an intellectual (reading, writing, observing, teaching) by decades.

Spoken language is a phenomenon at the boundary of nature and technology. It is part of the body as well as an extension of that body into the public domain. Our power of speech enables us to reach others and be reached by others without leaving our bodies. The same goes for sign language and other forms of nonverbal communication. Unamplified – without loudspeaker or signal flags – these are not media, but bodily abilities. Media are means of amplifying input from the world within our bodies, but also, inversely, of expanding our bodies' potential for action in the world. With media, traffic is always two-way. This is true of all technology. On the one hand, technology allows us to get to know the world better or differently than we could without its support; on the other hand, it provides us with a means of intervening in that world. The simplest way of getting to know the world is always to reach out, change it, and see what happens.

Media and Modernism

Historically speaking, awareness of the medial nature of all human expression and perception was late in coming, somewhere at the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century. Impressionism and cubism in painting were among the first artistic movements to confront viewers with the fact that when they looked at a painting, they were seeing a painted piece of canvas, a construction dreamt up and executed by a painter. Regarded as a medium, a painting is no more than that: paint on canvas, set down as fields, lines and points. Paintings were no longer intended to create the illusion of representing something other than themselves, a space containing a person or a landscape, or else a representation of the painter's unique vision of these phenomena outside the painting.

A painting is not a natural representation of something else, something spatial with a third dimension reaching deep into the canvas. The painting is two-dimensional: its inside and outside, front and back, top and bottom and all the rest lie on a flat plane. The point is not to look at the canvas bit by bit; you must take in the whole thing at one glance. Then you will see, as if for the first time, that you are looking at a medium instead of a message, instead of a so-called representation of something in the 'real' world. That real world is an illusion in painting; only the painting itself is real, as a medium. After studying cubism Marshall McLuhan came up with his slogan, 'The medium is the message'. This statement proved applicable to all media.

Marshall McLuhan got the essence of his media theory from the cubists, who were among the first representatives of what became known as Modernism in art. Modernism is the will to be modern – that is, the will to connect to the latest media. According to McLuhan, the cubists linked their painting to the medium of film, which was still new at the beginning of the 20th century. All modernist 20th-century art – poetry, literature, sculpture, music, ballet, film, photography, video art, and so on – links the medium through which it manifests itself to a more modern medium, in the hope of discovering what is unique and irreplaceable about its own, older medium. Modernist art legitimizes itself not through building on an illustrious past, but through the special, authentic characteristics of the medium in which it is created. Modernist art is art that seeks to engage the medium itself – written language, clay, bronze, notes, movements, poses, pictures. Modernist artists try to get the medium to propagate a message no person ever would have hit on – an extra-human message, because it is purely medial. Modernist art is art that seeks to make its medium its message.

Media and the Extramedial

The sentence 'The medium is the message' is the core of media theory, but at the same time it is a joke, a distortion of the central thesis of information theory, which holds that communication occurs when a sender sends a message through a channel to a receiver, who then either responds or does not. Information theory and media theory both try to answer the question of what exactly is being transmitted or exchanged when we communicate and use media. According to information theory, this is a certain precisely quantifiable amount of data, diluted with a certain equally quantifiable amount of noise. Information is measurable regardless of the medium in which it is sent. According to media theory, there is much more going on in communication than just an exchange of information: the medium influences the sender as well as the receiver. Information theory pays no attention to how it does this. But every medium influences both poles of communication in its own characteristic way.

In the first place, the medium determines what information can and cannot be transmitted. In fact, most information sent through a medium says more about the characteristics of the medium itself than about anything else. This aspect of communication was expressed by McLuhan in the aphorism 'The medium is the message'. In the second place, the medium evokes in the sender as well as in the receiver a certain more or less definable environment – a mental space or sphere of interest in which users of the medium can understand each other because they share a way of seeing, pre-formed by the medium, while those unconnected to it have no clue what's being talked about. McLuhan summed up this aspect in another aphorism: 'The medium is the message'.

All media begin as a potential in our bodies, expand into the public domain, creating a world – and finally end again in the body, as a way of being, a range of feeling, a worldview, a belief system. We are our media. And because we are never the only ones using a medium, as media users we are always part of a crowd. With some media, this crowd appears literally, such as with lectures, concerts, theatrical performances or film. With others, it remains imaginary: we must imagine it as we use the medium. With television, the crowd appears in the form of ratings; with radio, in the form of listeners who phone in; with youth TV stations, as e-mailing or texting viewers; with newspapers, as circulation figures; on websites, in the page hit count. We read books alone, but it makes us part of a language community. In the media we are never alone.

Modernism tried to divest itself of the illusions that sprang from the traditional representational use of media. At the same time, Modernism gave rise to its own illusion when it claimed that media could only speak about themselves (and that what they had to say was brilliant, moving, profound, tragic, real). The modernist illusion called upon a scientific worldview in which reality consisted only of matter and energy. Anything else we believed we saw sprang from the imagination. This conception of scientific knowledge was Newtonian and, in that sense, antiquated, though the modernists embraced it blindly. The world consists not only of matter and energy but also of information. Information refers to the form in which matter and energy manifest themselves. A picture is an accumulation of matter or light in which something else can be discerned besides that matter or light, namely the thing that the image is depicting, referring to. This something else is information. Information is everything in an image that one knows could have looked some other way.

Every human creation refers to something else. Even music refers to more than the sounds that make it up; perhaps we should say that there is more at play in music than the instruments it is made with. If there were not, it would move no one. Music has a much more direct connection to the body than any image – it follows the rules and dialogues of feeling rather than those of reason, and it tells us more about the rhythmic and melodic passage of time than about the extent of space. Thus, words are groups of sounds or letters that refer to something other than the sounds and letters themselves – they refer to life, in us and outside us. This reference to life is not so much the meaning of the words as the reason we are willing to use them in the first place – willing to speak, or to read what another has written.

In every medium, there is something that touches the outside, the extramedial – that which the medium is about and yet is outside the medium's reach, though it can be evoked, suggested, extolled. The extramedial, by definition, cannot be represented with media; if it could, it would be intramedial. Yet the extramedial can only be experienced thanks to media; we feel its presence before we have understood anything of the meaning of a work. Some poems have it, as do some photographs, some music, some installations. Other art does not. Or might suddenly if one returns to it later. But only when the extramedial is there can we summon up the energy to study a photograph, savour and ponder a poem, give a piece of music our attention instead of letting it wash over us, or take up the challenge of engaging with an interactive installation.

Only after one has noticed the extramedial does one ask questions like: 'Why is this word here and not another?' or 'Why do those trees and bushes hang under the line of the horizon like that in this photograph?' or 'Why that hiccup in the melody, or that slightly too-short beat after that held note?' With skilfully made poetry, photography or music, we feel admiration for the creator's or performer's craft, but with 'really good' work, we begin to feel grateful for the existence of life itself. The meaning of sentences, images and sounds is secondary; the extramedial charge is always experienced first and transcends the experience of what we have seen or read, until . . . well, until what exactly? The extramedial is not matter, energy or information. It is a fourth element that is called forth by means of mediation.

Media theory cannot describe all of reality. Media-theoretical description finds its limits in the certainty that there is a domain outside the media which remains inaccessible to media and media theory. Acknowledging the extramedial will prevent media theory from developing the totalitarian tendency to try to explain everything, and thus to control and change it. Only our existence in the media can be controlled and changed; nothing else can. The media have their limits. Past those limits, even media theory can do nothing.

'The Media'

'The media' did not exist before the beginning of the 1980s. What did exist was the press on the one hand and public opinion on the other. The press encompassed all journalists, whether they wrote for daily or weekly papers, filmed footage for television or independent documentaries, or made recordings for radio. These reporters kept to a strict journalistic ethical code which said they should report current events as objectively as possible and influence those events as little as possible through their presence and reporting. Subjective interpretation and politically tinted opinions were reserved for editorial commentaries, opinion pages and current affairs programmes. There, journalists themselves as well as people involved in current events could give their readings of those events. From this position, 'opinion leaders' tried to influence public opinion, and this opinion – sometimes archaically designated 'the voice of the people' – was the only entity not directly involved that was allowed to influence the events that made the news.

The contrast between objective newsgathering and subjective or ideologically tinted propaganda proved to be unsustainable in the 1980s. When the TV cameras were brought into parliament buildings, MPs began behaving differently. Instead of making dull speeches and impassioned arguments, they began to deliver performances. As in any performing art, these were evaluated on how they came across to the audience. The validity of the arguments was pushed further and further into the background. The journalists could only conclude that reporting was equivalent to exerting influence. Ever since this discovery, whenever press conferences and other staged events are reproduced, images of the photographers, camera-persons and radio microphones involved in the reporting of the event are always shown. The press's image of its own product has become an integral part of the information presented. Journalism no longer considers itself a mirror of reality or the truth behind public opinion. News is a product which is manufactured, like any other, by means of a creative-industrial process. The value of the product depends on its speed, uniqueness and aesthetic qualities – in short, its topicality – and is proven by viewer ratings, or entertainment value. If an event is

to appear in the media – to become infotainment – it must meet the criteria of topicality and entertainment.

This development led to a different way of dealing with the press among people who for one reason or another wanted to get into the news. The fact that it was the presence of journalists that made an incident into a media hype necessitated a heightened awareness of how the performance would come across among those who caused that incident, whether it was an official opening, a protest demonstration or a public appearance by a politician, artist or musician. For example, while it had previously been said that NGOs – known as ‘action groups’ in the 1980s – should not use or provoke violence because it would turn public opinion against them, now the press and public opinion were experienced as a single block, known as ‘the media’: if you wanted to get into the media, a little violence or other conspicuous behaviour wasn’t a bad idea at all. While in the past the media had been used as a mouthpiece or megaphone to communicate one’s own small message to the masses, from now on the media themselves were the target at which actions were aimed, for the media and public opinion were indistinguishable.

‘The media’ is less and less a collection of machines and their operators – formerly known as journalists – and increasingly a mentality: namely, the realization that everything is recorded but only a few fragments will end up as items in news broadcasts, current affairs and entertainment shows, and magazines. To become an item, one must provide mediagenic images or provocative statements. It has also become commonplace for reporters to ask, ‘Can you sum up this issue (an award-winning novel, a fight between segments of the population in an urban neighbourhood, an unhappy childhood) in one sentence?’ The answer ‘No, it’s too complicated’ spells the end of the item. What was once seen as an independent press is now regarded by all sides in any social conflict as one of the weapons to use in fighting, discrediting, ‘criminalizing’ or even ‘demonizing’ (as it is called in newsspeak) each other. One no longer fights for a good cause; one stages one’s resistance so that the media will pay attention, not in order to stir the masses with their public opinion to resistance or revolution, but in order to have been in the media.

Media and ‘Situations’

The absolutization of the media in the 1980s led to a great media aversion in all those who remembered a time when journalists reported what happened rather than shaping ‘media events’. Cultural critics rediscovered the old Situationist manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle*, and observed with dismay that its prediction had come true: any event on earth would henceforth be found interesting only if it presented itself as a spectacle. In the original French, the word ‘spectacle’ actually means nothing more than ‘something that is merely visible’: spectacular television programmes such as game shows with lavish sets and dozens of extras were not a cause for concern for the Situationists. They were worried about the fact that all experiences involving the entire body, experiences in which one ‘lived directly’ – such as parties, drinking sprees and wanderings – were increasingly being displaced by experiences reserved for the eye alone (display windows, advertising, photographs, films, television).

The Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s invented methods of generating authentic, complete experiences that could not be represented in images. When these were successful, and a series of crazy incidents ended in a general party feeling, then, they said, a ‘situation’ had been created. The main methods for creating ‘situations’ were ‘dérive’ (wandering through unfamiliar cities to the point of trance) and ‘détournement’ (distorting texts and images to breathe new life into them). ‘Situations’, it turned out, could be bigger than the first rather lonely generation of Situationists had experienced. Every generation since has witnessed moments when a demonstration, concert or protest action suddenly turned into a ‘situation’ that later assumed legendary proportions. Examples are the May 1968 student protests in Paris that ended in rioting, the concert at Woodstock in 1969, the 1980 squatters’ riots in Amsterdam, Berlin and Zürich, and the anti-globalization ‘Battle of Seattle’ in December 1999. These events were reported in the media at length, but exactly what had happened to the

participants who created these situations was something it was impossible for the media to grasp.

For it could not be seen; it had to be experienced through participating oneself: the party (for this is how situations are experienced) was extramedial, fundamentally unimaginable. People who knew each other barely or not at all suddenly recognized each other as old friends and got together, instead of simply passing each other anonymously, as is usual in the city. They met and got down to work, with no need for lengthy discussions about the hows, whys and wherefores. Out of these situations or 'happenings' were born social movements that combined 'direct actions' (or in some cases, nothing more than illegal dance parties) with special behavioural codes, fashions and lifestyles. Every social movement of the last 20 or 30 years found itself confronted with the question of how it could maintain the 'real' or 'directly experienced' communality of the original event once the media had discovered it and turned it into spectacle.

New Media

The computer, so goes an oft-repeated proposition, remediates all preceding media – look around on a few websites and you will find not only written and printed texts, photographs, film and video, television, and security cameras (webcams), but also scanned paintings, drawings, etchings and so on. Through computer speakers one can listen to LPs, CDs, MP3s, radio programmes and film scores. One can send letters by email, and even telephone through the net. Once all media were moved to digital carriers, the computer became a metamedium, a repository in which a user can jump from medium to medium with the proverbial click of a mouse. But this is not so much a remediation of all old and new media as a hybridization, a merging of different kinds of media into a new entity. This unity is symbolized by the laptop and mobile phone, in which all media are brought together and become mobile, portable, playable and usable everywhere. How do the various media bear up under this hybridization? Can the separate elements still be recognized on the basis of their historic origins, or has something new been created? And to understand it, is a knowledge of history unnecessary, perhaps even a hindrance?

Excursion: TV

An earlier example of the hybridization of two media shows how much 'monomedia' change in such a merging. Television is an example of a medium that is mainly supposed to remediate older media but has become something completely different in doing so. We can, of course, see films, documentaries, plays, videos, photographs, illustrated radio programmes and telephone conversations on television. But we view all these remediated 'media' differently on television than we do in their original settings. A typical televisual form such as the news differentiates itself from the medium of video by means of live reports, which are designed to prove that there has been too little time to manipulate the image. Live broadcasts guarantee the cinematic truth of what we see, though it is not cinema since film is never live. Other televisual forms such as soaps and sitcoms are definitely not film either, although they are made according to cinematic principles. The difference between a series and a film is that one must watch a film from beginning to end to understand it, but one can start watching a television series at any point in any episode. A series is not a film in serial form: series consist of chains of ideas which neither drive each other nor cancel each other out, as they would in a movie, but merely alternate. The suspense of television lies in seeing what the next link will look like. Who did what in previous episodes is not important. The ideas speak for themselves.

On television one watches programmes: that is, one follows the programmes the characters act out. These can be banal – programmes of grouchy fathers and quiz contestants – or refined and complex – ones of metaphysically inclined special agents and confessed gambling addicts. TV programmes are often dependent on a situation: a wedding, a competition, a prison, a police station or a news situation such as a plane crash or a political conflict. The

only reality depicted in the television image is that of the programmes of the characters and the situations they find themselves in. Television does not show who they are, where they are going or who they will become, as photography, film and video respectively do. Every TV episode, whether it is of a soap or a current affairs show, shows in an instructive manner how programmes function somewhere and how they affect each other and how one can hold one's own in a particular environment. Television is not good at telling us why: why would one want to hold one's own? That is more of a task for literature and the movies. There are no people to be seen on television: we see only the conceptual structures within which they move. This allows the television image to be totally transparent and understandable while always keeping a distance and remaining strange. Television can at once bore us and fascinate us.

The purpose of television is to show that the viewer can enter any imaginable programme at any moment: as a fashion model or a mother, an artist or a manager, a child or a senior citizen. Anyone can make a television programme their own, while not everyone can become a film or pop star. And yet film stars on TV are nothing more than programmes themselves, whether they are acting in movies or appearing on talk shows. On talk shows they perform the movie star programme; in films shown on TV, the actor programme. The same is true of pop stars who appear in videos and interviews. If you are going to appear on television, you should ask yourself: which programme should I make of myself, and how? Show how you do whatever it is you have been invited to be on TV for, and make immediately clear by means of a tormented or sympathetic expression that there is something behind it (you need not explain what).

The fact that every TV season, as exceptions to prove the rule, there are one or two series about 'real people' (as real, that is, as the actors in a good movie), as opposed to programmes, caricatures and stereotypes, demonstrates that the present state of affairs is not really so bad. Too much reality would make television an unbearable medium, one you could watch for an hour a week at most. Documentary photography, which depicts a misery the viewer always knows has really taken place or is still going on, becomes depressing if you look at too much of it. If the audience wishes to engage enjoyably with a medium, a healthy dose of silliness is called for.

Digital Emulation

The point of media use is not to remediate something old into something new or to make something new reappear in something old, but to allow the old and the new to hybridize into something unprecedented, and then go a step further so that one must reorganize one's whole internal order in order to process the information streams, thereby becoming something unique and characteristic of oneself and the generation one is a part of. This notion brings us back to computers, and to the practice of emulation. Emulation is the translation of hardware into software. Emulation makes it possible to run not only every old and yet-to-be-developed PC program on the average computer, but also every version of Apple and Atari and their applications; everything for PlayStation, Nintendo, Vectrex, Gameboy; and the arcade and slot machine programs of the past, present and future – in short, all the hardware of every time and everything it ever was, is and will be capable of doing. Because the entire digital universe is made up of ones and zeros, it can be called forth on a single machine. The fact that there are different types of hardware is an expression of the economic boundaries between the different computer companies. These economic boundaries are a consequence not of the traits of the computer medium but of historical circumstances – from designers' ambitions to business people's need to earn money. Emulation is the translation of this accidental digital segmentation back into one universal code that can run on any hardware.

When emulation ruptures the artificial boundaries between hard and software companies it wipes out the economic and cultural history of the computer medium. Paradoxically enough, emulation is at the same time the only means computers have of safeguarding and unlocking their own history, what with one antique format after the other being lost. Emulating all the hardware and software of the past is the only way computer history can be written on the

computer itself. Social and financial reality outside the computer do not appear in this version of history, but everything computers themselves were ever capable of does. In emulating games, the post-historical generation of computer fans can preserve all its past experiences and trances, now and for ever. And this answers the question of whether the computer is something totally new or just a collection of remediated older media.

Beyond Media Theory

If it is true that even a computer's hardware can be converted into software, and all other 'media' remediated on computers are nothing more than software packages, then there is no longer any point in speaking of media when we talk about computers. Nor does 'new media' make sense, even if the word 'media' is used in the singular despite being a plural form. Anyone wishing to understand the digital universe need not try to discover what exactly is new about various applications, and which of their functions have existed before in analogue form: the language of new media is written not in words or pictures but in zeros and ones. Looking around the computer's digital universe, one sees hardware, software, networks, objects, environments, situations and spaces, but no media – for everything there communicates, and when everything is a means of communication, the word 'medium' loses its explanatory power. In the digital sphere, everything ultimately is or can be converted into software. History, too, is software – a network of databases along with a series of search engines. What the computer age needs is a unified software theory. That is beyond the reach of media theory.

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