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2. Media: One or Many?

'Medium' and 'media' are concepts that are routinely used but too seldom examined in media studies. As foundational concepts they are the air we breathe, part of that what is taken for granted in the field. And yet, as we know from human history, the more evident and acceptable a conception, concept or theory appears, the more strictly it has to be questioned and scrutinized.

The singular 'medium' and plural 'media' are tricky concepts, indeed. At the nominal level in media studies the plural noun 'media' is used more often than the singular 'medium'. In research practices, however, preference seems to be given to the singular, not the plural – to differences, that is, rather than to connections and similarities. While it is usual at the nominal level to speak of 'media' – and especially 'the media', of course, naming the field as a whole – it is equally common to put 'medium' first in what is actually done.

What do we speak about when we speak about 'medium' and 'media'? Do these two have actual references outside our conceptual systems? Or are these concepts performatives in the sense that they produce their referents? And if they are performatives, in what ways and with what effects do they produce their referents?

'Medium'

The word 'medium' has its roots in classical Latin and in its modern form has been in regular use in the English language from the 16th century. Then, 'medium' referred to middle, centre, midst, intermediate course and intermediary. Since the 17th century it has also had the sense of an intervening or intermediate agency or substance. As Raymond Williams writes in *Keywords*, three senses have converged in the word: '(i) the old general sense of intervening or intermediate agency or substance; (ii) the conscious technical sense, as in the distinction between print and sound and vision as media; (iii) the specialized capitalist sense, in which a newspaper or broadcasting service – something that already exists or can be planned – is seen as a medium for something else, such as advertising' (Williams 1976: s.v. 'media'). Hence three different semantic fields interconnect and cross-breed in this modern keyword: 'medium' as an autonomous *substance*, as a *technology* and as an *instrument*.

Common to these various meanings is that 'medium' is in them seen as a *thing*. What might from a different perspective be perceived as human practices, intercourses and relations, is conceptualized as something that exists as an autonomous entity. In other words, 'medium' is reified. As Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg (1965: 206-208) write, reification operates in society by bestowing ontological status on social roles and institutions: 'Roles are reified by detaching them from human intentionality and expressivity, and transforming them into an inevitable destiny for their bearers.' The practical human actions that constitute 'medium' are first represented as abstract (disconnected from their actual relations).¹ This abstraction is, then, converted into something allegedly concrete in the sense that the abstract category is taken to be something that exists on its own right.

The concept of 'medium' represents certain social and cultural practices, but in a peculiar way. The practices are pictured not as practices, but as autonomous substance, a technology or a tool. To be sure, it has to be added that numerous media scholars have for

a considerable time pointed out that such reified notions are highly problematic. These scholars have not, however, succeeded in changing commonsensical conceptions. As 'medium' is seen in such ways, it is all too easy to forget that what 'medium' does – 'mediation' – is an active relation that cannot be reduced to neutral transmission of messages (and much less, of course, to the substance/technology/instrument supposed as performing this), but includes complex social relations actively involved in the shaping of contents.

The concept of 'mediation' is certainly noteworthy here. It is true, as Raymond Williams (1977: 98) wrote, that 'all active relations between different kinds of being and consciousness are inevitably mediated, and this process is not a separable agency – a "medium" – but intrinsic to the properties of the related kinds.' Williams cited here Theodor Adorno who in *Thesen zur Kunstsoziologie* wrote: 'Mediation is in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought.' To Williams, then, 'mediation' indicated an active process – albeit one inherently objectified.

The prevailing commonsensical views of 'medium' and 'media' include strong abstracting and objectifying tendencies similar to dominant Western views of language. In these views, people are thought to have thoughts regardless of language. People are then thought to transmit these thoughts to each other as the thoughts become enunciated in the 'medium' of language. Hence the constitutive human feature becomes abstracted and objectified. Words 'are seen as objects, things, which men take up and arrange into particular forms to express or communicate information which, before this work in the "medium", they already possess' (Williams 1977: 159).

Autonomy or heteronomy?

What to do with 'medium' and 'media', then? To dump them completely is evidently out of question for researchers, since their usage is

ubiquitous and has a deep impact on our social, economic and cultural realities. Perhaps the only option, then, is to put them 'under erasure'. This would indicate that 'they are no longer serviceable – "good to think with" – in their originary and undeconstructed form', as Stuart Hall (1996: 1) puts it in relation to the concept of 'identity'. As with 'identity' for Hall, so also can 'medium' and 'media' be understood as concepts that 'have not been superseded dialectically', but which are still used because 'there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them.' Therefore it might well be that 'there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated' (ibid.). Yet, how to do this? How to detotalize and deconstruct 'medium' and 'media' by converting thing-like entities into active intercourse and relations?

One way to start making sense of this conceptual puzzle is to turn to a lesser known text by Raymond Williams, *Film History* (1983/1989). There, Williams asks: 'What is the history of film?' And he suggests that when answering this question, researchers 'are likely to pass lightly over "history" and put a defining emphasis on "film".' Film seems to be the noun that brings researchers to their subject, he states: 'The properties of the subject are taken as known [...] film and cinema are treated as unitary subjects.' For Williams, however, this is evidently flawed, since it involves an unquestioned assumption 'that there is a significant unitary subject, film, with reasonably evident common properties.' Such 'subject' for Williams cannot be assumed as 'independent and isolated processes and products' (ibid.: 133). For him, these are 'at best provisional intellectual identifications of significant areas of common life', but at worst 'draw hard lines around certain areas, cutting off the practical relations with other "areas".' What Williams questions here is the idea that there might be such a unitary subject as film. According to him, anyone wishing to understand the history of film has to take into account relations between film, theatre, literature, popular culture, technological change and urbanisation, et cetera.²

What Williams writes of film applies *mutatis mutandis* to other forms of media. To paraphrase Williams' argument, forms of media are not autonomous entities but *heteronomous* cultural practices that gain their identity not from themselves but from their relations to other practices. As a consequence, while studying various forms of media one should ask if there really is a significant unitary subject with reasonably evident properties. In studies of any media form one should not draw hard lines around certain types of texts, production practices, etc., cutting off relations with other types of texts, production practices, etc. On the contrary, a relevant understanding of any medium cannot be reached by concentrating only on that one medium. Such *media-centrism* would represent a peculiar formalism that fails to pay sufficient attention to what media forms actually do.

In his time, Williams was definitely outside of the mainstream with such ideas. Questioning the thing-like quality of film or any other media form was clearly against the media-based disciplinary logic of the post-war period. Today his way of thinking might, however, find more favourable response among researchers, not least due to the new multidisciplinary research areas of multimodality (see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001) and intermediality (Fornäs 2007, Lehtonen 2001). Another, perhaps much stronger factor contributing to changes in views concerning 'medium' and 'media' is the fact that institutions educating future journalists and other media functionaries can no longer rely on the possibility that their graduates will spend their whole careers producing (in) just one medium.

Multimodality and media

How do ideas concerning multimodality and intermediality question prevailing notions of what 'medium' and 'media' are? In order to outline an answer, let us start from the two simultaneous dimensions of

the word ‘multimodality’, i.e. *textual* and *cultural* multimodality (see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996).

The *textual* aspect of ‘multimodality’ is linked to the fact that language has always existed as just one mode in the totality of modes involved in the production of any text. To take an example, a spoken text is not just verbal but also visual, combining with ‘non-verbal’ modes of communication such as facial expression, gesture, posture and other forms of self-representation. And if one of the fundamental symbolic forms – speech – is always already multimodal, then multimodality must also cover the more complex symbolic forms developed on the basis of and combining speech, writing, sound and image.

The second dimension of ‘multimodality’, that of *cultural* multimodality, refers to the fact that all known human societies have used a variety of modes of representation. Cultures are never constructed by relying solely on one form of representation. Even the so-called ‘oral’ societies had other symbolic forms than speech at their disposal.

Both textual and cultural multimodality have the potential to make researchers more sensitive towards the specificities of various symbolic forms and their mutual interdependence. Each of the symbolic forms used by human cultures has different representational potentials and limitations. These can be called ‘affordances’, things that a certain mode can and cannot do (cf. Gibson 1986). This is also connected to the fact that some things are more easily communicated in some modes than others.

Hence, when we translate between modes (e.g. make a film adaptation of a novel), we have to add something that was not there but we also necessarily take something away from what the first mode included but cannot be represented in the second. We can, for instance, say or write that the popularity of President Obama has increased or decreased, but it would be immensely difficult to communicate this in instrumental music. Furthermore, each symbolic mode has specific social valuations in particular social contexts. This, in turn, has been one of the main obstacles in developing theories concerning multimodality. In our culture, most theories of symbols and signs are

still based on linguistics and concentrate mostly on the written word, the most highly valued symbolic form of Western modernity. In spite of, for example, vivid research on visual forms of signification, there still is not the rich theorisation on the varying possibilities and limits of other symbolic and media forms that there is on the verbal. Even less is there work on what happens when words, pictures and voices are combined. To give just one example, in film studies the study of sound is relatively new and still largely marginal. Even less central is the study of how the visual and auditory elements of film narration come together to produce meanings. These different modes are, finally, not autonomous communicational resources in a culture, nor are they deployed separately, either in representation or in communication; rather, they intermesh and interact at all times.³

Intermediality and media

The other key concept here, ‘intermediality’, refers to intertextuality transgressing media borders. ‘Intermediality’ characterises the formation of meanings in multimodal cultural spaces. Intermediality, then, is about the relationships between always already multimodal symbolic modes in always already multimodal cultures.

The notion of intertextuality that is the footing for notions concerning intermediality supposes that all texts are produced and interpreted in relation to other texts and the textual knowledges possessed by the producers and the interpreters. The idea of intermediality then expands this by emphasising how intertextuality is not confined to internal intertextual relationships of just one medium. The same genres, character types, plot patterns, themes and motifs and suchlike are used in, say, novels, movies, cartoons and computer games. The same celebrities circulate in tabloids and television programs.

The term ‘intermediality’ is, then, a healthy reminder of the fact that different forms of representation cannot be separated from each

other, either on the level of individual consciousness or on the level of culture as a whole. On the contrary, they have an effect on one another at all times. Forms of representation in use at any given time form a certain network or field that is constructed from mutual differences and similarities.

If anything, the ideas of multimodality and intermediality call into question the notion of seeing media practices as autonomous. These ideas – of textual multimodality (all modes of representation are themselves multimodal, i.e., they consist of more than one mode of representation), cultural multimodality (cultures always use more than one mode of representation) and intermediality (the same contents circulate in various media forms transgressing their borders and becoming translated from one form to another) – all question modern notions of identities of texts and media practices. In the light of these concepts and conceptions, texts and media practices are not autonomous and full in their own terms. Instead, they are heteronomous, that is, dependent on forms and contents and signs and significations and products and practices and texts and sub-texts and so on that are not derived from their ‘proper’ areas. If no media text or form ever exists or has existed alone or independently, we cannot successfully study any media form independently of other media forms.⁴

Media as practices

The ideas of multimodality and intermediality have been developed in conditions of late modern cultures saturated with numerous hybridities. As the cultural realities of the day are increasingly characterized by impure cross-breeds, it becomes problematic to cling to such disciplinary traditions characterised by the modernist drive towards purity. All this would seem to favour a rejection of the monomodal era in which the academic disciplines were usually limited to just one form of media. It would seem that in the current multimodal media

landscapes, such multiple fields of research and teaching as communication and media studies cannot consist solely of researchers adhering to just one medium at a time. Instead, in order to understand what is going on, it would seem necessary in these fields to look also at the simultaneity and interaction of different media forms.

As a consequence, in, say, television studies, it might become common to examine the relations between television and newspapers, drama, radio, film and computers. There would be no reason to draw hard lines around certain types of texts, cutting off relations with other types of texts. In the contemporary world a relevant understanding of any medium would seem to entail detecting the relations of that medium and other media. Instead of media-centrism, representing a peculiar formalism, greater attention should be paid to what media forms actually do, that is, what kinds of practices they are.

Differences and similarities

In addition to raising relevant new research questions, the idea of multimodality also calls into question traditional conceptions of 'medium'. The singular term, 'medium', stresses the specificity of each medium, foregrounding *differences* between different media forms. The formally plural but virtually singular 'media' hints at the important dimensions of *similarities* and *interactions* among different media forms. Yet these dimensions are only seldom made explicit in media and communication studies.

Multimodality as a new trans-disciplinary research field has become visible in studies of, for example, multimedia, the visual forms of culture, media convergence and cross-media products (Smith 1991, 1993, 1996, Walker 1987, 1994). The idea of multimodality is a challenge for the existing disciplinary and other borders in all studies concerning human symbolic forms. The ascent of questions concerning multimodality into the academic agenda seems to make topical

the question of the extent to which it is possible to get a grip on late modern culture on the basis of the prevailing disciplinary division based on the separation of different symbolic, art and media forms.

In academic studies, questions concerning cultural values and cultural power are always present, regardless of whether they are articulated explicitly or not. The matter of multimodality thus raises questions concerning values, implicit and explicit, in the studies of arts and the media. Do we prioritise the printed word over other symbolic and media forms? Do we organise academic structures along the monomodal lines, giving distinctions between various forms of arts and media priority over similarities, overlappings and mutual influences? While doing so, for what kind of future and with what kind of facilities, abilities and propensities do we prepare our students?

Differentiation or convergence of academic fields?

All this refers us toward a need to create new interdisciplinary spaces where questions concerning multimodality can be properly addressed. Academic disciplines are linked to the professions they study and educate functionaries for. Perhaps the stress on the singular 'medium' over plural 'media' has its roots in the pressures of professional training in the academic institutions. The question, then, is: Can people be trained in the future on a monomodal basis? How would the discipline that would take multimodality seriously imagine the future of what it might study and train its functionaries for?

And here, we come across another puzzling paradox. The hybridization of media has not led in the academic world to increasing hybridization, transgressions and convergences of media studies. Instead, it has led into a series of new splits. The emergence of new media forms has time and again led to the emergence of new academic sub-fields to match. Thus, after communication and literary studies had secured their positions during the first half of the 20th century, did

other fields such as film studies, television studies and digital media studies gain a foothold in academia.

It is, of course, possible to see disciplines simply as necessary means for universities to classify the reality studied, as methods to produce controlled diversity in order to grasp the world. Such a view would, however, be naïve in bypassing the fact that disciplines are historically and discursively formed, that they have a firm connection to the cultures and ways of thought and action they intend to analyse, and that they hence also produce and reproduce certain power relations (see Lehtonen 2009).

In here it is vital to notice that the formalistic and reifying notions concerning 'medium' and 'media' have had a substantial influence in the development of modern academic divisions of labour. Do we not have specific disciplines for all major forms of expression, with folklore and speech communication studying oral cultures and practices, communication and literary studies examining printed texts, art history investigating still images such as paintings, graphics and photographs, with film and television studies considering moving images and the sounds connected to them while musicology looks at auditory forms other than speech?

'Medium' and 'media' are not, of course, the only principles structuring the modern disciplines and their divisions of labour. As is well known, modernity is characterized by increasing universal differentiation 'between state, market and lifeworld, between individual and society, between spheres like art, science, religion and politics, and emotion or production and reproduction' (Fornäs 1995: 31). It is possible to see the modern disciplinary system as a consequence and expression of this universal differentiation. Hence the disciplinary divisions are marked both by the notions of differentiating socio-cultural spheres and the reifying notions of 'medium' and 'media'. As a result, the disciplines studying the 'factual' media forms are seen as a part of the social sciences, whereas the disciplines studying the 'fictive' forms of media are thought to belong to the humanities.

It may not be a coincidence that such new research areas as media studies or media culture have, at least in Finland, emerged in intersections of social sciences and humanities. 'Media Studies' was established at the University of Turku in the late 1980s (first as 'Film and Television Studies') by a crop of humanists educated in literary studies. When 'Film and Television Studies' merged with a tiny local subject called 'Communication Studies', 'Media Studies' was born. 'Media Culture' originated with a clutch of communication and literary scholars in the early 1990s at the University of Tampere (first as 'Audiovisual Culture', then 'Audiovisual Media Culture' and, from the early 2000s, as 'Media Culture').

Histories and names may alter, but the basic idea remains the same: uniting explorations of social structures and humanistic textual analysis. The result has been the formation of such interdisciplinary areas where the starting point is not any one single medium (media form), but rather the contemporary media landscape in all its diversity. This, in turn, has led to a strong emphasis on contexts of media and media texts, especially the contexts of media usage. As a result, Media Studies at the University of Turku and Media Culture at the University of Tampere are hard to see as traditional academic disciplines with distinct boundaries and profiles. Instead, both are multidisciplinary areas of research and teaching.⁵

The obvious question, then, is: Instead of differences between various media forms, why not adopt as the foundation of disciplinary division *signification as a general human (material and social) process*? This would, no doubt, lead into a total rethinking of present disciplinary systems, including convergences and fusions as well as drawing new boundaries. That the idea is not totally utopian might be evident from the fact that such a pursuit already has a name: 'cultural studies'.

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Endnotes

1. Here it is good to keep in mind that the word 'abstraction' means literally 'to draw something out from something'.
2. In *Drama in a Dramatized Society* (1974/1983) Williams makes similar points relative to theatre, writing that the 'room on the stage' has 'dissolved'.
3. Furthermore, various symbolic and media forms have in specific contexts various 'modalities', i.e. various truth-values. This version of the term 'modality' comes from linguistics and refers to the truth-value and plausibility of utterances (see e.g. Halliday 1970/2005). In linguistics, modality is linked, for example, to such auxiliary verbs as 'can', 'must' and 'may' and adjectives like 'possible', 'probable' and 'certain'. Such ideas can then be extended also to other symbolic forms. We are, for example, inclined to think that photographs do not 'lie' and that a 'report' is more true to life than a 'story'. Such modalities are social, based on shared notions concerning reality and ways of symbolizing it.
4. From this viewpoint the term 'intermediality' may appear inadequate, since the prefix 'inter' can be thought to suggest that there are independent forms of media that then enter as autonomous entities into mutual relations. Perhaps the term 'transmediality' would therefore be an even better to portray the landscape outlined here.
5. There are also several mass communication scholars who believe that mass communication studies are not a traditional discipline but a multidisciplinary area (see e.g. Pietilä 2005).