

Alejandro Melero

Introduction to Media Studies



# Topic 1. Introduction to Media Studies

Alejandro Melero, 2015

## **Contents:**

- 1.1. What is media? What is communication?**
- 1.2. The disciplines of Media Studies.**
- 1.3. The relevance of Media in our lives.**

## 1.1. What is media? What is communication?

This course is an introduction to the study of Media. Students of this course will probably expect to work in the media, in a future, or maybe they are already working on it, or have done it and want to know more. Wherever and whichever context students are coming from, this first section of the course invites them to re-think what Media is. We all know Media is present everywhere in our lives, and there is very likely not one single day in which the media does not affect us. Even if we are on holidays, or in the remotest corner of the world, there will possibly be some kind of interaction with the media or, at least, the possibility of it.

That fact serves as a proof of the relevance of Media. But we have not provided a definition of what Media is. Admittedly, it is not easy to phrase, as in a dictionary, what such a huge phenomenon is, possibly because of the very magnitude and scope of the media in the contemporary world. One approach to find a definition for the term 'Media' is by comparing it with another term with which it is usually conflated: Communication. Thus, a definition and comparison between them could be like this:

**Media:** (the plural of "Medium") refers to the means of communication that reach or can reach a vast number of people. Examples of media are: television, cinema, newspaper, radio, internet...

**Communication:** there is a double (at least) definition for Communication.

- 1) the process by which an amount of information is exchanged between individuals through a common and previously agreed system of symbols, signs, or behaviour.
- 2) a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (i. e., encode-decode) information but also create and share meaning.

These definitions make the connection between Media and Communication very recognisable. Media IS communication. However, communication is a much bigger experience than media; communication is an essential part of the human experience. Having said that, the relevance of Media in the contemporary human experience is so big that some people could argue that Communication is now dependent upon Media.

There are three types of communication, and knowing them will be useful to clarify the relevance of Media in contemporary processes of communication. These types are:

1. Interpersonal communication: as old as the human species, IC makes the relationship between individuals possible. Its main tools are the possibilities of the body to act and speak. It makes use of the breathing organs, the larynx, vocal chords and resonant cavities, which are those that amplify the sound. IC also requires the vocal organs for the differentiation of speech sounds. Therefore, technical means such as microphones and cameras, are extensions of the body's mechanisms of voice and eyes.

2. Massive communication: inexistent until the 20th century (?), it allows to disclose ideas and information to large groups of people. One may wonder if Massive communication is as new as some people argue. The printing press, which is now five hundred centuries old, can be considered as the first form of massive communication.
3. Telecommunication: the main characteristic of Telecommunication is that it is INTERACTIVE and is usually performed in distant places. Its aim is to bring people together, no matter space or time. INTERNET is the means of communication par excellence. Its origin can be found in the 1960s, in the USA.

The film *The terminal* (Steven Spielberg) offers a very nice example of the complexities of the different processes of communication. At the very beginning, we can see how the main character, played by Tom Hanks, is trapped on the airport. The authorities try to communicate with him, but his English is very poor a number of confusions follow. They are very funny for the spectators, despite (or, rather, because of) the fact that the characters are frustrated and going through a difficult moment. The problem can be reduced to this: they do not share the same codes and, therefore, communication is not possible amongst them. And it is not just the inability to speak the same languages (in this case, English), but many other codes they do not share, such as body movement and languages.

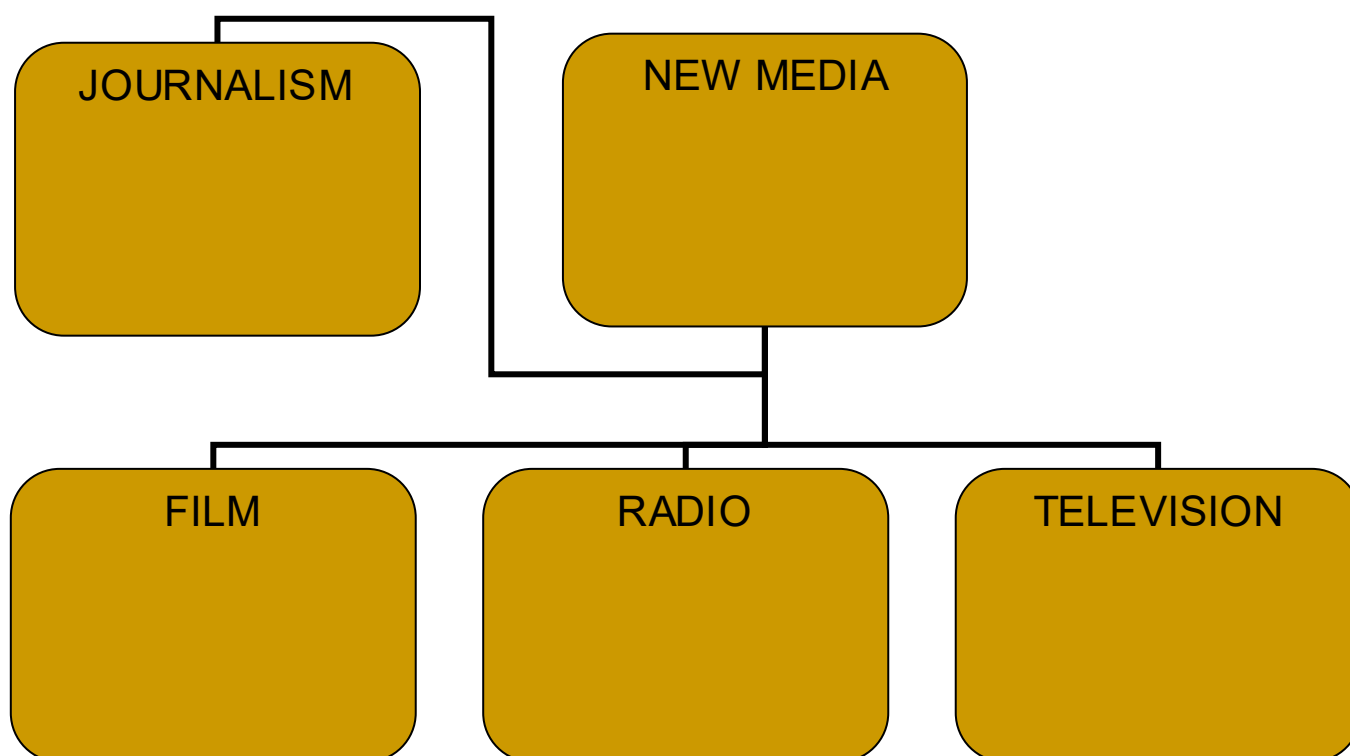
It is a very good film and is easy to find. In the following link you can see the clip discussed above:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOn3xbI6Vyk>

## 1.2. The disciplines of Media Studies.

If Communication is so fundamental to the human experience, and Media plays such an important role in the contemporary processes of Communications, it is no wonder that there is the need for the creation of a discipline to study Media. That discipline is called Media Studies and it aims to expand, transmit, research, preserve and further the knowledge of media processes.

Media Studies is an immense field which contains other (also, immense) fields within. The following graphic illustrates, albeit succinctly, the most important disciplines of Media Studies, and the connection between them.



These are the disciplines that the students of Media and Communication Studies will be familiar with. There is now a long tradition in the study of all of them, even the newest ones. That means that there is a lot of bibliography, conferences, experts, scholarship... for all of them. Universities all over the world teach Media Studies, and this has made the discipline become rich, as the dialogue amongst scholars of different cultures and countries is fluid, vivid and passionate.

It is one of the most popular degrees in many countries. In most cases, even if the student becomes an expert in one of the disciplines (for instance, let us imagine that this particular student is interested in Radio Studies because she has always wanted to work as a radio host), it is required that she knows the others. If we take University Carlos III as our example and look at the contents of the Bachelor Degree in Media Studies, we can see that there are several courses for Radio Studies (these will surely be the most interesting ones for this imaginary student), Film Studies, Television Studies and New Media Studies. There also more

general courses that are necessary for furthering the knowledge of the students in aspects that are not solely part of Media Studies, but necessary nonetheless (for instance, Language or Economy: how could our imaginary student be a good radio host with a poor knowledge of language or business and employment strategies?).

Thus, this imaginary student, no matter how fascinated by the courses on radio she would be, would have to learn about scriptwriting for television and cinema, the history of the media in our country and the rest of the world, the different models of business corporations in the contemporary media, the techniques for documentary writing and filmmaking, the legacy of old and classic film in contemporary narratives... to name but a few. It goes without saying that the connections between these subjects and the dream-job of being a radio host. Even if they do not look strictly connected, students are invited to think of useful they would be to this imaginary student in her future career, and then think of other professions (maybe, the student's own dream job), and do the same exercise.

## 1.3. The relevance of Media in our lives.

Everyone is able to think of the many ways in which Media determines our daily lives, on so many different levels. However, a professional of the Media must be beyond simple assumptions and consider the ethical, professional and ideological dimensions of these implications. Before going into that, let us think of different answers for the following questions (let us try to think of precise answers, with as many examples as possible):

1. How does Media affect and alter our language?
2. How does Media affect our health? What about the way we eat, do sports'?
3. How does Media determine our social relations? What about friendship today as compared to what it used to be a few decades or years ago?
4. How does Media interfere in family relations? What are the different uses of the Media depending on age and family status (children, the elderly...)?
5. Can you think of other questions that would be relevant to start a debate on the relevance of Media in our lives?

In Topic 6 of our course, more will be said about how New Media is determining most of our daily routines, to an extent that is sometimes even difficult to assimilate. For now, let us pay attention to the following facts, which should be seen as a starting point for future debates on media and the consequences of being a professional in a field with so much importance in our world.

### 1.3.1. Everyone experiences the Media, but only a few work on it.

The implications of this statement are many. To begin with, the professional of the Media will have to learn to live with the fact that everyone has an opinion on the Media. This does not apply to all professions, but does happen a lot to people who work on television, for instance. If you become a scriptwriter, you must be prepared to listen to criticisms coming from all sorts of people. Again, this does not happen to all professionals.

### 1.3.2. The Media can potentially reach thousands.

Again, this does not apply to all works. The most important consequence of this fact is that there are some very strong ETHICAL implications. What the scriptwriter writes, the director directs, the producer produces, the cameraman photographs... will be there for millions to see, now and maybe forever. This is a responsibility not taken by other professionals. People who work in the Media must be accountable for what they do, and aware of the legal and moral implications of the products they show to the world.

### 1.3.3. All cultures around the world consume some kind of Media.

This means that you are not working alone. If you work on the media, you must pay attention to what other people in your own position are doing all over the world. The Media world is full of feedbacks, and having access to them is not difficult at all.

Likewise, working in the Media can sometimes make one feel under the pressure of making one's product be of international relevance or success. Rather

than looking at the negative aspects of this, it is better to learn from what other people are doing abroad, and to see what you can do within your local or national possibilities.

**1.3.4. The Media is changeable and mutable, but also full of longevity.**

It is said that nothing dies as soon as a newspaper, but it is also true that researchers all over the world look for old newspapers as sources of inspiration and knowledge. The Media tends to be ephemeral, by its very nature. Very often, you will find that you invest a lot of energy in a project that, once is done, is left behind in order to start a new one. Paradoxically, as projects go by, you will see that some issues or characteristics of your work come back, or are repeated now and then. This is what we can call style, or signature, and is the proof that the work in the Media is not comparable to a newspaper which becomes a piece of dirty paper twenty four hours after leaving the printing press.

Moreover, the new formats make media products endure in time, and even become exponentially 'immortal'. The DVD is meant to last hundreds of years, and many of the images and sounds that are spread all over the internet could be there forever. You must be now familiar with this tendency: this has some good implications, and some bad ones. But there are things to learn from this too: try not to do something you do not think you will be proud of, as it can be there forever!