

Media & Materiality

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Cultures need media for the transmission of meanings, norms and values in time and space. Without media, cultures could not exist, and therefore: “Cultural studies focus on media in their historical context that communicate culture, create memory and shape how we perceive the world”¹ – and how we act upon it.

The first of such media is the spoken word; here, transmission is limited to no more than a few hundred people, and every articulated word vanishes as soon as it is uttered. In such a context, most cultures rely on specialized narrators and rituals of repetition to pass on knowledge and rules within the community.² However, almost every culture we know of has attempted to create more lasting means of recording, storing and transmitting meaning (or else we would know little about them today). From Stone Age cave paintings to the Golden Fleece of ancient Greece, from Celtic belt-plates to the totem poles of Canada’s First Nations, various means of materializing what is valued in a community have been created throughout time.

One of the most important means to widen one’s reach is writing: the written word lasts for thousands of years and is able to travel all around the globe. In a similar way, paintings on canvas (instead of cave walls) make images more mobile. However, writing and painting are still limited as to how many people can be reached; the production of a manuscript or an oil painting is a laborious process, only a limited number of people can read a book or look at a painting at the same moment – and passing it on takes time. The printing press and the photographic apparatus have significantly sped up the process of reproduction enabling the technological duplication of first the word, and then the image. Film and phonograph have made it possible also to record, store and transmit moving images, speech and music. Television and the internet have brought words, moving images and sounds into almost every UK and US household. Your tweet can now circle the globe within milliseconds, and reach an audience of hundreds of millions (at least if you’re Justin Bieber or Katy Perry).

When we discussed semiotics (or semiology) in this introductory course, we called the material side of the sign, that which is perceivable through the senses, the ‘signifier’. However, while we were discussing the creation and effect of meaning in great detail, we in fact gave little attention to the signifier. Does it matter how exactly the sign materializes, how exactly it sounds or looks like? Does it matter whether I say ‘Brit-ish’, ‘Bri-äsh’ or ‘BRRRitish’? Whether I write ‘British’, ‘BRITISH’ or ‘*British*’? No, most would say, the signifier should not matter much at all; it is no more than a crutch, a supplement, an arbitrary means to get to the all-important meaning. Its role is to refer to something other than itself, and not to attract attention.

Such thinking is the basis for what I would like to call the *UPS model of communication*, which claims that packaging is irrelevant and that content exists independent of its carrier. Here, media simply deliver messages like the United Parcel Service (UPS) delivers packages:

The theory’s diagram of information transmission appears in almost every communication textbook. Over the years, millions of students have been exposed to the one-way flowchart that makes information seem like a commodity that is packaged, picked up by UPS, then carried through noisy city streets, delivered to its destination, and finally unwrapped relatively intact.³

What is this supposed to mean? Think of a novel that has been published with different covers over time, in different colors and maybe with different images on it. Your teacher asks you to read the novel in order to then discuss it in class. When it comes to the discussion and your teacher asks you what you think, you say: “Well, you’re all talking about the green book, mine was yellow, so I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing, and therefore I better say nothing.” Or: “Well, you’re all talking about a text that was set in Garamond, mine was set in Times New Roman, so I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing.” What would your teacher answer? “No! I don’t care what your book looks like from the outside, or what typeface was used to print it: we’re all discussing the same novel and you better stop looking for excuses! Tell me about the content, now!”

Indeed, this is exactly what makes media special, that they can produce the same novel to different readers over and over again: “Media make it possible that not just something similar, but exactly the same thing can be

produced in different places and at different times”.⁴ It would in fact be difficult to organize English lessons in a way that everyone uses the exact same copy of a book in order to read the same novel. That we might think different about a novel is a consequence of how we *interpret* the content, not how we *perceive* the materiality of the medium:

The medium ‘book’ makes it possible that the same novel can be read at different times and in different places; it is important that it is *the same novel* which is read by different readers in different ways, which can be interpreted and understood in so many different ways at different times. No one would propose in earnest that only those have read *the same novel* who actually held *the very same copy of the book* in their hands.⁵

In fact, there seems to be a certain necessity to forget about media when you’re concentrating on the message. When you’re immersed in the Battle of Winterfell or absorbed by the press and gegenpress of ManCity and Liverpool FC, you will probably think little about Ultra HD, bandwidth and the modalities of your Sky, DAZN or Netflix subscription. For media to do their job as messengers, they have to disappear, become invisible; otherwise, they would disrupt the experience.⁶

But does it really not matter *at all* what material form is used to make meaning perceivable through the senses? While the argument might be convincing (at least at first sight) when we talk about books, the situation becomes more complex when we talk about movies, for example. Does it really not matter whether you watch a film on your smartphone, or in a modern multiplex cinema, does it matter whether you have 8K UHD and Dolby Atmos, or just watch the movie on your parent’s old TV set? Do you really watch the same film regardless whether you sit on the train with your AirPods in, or whether you’re getting showered with popcorn from the crowd in a movie theatre? Does it matter whether you read this text on your smartphone, or whether you hold a print-out in your hands? Does it matter whether you tell someone “I love you!” face-to-face, or whether you send a text message with the same words (and a couple of smileys)?

When Saussure spoke about the human language and the arbitrary nature of the sign, he was thinking more about language as an abstract system than about language in actual use. If we look more closely at the actual practical activity of human communication, we might understand that it

not only involves *symbolic* words, but also body language as well as vocal tones and timbres. The latter might even be the more important bit, as Gregory Bateson, the American anthropologist, suggests: “If you say to a girl, ‘I love you,’ she is likely to pay more attention to the accompanying kinesics and paralinguistics than to the words themselves”.⁷ While words can easily deceive, a shaky voice and slumped shoulders are often more revealing. In short, it is not only *what we say* that matters, but *how we say it*. It is the whole performance that counts.

The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan finally turned the traditional thinking about media on its head. Instead of discarding the material side of the sign as wholly exterior to meaning, he claimed instead that “the medium is the *message*”.⁸ For him, it is more important *that we read*, rather than *what we read*; it is more important that we watch TV, rather than which program; it is more important that we speak to each other face-to-face, rather than what we talk about. For him, the materiality of the packaging becomes more important than the content. Funnily enough, although this claim is completely opposite to the claim we made before, it appears to be as much part of common sense as the belief that it’s all about the message rather than the bottle. Strange, eh?

I guess that many of us have heard their parents demand that we stop watching TV (or play on our smartphones or playstations) and start reading a book instead. For some reason, ‘the book’ rather than a specific content, a specific story or argument, is thought to be better for us than television, independent of what, exactly, we are watching. McLuhan and other media theorists developed some far-reaching theories about this. In fact, McLuhan described the world that began to end in the twentieth century as the Gutenberg galaxy, taking the invention of the printing press as the single defining feature of modern society. “Media determine our situation”, the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler seconded.⁹

While a society dominated by oral communication is defined by performance and collective experience, by a lively interaction between speaker and audience, by ritual formula and narrative schemata, but also by improvisation and variation, the world of print is defined by authors and readers who do not see and know each other, by individual rather than collective experience, by a fixed wording that allows for imaginative interpretations. While oral cultures are dominated by community and participation, text cultures are apparently dominated by individuality and distance.¹⁰

For Cultural Studies, however, the “technological determinism” associated with McLuhan “is an untenable notion because it substitutes for real social, political and economic intention”.¹¹ That doesn’t mean that Cultural Studies thinks humans can simply use media in every way they want to. Instead, Cultural Studies thinks of the relation between media and society

as a process in which real determining factors – the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups – set limits and exert pressures (...).¹²

Thus, Cultural Studies agrees with McLuhan that meaning does not exist independent of a carrier, and that packaging affects recipients, too – but Cultural Studies still finds it important to analyze content, as well, and the exact way in which it is influenced by a specific medium. For that, we have to think of media not just as technologies, but as technologies within specific social, political and economic circumstances. It is in this sense that we can say that media perform their duty as messengers not without asking a price for it: by materializing meaning, by inserting it thereby into a technological, economic and political grid, media’s performance of meaning leaves its own traces.

Highlighting the importance of media and their materiality takes meaning away from the lofty sphere of immaterial ideas and emphasizes “that the process of articulation is necessarily also a *material* process, and that the sign itself becomes part of a (socially created) physical and material world”.¹³ In the words of Raymond Williams: “Signification, the social creation of meaning through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity”.¹⁴ What Cultural Studies is interested in are the specificities of material cultural production within a capitalist society.

When engaging with the study of television, as one of the central media of the twentieth century, Stuart Hall begins with advocating to “adapt a semiotic perspective”, claiming that “we must recognize that the symbolic form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange”. The TV is not merely a window to reality; rather, it presents carefully constructed meanings. However, it was important for Hall to emphasize that although the analysis of meaning is important, we must simultaneously pay attention to the socio-technological factors at work in the production, distribution and

consumption of meaning. Without considering the “technical infrastructure” of media, the “structures of production” in which they are embedded and the “frameworks of knowledge” involved in encoding and decoding meaning, no analysis could be complete, Hall insists.¹⁵

The semiotic approach is central to understanding that media produce reality, rather than simply record it; media are constitutive, creative. In order to be able to transmit a real-world event, the event has first of all to be translated into signs which can then be transported; the message has to be *encoded* before an audience can *decode* it. The use of different forms of signs, however, is determined by the use of different media; printing, radio and television provide for the transmission of certain, specific sign forms: “The raw historical event cannot in that form be transmitted by, say, a television news-cast. It can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual language”.¹⁶

Although the specific *technology* of media determines whether they can transmit moving or still images, sounds or words, there is a whole *apparatus* at work in creating a television newscast, for example, a network of human, technological, organizational and legal infrastructures that determine the usage of a determining technology: reporters, camera operators, sound engineers, editors and sub-editors, directors, but also cameras, tapes, editing tables and television towers, as well as broadcast stations, licenses and copyrights.

Within this complex network of production, the message is constructed in cooperation with the various actors involved and the knowledge and ideas they bring to the table:

the production process is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience etc. frame the passage of the programme through this production structure.¹⁷

However, Cultural Studies not only emphasizes the agency of humans, institutions and organizations, it also recognizes the specific limitations and affordances of media technologies. As Hall asserts, the “televisual sign is a peculiarly complex one”:

It is a visual sign with strong, supplementary aural-verbal support. It is one of the iconic signs, in Peirce's sense, in that, whereas the form of the written sign is arbitrary in relation to its signified, the iconic sign reproduces certain elements of the signified in the form of the signifier. As Peirce says, it 'possesses some of the properties of the thing or object represented'.¹⁸

In fact, the peculiar mixture of iconic image-signs, indexical film-signs and arbitrary text-signs defines television, allowing a 'naturalization' of its message, a realism that extends from the image to the word. It is difficult to deny what you see in the endless flow of television signals; in this sense, television creates a shared reality. It is Cultural Studies' task to reveal the made-ness of this shared reality.

In place of a theory of media, Cultural Studies thus proposes a practical approach that one might call a *mediology*: a synthesis and critique of such media theories as discussed above that opens up a wider framework of mediation by focusing on social, political, and economic institutions of transmission and the cultural embeddedness of all technologies. Rather than analyzing either the medium or the message, mediology suggests studying the "historical milieu of transmission" and "the socialized operators of transmission". What determines the *effects* of a mediated message is neither material technology as such, nor the ideal meaning of a message, but the *act* of transmission: the "networks of appropriators, official guarantors of reputations, regulators, go-betweeners or middle-men". This holds for television and the internet as much as it does for printing, "with its editor-booksellers, retailers, educators, librarians, organizers of reading rooms, administrators of provincial academies, etc."¹⁹

What is more, the emphasis on the material *practice* of media transmission within Cultural Studies can be understood as part of a wider concern for the material performance of communication, meaning and culture in space and time. For a long time,

it was widely assumed that European cultures asserted and represented themselves through texts and artifacts, while non-European cultures articulated their self-image and self-understanding through various kinds of cultural performances.²⁰

While ethnologists and anthropologists studied the performance of rituals and festivals of so-called ‘primitive cultures’, observers of Western culture tended to concentrate on the ideas embedded in books, paintings and other artifacts, leaving aside sporting events, fashion shows, fairground attractions and other popular pastimes as well as the bodies and materials involved in these performances. Cultural Studies, however, put the focus on such performances of culture within the Western world itself.

However, by applying ethnographic approaches to cultural performances within our own, contemporary society, Cultural Studies had to understand the impact of economic conditions on culture in a way that ethnologists of old wouldn’t have had to. In our contemporary world, most cultural expressions are produced not only by bodies in space and time, but by what has been termed the “cultural industries” and their technologies. These take up a dual role “as ‘economic’ systems of production and ‘cultural’ producers of texts.” Within the cultural industries, culture and economy become deeply intertwined: “Production is profoundly cultural and texts are determined by economic factors (among others)”.²¹

Finally, the UPS-model of communication, where meaning is everything and materiality does not matter, prevents us also from understanding the environmental impact of media when we understand media communication as an almost immaterial activity. “To communicate with one another”, Sean Cubitt tells us about the ecological implications of digital and electronic means of communication, “we also inadvertently communicate our dismissive relation to the human and natural environments who pay the terrible price for its efficiency, even for its poetry”.²² Rare earth minerals and metals from all continents go into the production of a smartphone, and these raw materials are often sourced under hazardous health and environmental conditions by members of the poorest sections of the world’s population. At the same time, the electronic waste we produce often lands at the feet of the poor once again, its toxic remnants sipping into the ocean. When we stream *Finding Nemo*, real fish have to die. We have to understand that mediation is a practical material activity in order to make sure to *see the media amongst the messages*, to understand their social effects and the environmental footprints they leave behind.²³

1. Hartmut Böhme, "Was ist Kulturwissenschaft?", <http://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/lehre/kultur-wissenschaft.pdf>, no pag.; my translation (accessed 6 Nov 2001).
2. Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, Berlin: 2012, p. 58-59.
3. Em Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 3rd ed., New York: 1997, p. 55.
4. Lambert Wiesing, "Was sind Medien", in: *Was ist ein Medium?*, eds. Stefan Münker & Alexander Roesler, Frankfurt/Main: 2008, 235-248, here p. 244; my translation.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 243; my translation & emphasis.
6. Cf. Sybille Krämer, "Selbst-zurücknahme. Reflexionen über eine medientheoretische Figur und ihre (möglichen) anthropologischen Dimensionen", in: *Ökonomien der Zurückhaltung. Kulturelles Handeln zwischen Askese und Restriktion*, eds. Barbara Gronau & Alice Lagaay, Bielefeld: 2010, 39-52, here p. 45.
7. Gregory Bateson, "Problems in Cetacean and Other Mammalian Communication", in: *Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises*, ed. Kenneth S. Norris, Berkeley: 1966, 569-579, here p. 574.
8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London: 1964, p. 333.
9. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: 1999 (1986), p. xxxix.
10. Cf. Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies*, p. 58.
11. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London: 1974, p. 130.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, London: 1977, p. 38.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, CCCS, Birmingham: 1973, p. 1-4.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
19. Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*, New York: 1996 (1994), p. 16.
20. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Culture as Performance", *Modern Austrian Literature*, 42:3 (2009), 1-10, here p. 1.
21. David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd ed., London: 2012, p. 60.
22. Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*, Durham, NC: 2017, p. 6.
23. Cf. Christian Huck, *Digitalschatten. Das Netz und die Dinge*, Hamburg: 2020.

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