

1

AN INTRODUCTION

Then there is the methodological problem posed by the conundrum of whether the now so self-evident term ‘communication’ can properly be used in connection with times and locations which manifestly were characterised by other terminology (drawn from mythology or religion). At any rate its entronement in philosophy was based in John Locke’s ‘Essay on Human Understanding’ on the scarcely generalisable assumption that communication means the rendering into speech of perceived ideas and consequently the linking of isolated individuals through ‘bonds of language’. The only trouble is that philosophy omits to enquire how, without language, people are supposed to have arrived at their ideas and conceptions in the first place. Liberation from this unfathomable confusion came only with a technical concept of information which, since Shannon’s ‘Mathematical Theory of Communication’, avoids any reference to ideas or meanings and thus to people. (Kittler 1996: 1)

Media are ubiquitous. This is not only because of the sheer increase in volume and diversity of equipment specifically designed to facilitate information and communication processes, but also because more and more objects are being turned into (communication and information) media. It is generally accepted that we ‘communicate’ not simply ‘via’ mobile phones or email, but also *by means of* hairstyle, make-up, clothing, wristbands, t-shirts, plastic carrier bags (i.e., displaying brands and logos, indicating ‘where we shop’ or ‘what we buy’), etc. Indeed, our world can be characterized by an increase in *mediatization*.

With the advent of modern industrial societies in the nineteenth century, media have really become an all pervasive social force. First, in the form of transport (in particular, the steam engine) and soon followed by communication media, such as the telegraph and telephone, the industrial society in Western Europe and North America took shape

as a world of high mobility of goods and (some) people, as well as increasingly wide-ranging and accelerating forms of communication (e.g., Harvey 1989; Giddens 1990). With the advent of radio and television alongside newspapers, one could argue, mass media emerged as a set of technologies capable not only of facilitating the communication between people across wider distances in shorter time, but also the *broadcasting* of information from very few to very many people. In particular, since the Second World War, modern societies across the globe have been caught up in this process of mediatization (Thompson 1995).

Yet, despite the rather obvious fact that we are becoming more and more reliant on an expanding range of communication media, it is perhaps remarkable that we do not give more thought to this process beyond such superficial observations. Mediated communication is something we *do*, rather than *think about*. This is not simply the case in everyday life, but also in the academy. For years, universities have expanded their research and teaching programmes in communication and media studies, and they continue to be popular subjects among students. At the same time, there is a relative lack of concern for media *as media*. Instead, we simply talk about ‘the’ media.

Rather than analysing media as phenomena, media and communication studies have continued to borrow their main analytical frameworks from other disciplines and theoretical cadres. This usually comes in the form of understanding media *in service of* something else, e.g., power, capital accumulation, ideology, social interaction and popular culture. Furthermore, this servicing has generally been approached as either ‘context’ or ‘consequence’, with mediation in-between as ‘process’. Media were too often simply treated as the black box between corporations and consumers.

There are, of course, exceptions. These are studies of media processes that focused on mediation in terms of:

- organizational practices (e.g., Hall *et al.* 1978; Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1987; Cottle 1993; Harrison 2000);
- media products (primarily in the field of semiotics and screen theory and mainly concerned with media content);
- some sustained interest media-technologies, mainly from scholars associated with McLuhanism (although these rapidly faded away in the 1970s).

It was in the early 1990s, with the rise of ‘studies of media use’ (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992), that technology made a somewhat ‘surprise’ return. When we refer to media-use, we are actually looking at how people interconnect with technological agents in structuring their everyday lives (Moore 2005). The concept of technological agency will be further explored in Chapter 2. In essence, it refers to the idea that technology contains a capacity ‘to act’ (Latour 1988a). The question whether technologies are exclusively ‘reactive’ is not relevant here; what matters is that in everyday life, people interact with technologies *as if* they are capable of acting on their own accord and, thus, have agency.

It is here where media-technologies become *realized* in specific forms and no longer operate as ‘pure potentiality’ (of possibilities of things that could be done with them). It is *the use* that makes a hammer a tool for joinery or smithing, a means of destroying toys or a weapon of mass destruction. Use does not foreclose potentiality (a hammer could still be all of these things), but actualizes it, in temporary form, to become ‘one’ with the practice of handling it.

Indeed, the media-use paradigm has already given strong hints of how mediation is always contextualized by the cultural repertoires by which new technologies are introduced in domestic settings and how their use stabilizes over time. We now need to argue the same thing when linking content and technology as both aspects of the mediation process. This contextualization relates to the political economy of media as it involves questions of how mediation takes place as socially organized practices. The strength of a phenomenological approach to media is that it problematizes exactly that which most communication studies approaches take for granted: the medium. What this book will try to show is that an adequate media analysis should start with its reversal, expressed in McLuhan’s (1964) famous aphorism: ‘the medium is the message’.

Mediation as a black box

Most advocates of media studies would emphasize the need to bridge effect-, content- and context-orientated approaches; that is, they recognize that understanding media involves mapping and tracing the connectedness of specific contexts (conditions), contents and effects. This book offers a distinctive conceptual framework with which mediation processes can be theoretically, as well as empirically, explored and critically analysed. In doing so, it is concerned with the ‘lynchpin’ between context, content and effect: media. That is, what context-, content- and effect-orientated approaches have in common is that they are assuming media themselves to be a ‘black box’; either as a transmitter of messages or an engine of meaning-production (also see Fiske 1990 for a similar critique).

The aim of a phenomenological approach to mediation should be to prise open some of the secretcies of this ‘black box’ and demystify them, so to speak. It is because, thus far, the three aforementioned domains of media studies have such vastly different conceptualizations of media (as organizations, texts or transmitters) that media studies have struggled to adequately conceptualize this lynchpin.

The context in which this will be done is predominantly, but not exclusively, modern Western society and culture. More specifically, it focuses on the role of media-as-technology. This is not because we need to assume that media analysis can be exhausted by a focus on technology, i.e., that there is nothing more to media than technology, but instead that a consistent focus on media-as-technology (hereafter ‘media-technologies’) can help us clarify the process of mediatization and contribute to an explanation of why especially communication media have become ubiquitous in modern society.

Media as phenomena

An underlying theme in this book is the desire to think more clearly and deeply about media by resorting to a more philosophically grounded theoretical engagement with media-technologies as phenomena. However, it should not be read as a radical departure from the existing domains of the growing field of media theory, but merely a conceptual recalibration. Whereas it will undoubtedly be somewhat at odds with most of the dominant strands in the wider domain of media studies, most notably the Marxist and functionalist approaches [e.g., political economy (Murdock and Golding 1977), hegemony theory (Hall 1980), public sphere theory (Dahlgren 1995)], as well as those inspired by liberal pluralism (uses and gratifications theory; Blumler and Katz 1974), audience studies (Ang 1985; Moores 1993), cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross 1976), it is not necessarily incompatible with any of these. The aim is not to falsify other approaches, but merely to refocus our theoretical orientation to that which is at the heart of media studies, namely the process of mediation. It is hoped that a result of this reorientation, some of the aforementioned theoretical approaches may actually also attain greater clarity.

The approach of this book has a lot in common with what is growing into a distinctive field of its own, namely ‘new media theory’ (Elmer 2002; Gauntlett and Horsley 2004). New media theory includes both theoretical and empirically grounded analyses of digital media, telecommunications and the Internet, and is, by and large, well attuned to exploring media phenomena beyond issues of domination and resistance. New media theory has emerged out of a range of disciplines, which have converged around issues of technological innovation, and their social and cultural embedding or ‘domestication’ (Bakardjieva 2005; Berker *et al.* 2006). Although there are clearly close links with media studies, new media theory has not been subject to the institutional straightjacket, simply because it has not sought to obtain its own (inter-) disciplinary status.

Thinking about media is something we cannot do often enough. This is first of all because not only do we think ‘through’ media; media also structure our thinking (Curtis 1977). How we think is so closely bound to the media through which this thought is processed and by which this thought is generated, that we generally do not perceive thought as itself mediated. Hence, we normally take media for granted. It is in our very nature to take media for granted because as Marshall McLuhan (1964) provocatively said: media are ‘the extensions of man [sic]’. It is usually only when new media are introduced that we are actively encouraged to dwell on their ontology as media, but such dwellings are often lacking in critical appreciation, as exemplified by the ubiquity of naïve knee-jerk reactions of celebratory optimism, as well as derogatory pessimism. When this happens, it seems as if all there is to media critique is mere opinion.

An example of this is the way in which the arrival of the Internet, in the late 1980s, sparked quite a few publications, which (unfortunately too often) were being reduced

to the issue of whether the Internet is a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing (Dovey 1996). The ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of this ‘thing’ called the Internet, of course, strongly relies on the moral, ethical or political principles that are implicitly or explicitly invoked by such evaluative comments. Hence, whereas for socialists the issue of commodification played a central role, for liberals it was the role of state intervention and, for conservatives, it was the extent to which the Internet would support or undermine the moral fabric of our culture. In each of these cases, the Internet itself remains of minor importance, it is simply reduced to being a vehicle of (undesirable) social and political consequences.

Mediation and politics

The example shows that much ‘thought’ about media has been cluttered by a preoccupation with evaluative political critique taking the place of a more phenomenon-orientated analysis. This is directly reflected in a key text book on media theory, which although over 15-years-old, is still a highly adequate summary of where we are: ‘media theory is a branch of political theory’ (Inglis 1990: 3). Media theory and media studies have insufficiently scrutinized the ontological nature of their object of study. That is to say, the analysis of media is, by and large, derived from an assumption that media are merely empty vessels that deliver content.

This explains why most media analyses have focused on either the political economy of media production, the semiosis of media texts or the sociopsychological effects of media consumption. This triad is a mere adaptation of the systems model which is still the predominant paradigm of communication studies (Fiske 1990). In all three, the medium is largely irrelevant because it is a mere instrument of either the accumulation of power and/or wealth, the organization and transmission of meaning, or the means by which people can experience (electronically generated) stimuli that may or may not be meaningful within their everyday life settings, and could have social and/or psychological consequences.

The purpose of this book is to drag the medium back into the spotlight. That is to say, it wants to offer another way of theorizing media that does not reduce the medium to a mere instrument. It will do so by providing an introduction to theoretical writings on media that either explicitly or implicitly enable us to question them. The work of media theory does not have to be invented from scratch; as much of it has already been done extensively. However, what has been lacking, thus far, is a sustained theoretical integration of the different approaches that have sought to explore and interpret media as phenomena in and of themselves.

As a result of an often overtly political agenda, students of media studies are presented with a view of media as merely a political instrument or site of struggle. In the UK, this has been interpreted mainly in terms of issues over power and domination; in the USA it is predominantly discussed in pluralistic frameworks related to issues of

access, balance and fairness; in continental Europe (as well all as in some non-western nations, such as China) the agenda has been more one of cultural regulation, in which media are seen as an instrument and venue of cultural policy. The consequence of this is that media studies presents itself to students as an appendix of political science, but it also creates the impression that media are merely instruments of political power, and sites of struggle and domination. This leaves the concept of media rather empty.

Mediation as social interaction

Other attempts to theorize the media have reduced mediation to forms of social interaction. For example, John B. Thompson (1995) developed an approach to theorizing media based on social theory. The implicit assumption in this attempt is that media technology is merely a means of extending processes of *sociation* or social interaction. For example, Thompson's concept of '*mediated-quasi-interaction*' implies that the 'quasi' nature of interaction is the consequence of a technological intervention. In breaking up the face-to-face dialogical nature of speech, mediation performs a reduction of social interaction to enable its instantaneous replication for broadcasting. Mediation is thus valued purely for its social features.

It could be argued that, in his own way, the late German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (arguably the most influential communication theorist in continental Europe) also attempted to develop an understanding of media as an extended form of sociation in his system-orientated version of social theory. For Luhmann (1982, 1990), the focus was on communication as a means by which systems operate and provide means to affect each other. This becomes increasingly necessary in a society marked by increasingly specialized institutions (media). Mediated communication becomes itself a specialized function, that is separated from other institutions. As a result of these increasingly specialized mediation processes, communication itself has become an object of concern, an object of study and a matter of regulation. However, what remains difficult to understand is what 'pure communication' entails (that is, communication without content).

Both Thompson and Luhmann reduce mediation to social functions. As a result, their models do not inspire inquiries into that which enables mediation in the first place, that is, technology. Mediation is technological exactly because (at the same time) it both reveals and conceals the process by which social interactions are 'enabled'. The problem with the separation of 'media' as a specialized institution is that it suggests that it is somehow removed from what social theory assumes to be 'the social' (Latour 2005). This, in turn, begs the question of what 'unmediated' social interaction might be. Too often, this is assumed to be interaction outside the so-called mass media of print, broadcasting and computing; i.e., the already separated and recognized media institutions. This, as we shall see next, is erroneous.

Mediation as cultural reproduction

Media can also be reduced to ‘cultural tools’. For example, the work of Stuart Hall (1980) on encoding/decoding is a good example of how media are black boxes providing the ‘encoding’ of messages so that they can be transmitted. Decoding then becomes the work of human beings. The consequence of this thinking is that culture remains the work of humans only; and the role of media themselves remains relatively obscure; they are merely facilitators of ‘text’. The fact that Hall’s own interest in encoding and decoding was primarily geared towards understanding how dominant ideologies are (re)produced, further testifies to the dominance of a particular (narrowly defined) notion of ‘the political’ in the history of media analysis.

Finally, there are approaches to understanding media that primarily understand it as a means of (mass) communication. John Fiske’s work (1994), which includes a well-developed technological analysis, is still primarily geared towards an instrumentalist approach of media as a means of (once again) political communication within everyday life settings of popular culture. For Fiske, the role of media technology is only interesting in so far as it further reinforces the skewed political consequences of the messages thus constructed. While placing a lot of emphasis on non-dominant interpretations (as forms of resistance), Fiske only partially engages in an analysis of how ‘effects’, such as dominant or resistant interpretations, are themselves technologically facilitated. To a large extent, his approach to critical media analysis remains a matter of positioning, the origins of which lie outside the realm of mediation itself, but are the consequence of a distinctive ‘will’ or ‘ideological disposition’.

Technology as ordering

What unites many approaches to understanding media is thus a strong reductionist assumption that technology has to be understood as a facilitator, a device or tool, in service of something else. This ‘something else’ is deemed more fundamental and, as a result, the process of mediation is reduced to an epiphenomenon. Furthermore, it is quite remarkable that even if this ‘something else’ takes the form of a social, cultural or communicative process, ultimately it is always the political that surfaces as the supreme ‘force’ of motivation.

By focusing more closely on the specific features of technologies of mediation, however, media theory is able to reveal that the concept of the political is not exhausted by a focus on the public sphere, and the way in which ‘the public’ are organized by the state, as well as more civic deliberations (Dahlgren 1995). Instead the concept of ‘the political’ should be stretched a bit more to include the most banal events of everyday life, on the one hand, but also to the more psychological and existential attunements between human beings and more abstract technical systems, on the other hand. That is, a phenomenological approach to mediation enables us to question that which

mainstream approaches to theorizing media have too often taken for granted, such as perception, cognition, mood and attunement. This is a rather more radical understanding of 'the political', which goes well beyond ideologies, institutions and regulations.

While the political is by no means irrelevant, a case needs to be made for understanding media '*as such*', that is to say, not as instruments or tools, but as 'agents' of political, social and cultural processes. This is why we need to start a refocusing of media analysis with a phenomenology of mediation in terms of technology.

This is not to suggest that media are only technologies; indeed, media could be equally seen as social systems, organizations, businesses, cultural phenomena and political actors, to name but a few. However, whereas such approaches are abundant in the literature, there is a comparative lack of integration of perspectives on media technology into the field of media studies. Too often, media-technological analyses are being dismissed as 'technological determinism' without due consideration of what understanding media-as-technology might contribute on its own. What is particularly missing are attempts to connect media-analyses with more generic philosophical approaches to technology, although more recently, this is changing. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the work of Friedrich Kittler (1997) which is now finding resonance in exiting recent publications, such as Fuller (2005) and Mackenzie (2002).

We cannot ignore that media are contested sites, and can provide means and instruments for—as well as agency to—the development and organization of collective action, tactical intervention and forms of 'resistance'. However, these terms should be reconsidered as part of the technological assemblage, rather than outside of it. This means that forces, such as 'stakes', 'interests' and 'motives', should be understood as part of what constitutes technologies.

Technologies 'enframe' the world; that is they *order* them in the double sense of providing a structure and commanding specific actions (Heidegger 1977; Adams 1993; Fry 1993; Van Loon 2000). This ordering constitutes the essence of mediation. This focus will also help us to reconsider the critique of 'technological determinism', which nowadays is used too often rather carelessly, to dismiss any form of criticism that seeks to attribute some active and creative power to the technological itself.

A good example of how media-as-technology enables us to understand the particular way in which the world we inhabit is being ordered is Walter Ong's (1982) historico-anthropological discussion of orality and literacy. Strongly influenced by the work of Marshall McLuhan, he argues that, in cultures where orality is the primary or only communications medium, human perceptions are structured on the basis of aural paradigms. In oral cultures, listening is the primary mode of perception and is materialized in an acoustic conception of spatiality. Acoustic space generates a specific modality of 'presencing' that is dominated by a timeless, but ephemeral referentiality that can only come into presence through repetition.

In contrast, literacy is both linear and geared towards the visual. Literary cultures 'preserve' referentiality in symbolic forms that can be passed on as objects and thus separated from the enactment of representation. It entails a 'splitting of the medium'

into the enunciating actor (the author) and the enunciated act (the text). Whereas, in oral cultures, the medium remains a unified actor/act and thus always requires the presence of the enunciator, literary media enable the isolation of the enunciated act from the actor. The act can then be passed on as a separate item as it becomes the main performative part of the media product. Repetition is thus no longer the province of enunciation, but becomes technological (e.g., copying or printing a text). It is for this reason that Ong associates literary cultures with forms of alienation, which – at the same time – were also essential components for the development of civilizations.

Ong uses the contrast between orality and literacy to show that our very human being, that is what it means to be human, is intertwined with how we communicate, think and perceive. Indeed, his work shows that we need to focus more closely on the technological dimension of media and mediation as a way to sculpture an approach to understanding media that does not embrace an empty instrumentalism [which takes media as simply the means by which something ‘more fundamental’ is accomplished, such as collective (inter)action, socialization, propaganda or mass communication]. Following on from Ong’s seminal intervention, it is possible to suggest that an adequate analysis of media technology should involve four key aspects: form, historicity, cultural embedding and embodiment.

Form

Ong’s contrasting of orality and literacy provide a necessary deepening of (for example) McLuhan’s more aphoristic reading of media history (see Chapter 2). It highlights, first of all, that the *form* of mediation has a significant bearing on the way in which communication works. Given the ubiquity of media today, it is a focus on technology-as-form that enables us to understand mediation as incorporating a vast range of different practices. Attention to form enables one to remain critical of any type of instrumentalism.

This first premise of this book is therefore that we have to analyse media in terms of their different *forms*, because it is through these forms that we can see how they facilitate the formation of particular logics in terms of modes of sensing, interpreting and reasoning. Whereas media studies have tended to favour analyses of content, and thereby primarily concerned themselves with questions of ‘ideology’ or ‘discourse’, an adequate media analysis should also contain a sensitivity towards the phenomena of media themselves and not just what they seem to ‘contain’.

Only an inclusion of media-form enables us to study media *as such*. That is to say, a phenomenological approach to media begins with an appreciation of mediation as form. In this book I will therefore largely follow the phenomenological line that seeks to identify and explore the nature of media, that is, their ontology. In doing so, questions of politics (media as political instruments or engines of manipulation) and effects (media as transmitting stimuli or offering services) are secondary, and will

only be invoked through a more primary ontological analysis of what mediation entails.

However, form on its own can only inform a very basic phenomenology. Part of a phenomenological approach is to focus on media as embedded in specific environments. Indeed, even if one takes a completely instrumental view of media (that is, media as vehicles for politics, social interaction or cultural reproduction), their phenomenological nature has to be understood in relation to the functions they fulfil and operations they entail as instruments. Indeed, as we have already stressed, when exploring the consequences of media-technological innovations, we always have to pay particular attention to the entire social, economic, political and cultural formation within which such media-technology systems operate.

Central to a phenomenology of media is therefore the way in which a focus on mediation enables us to connect to distinct conceptual domains:

- communication, as the '(inter)action' through which meaning comes into being (which is often truncated into debates over 'effects');
- culture as the 'context' as well as 'content' of that action (which is often further differentiated into issues of power, wealth and knowledge; e.g., Innis 1982).

James Carey (1992: 15) distinguishes between two different approaches to understanding the relationship between culture and communication as 'a transmission view of communication' and 'a ritual view of communication'. The transmission view focuses on communication as a process of sending and receiving messages over distances. The ritual view is much older and portrays communication as the key means of association (very similar to interaction), which is expressed in the etymological links with communion, community and commonness (Carey 1992: 18). Carey asserts that both have distinct religious origins. Transmission relates to preaching and evangelization; ritual communication to practices of worship, prayer and liturgical and sacramental ministry within congregations. It is perhaps because the culture of the United States has been traditionally dominated by Protestantism (Parsons 1973) that the transmission model has been far more dominant there than the ritual model, which has its roots in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions of the early Christian Churches and (pre-medieval) monasticism (Winter 1996).

As Communication Studies has been dominated by North American scholarship from the outset, it is perhaps no surprise that it has been, by and large, framed by the transmission model. Indeed, in North America the very infrastructure of telegraphy developed alongside that of the East-West railway (Carey 1992). The link between transportation and communication was a key component of the colonization of the 'Wild West' through settlements that displaced the more nomadic modes of inhabitation of native Americans. Its close relationship with transportation made it an almost self-evident part of the experience of colonization and the ethos of pioneering. Its primary orientation [Innis (1982) called it 'bias'] is towards overcoming the obstacles of space and geography. The idea of cultivating 'nature' that was conceptualized as

barbaric and pagan, could indeed be seen as a redemptive act in itself. The role of communication in the coming into being of the United States is, thus, more than merely instrumental; its very substance of spreading ‘the Word’, indeed its civilization-labour (a term coined by de Regt 1984) is of fundamental significance to understanding how the dominant culture of North America was initially formed and still persists to this very day (Carey 1992: 16). Indeed, from this point of view, communication is inherently a ‘moral enterprise’.

By contrast, the ritual view of communication has much closer ties with traditional scholarship, first in the realm of theology, but later spreading to philosophy and the social sciences. Since the birth of the modern academy in the nineteenth century, its links with the emergent social sciences (such as psychology and sociology) were so close that it was generally not considered necessary to study communications as a separate field, let alone discipline. For Carey, the lack of scholarship based on the ritual model in the US, reflects the latter’s underlying ‘weak and evanescent concept of culture in American social thought’ (Carey 1992: 19). Hence, it is with this in mind that a phenomenological approach to mediation could also be invoked to sharpen a more cultural analysis of communication processes.

Historicity

As we have seen, media-technologies have pervaded almost all activities of human beings. This has two rather paradoxical manifestations in commonsensical perceptions of the role of media-technologies in human history. On the one hand, there is a generic and usually unquestioned acceptance of the assumption that media-technologies have *caused* many social, cultural, political and economic changes. Current examples of this can be found in aforementioned lamentations over the rise of the Internet and the death of face-to-face communication as determinants of an increasingly individualistic and *blasé* society. On the other hand, (media-) technologies are often ‘taken for granted’ to the extent that we don’t even seem to notice their workings (that is, until they ‘break down’). We do not think about our use of and dependency on media as having any effect on ourselves because they are merely things we use.

However, the paradox of media as autonomous causes versus invisible instruments is easily resolved if we take a more historical perspective. When we look at the history of distinct media-technological innovations, we discover a distinct pattern. When a new medium ‘arrives’, that is, when its ‘usage’ moves from experimentation in laboratories to taking on functions (i.e., ‘settles’) in everyday life, we notice their ‘effects’. That is, we notice the difference that these media-innovations make to how we function as human beings. The more radical the innovation, the more its effect is noticed.

Hence, the arrival of the telegraph was a far more historically marked event than the arrival of the fax machine or the VCR. The radical nature of the telegraph was its ability to facilitate communications over great distances with the immediacy of

face-to-face speech. It was the first electronic communication medium. The fax machine, however, arrived a century after the telephone. Its usage was more closely associated with moveable typesetting (print), which was – at least in terms of its appropriation of the alphabet – over 500-years-old by the time it linked up with telephony. The social embedding of the fax was merely a speeding up of mail, not a new way of getting in touch, for which the telephone was still far more appropriate and effective.

Hence, one cannot understand the nature of any medium without taking into account the *historical context* in which it came into being. This is the second premise that underscores this book. It is a fairly obvious point, but nonetheless needs to be made if only as an antidote to modes of thinking that attempt to read the ‘essence’ of a medium purely from its internal, technological properties. It is also an antidote against both poles of the false paradox: media are neither singular causes of social effects nor inconsequential instruments of social, political or economic action.

A return to Ong’s work makes it clear that even within the most elementary media that we can already trace the complex, interconnected nature of mediation. Indeed, while speech and non-verbal communication have by no means been diminished during the course of human history, it is noticeable how many more media have been introduced since the beginning of time (e.g., itself a mediated event, mythologized by ‘recorded history’). The introduction of inscription and writing, for example, in ancient Egyptian civilization, combined the use of language (a rule-bound, arbitrary system of symbols) in speech with the visual means of representation of cave painting.

Hieroglyphs are an interesting form of writing because they are ‘little pictures’ of ‘things’ they represent; this also entails a reduction of often complex visual realities to rather simplistic icons. This reduction, in turn, has to be compensated for by the invocation of connotations, which themselves have to be socially acquired through learning. That is to say, the first systems of writing also entailed a more formalized pedagogy of reading. This meant that a separation was made between understanding in terms of ‘thought’ as opposed to ‘experience’ and this, in turn, can be seen as the inauguration of formal abstraction (Ong 1982).

The arrival of the alphabet entailed the completion of the total abstraction of writing as a medium of representation. The simplicity of the alphabet, in which a relatively short number of characters can be put together to produce an infinite amount of ‘words’, became the major strategic advantage for the development of print in Europe. This is not the case in, for example, China, where the sheer amount of characters or ideograms inhibited the rapid spread of moveable typesetting and facilitated (not caused!) the consolidation of centralized control (Innis 1982).

However, the first consequence of the use of alphabetical writing was a radical extension of ‘abstraction’ in forms of communication and thus an increased emphasis on the development of ‘reading’ as a learned practice. The acquisition of know-how to use (read and write) the alphabet thus brought with it an incorporation of the logic of this abstract system. This logic was linear (letters making words, words making sentences, etc.). Whereas the alphabet was a lot easier to learn than hieroglyphs, because

one acquires it through the linear logic that underscores it, it required a more radical transformation of perspective because of its shift of meaning from the primacy of icons to the absolute supremacy of symbols. Following Innis, McLuhan (1964: 86) argues that the shift to the phonetic alphabet led to a demystification of writing. This, in turn, entailed a loss of monopolistic power of the priestly caste over the realm of representation in favour of the military and political castes. As everybody could now learn to read and write, and it was no longer a lifelong enterprise; the printed word could be instrumentalized in the service of the pursuit of strategic power and the accumulation of wealth (see Chapter 2).

Cultural embedding

The articulation of the form of the medium within a specific historical trajectory opens up a whole new domain of analysis, namely how relationships between media have affected communication processes, i.e., the possibilities for *shared meaning*. The content of mediation is not independent from the form of mediation because, as McLuhan (1964) stated, '*the medium is the message*'. Even if we accept that this may be a bit hyperbolic, we can still appreciate the merits of emphasizing mediation in terms of evolution as it enables a historical sensitivity towards the way in which sense-making is organized. In simpler terms, the organization of sense-making is what we normally call 'culture'.

The third premise of this book is that media analysis requires a sensitivity towards the cultural embedding of mediation. This also means that we are always geared towards analysing inter-media relationships, because it is in the articulations between media that specific forms of sense-making become embedded in social forms and are able to 'endure' over time. Moreover, an awareness of cultural embedding enables us to look for transformations in the way in which sense-making relates to the sensibilities, experiences and anticipations of those involved in it (which can be human, as well as non-human actors). Culture highlights that meaning and significance emerge from *practices* and do not exist in themselves. In short, sense-making is an *enactment*, it is performative. This enactment will be primarily understood as 'technology-use'.

If we accept that the role of media-technology is ordering both in terms of structuring and commanding, how we perceive, think and communicate, it follows that there is no meaning outside mediation. The way in which the world is revealed and enframed, and thus becomes significant, following specific historical trajectories, which can also be mapped as media evolutions (as long as we include human actors in there as well).

In Chapter 2, we will see that these evolutions are very specific mediated nestings and sequences that can only be explained when taking into account their cultural embedding. That is, media evolutions are not haphazard or autonomous, but involve specific *selections*. These selections emerge from specific forms of engagement with the technology, i.e., their *use*. Technological use becomes binding over time as particular

selections, in turn, affect how we perceive, think and communicate, that is, how we make sense. The emphasis on the enactment of sense-making enables us to identify specific modes of agency, subjectivity, intentionality, as well as necessity, determination and impact; in short, enactment highlights the process of motivation. All forms of mediation are *motivated*.

It is this understanding of mediation as motivated that enables us to return to the question concerning the political nature of mediation. This is the radical extension of the political that was referred to earlier. The political is not limited to collectively articulated opinions or interests, but to very particular instances of sense-making. These may impact on the way in which use becomes binding and thus affects the specific trajectories through which media-technologies are enabled to facilitate ('order') how we perceive, think and communicate.

Embodiment (and disembodiment)

It is difficult to envisage a human history without media and without technology. From archaeological digs of the earliest forms of human life, there is already abundant evidence of the use of technological devices such as tools and weapons. The Magdalenian paintings of the Altamira Cave in Cantabria Spain and, most famously, in Lascaux, as well as the paintings of the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave (both in France), are brilliant records of media used in visual representations of life events (Heyd and Clegg 2005). These paintings were embedded in oral cultures and often depicted animals. Human representations were extremely rare.

Whereas no consensus exists among archaeologists about the exact function of the paintings, it is not difficult to explain how they could have functioned within oral cultures. They ordered specific sensibilities towards the world, by illustrating experiences, thoughts and reflections. That is, the images did not represent how people thought, but ordered their sensibilities of being-in-the-world. In such cultures, the main modality of communication was not visual but oral.

Logically speaking, speech is in effect the first communication medium (Ong 1982). Although, in essence, not an application of any 'artefact' as tool, speech is a medium because it uses 'language', which is an abstract system of symbols based on arbitrary (but socially reinforced, reproduced and regulated) connections between sounds (words) and things. If we take speech as the 'arche typical' communication medium, it is perhaps easier to understand why McLuhan (1964) referred to media as 'extensions of man' [sic]. It is also easy to see that this medium has a direct connectivity with the human body, which is further underlined with the notion of nonverbal communication, in which the human body itself becomes an instrument, a medium, for the articulation and dissemination of meaning. This is, therefore, the fourth premise underscoring this book: the adequate analysis of media requires an orientation towards their *embodied* nature, which has a *logical* starting point in the human body itself.

Mediation extends the human body; its ability to perceive, to express itself, to ‘reach out and touch’ others across space and time. This is captured by the aphorism ‘media are extensions of man’. The challenge of feminist theory, however, is that the human body is not a self-evident singularity, but itself differentiated (gendered) and politicized. This can be revealed by linking the previous concerns over form, historicity and cultural motivation with the concept of gender. Not only is gender heavily propped up by forms of mediation, it also affects the nature of mediation itself. This becomes particularly clear when reflecting on issues of subjectivity and identity.

Subjectivity and identity operate at the level of ‘manifestations’; they are specific, modern, expressions of sensibilities. These should not be confused with the sensibilities themselves. To come to terms with how sensibilities are ordered, we should consider the nature of mediated embodiment in terms of what is perhaps more primordial: namely, power (force) and desire. That is to say, the embodiment of mediation has an ‘affective’ drive that, if we use the human body as an archetype, reveals itself, for example, in terms of ‘sexual desire’ (Eros). Hence, mediation can be understood through the prism of sexual desire as a movement towards unification, a physiological expression of drive to ‘become one’ (again).

The embodied nature of media, however, should by no means be exclusively understood in terms of the *human* body. ‘Media as extensions of “man”’ is perhaps one of the less fortunate expressions used by McLuhan. Not only does it immediately pose the question of gender difference; it also brings up a rather problematic (and literal) anthropocentric view of the process of mediation as extending from a unique mythical origin (in terms of what Nietzsche called *Ursprung*, cited in Foucault 1977a) i.e., ‘man’. This ‘man’ is too easily confused with modern ‘man’, the double agent of modernity: its arche and telos, its cause and effect, its condition and destiny, the measure and purpose of all things (Foucault 1970).

Instead of this mythical ‘man’, Matthew Fuller (2005: 63) proposes a more Nietzschean concept of the body as the ‘starting point’ for knowledge. For Fuller, this has two distinct advantages:

- it provides a materialist and action-based grounding of perception, ordering, indeed mediation;
- it bypasses the need to impose an *a priori* hierarchy of the organization of this mediation.

In simpler terms it seeks to avoid having to take-for-granted human intentions, motivations, concerns and interests as the sole origin of intelligible action (anthropocentrism). As a result, it does not have to assume that media evolution happens on the basis of some intrinsic human reason. The ‘subject’ of communication is thus no longer a privileged entity (i.e., the human being) whose status is derived from metaphysics, but instead is itself an *effect* of a sustained interaction between forces. Following Latour (1988b) we could further specify that these forces themselves are irreducible (to interests, beliefs, moral values, etc.). This, in turn, leads us back to Nietzsche’s

(1992) concept of ‘the will to power’ as a means to describe this force of sheer being or ‘vitality’. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, where we will problematize the man-machine divide to develop a concept of mediation that does not rely on an anthropocentric concept of human-machine interfaciality.

Outline

Form, historicity, cultural embedding and embodiment/disembodiment are all intricately connected in a phenomenology of mediation. Yet, different approaches to understanding media-as-technology will have different emphases. For example, whereas the works of thinkers, such as McLuhan, Benjamin and Barthes, emphasize form, Innis, Williams and Baudrillard are much more focused on historicity. All of them were concerned with cultural embedding and, in particular, McLuhan and Benjamin were also concerned with embodiment.

The way to organize a discussion of their writings will always entail some form or arbitrariness, and it is for this reason that I have decided to use the split between medium theory and cultural theory, or between a transmission view of communication (as the North American tradition) in Chapter 2 and a ritual view (the European tradition) in Chapter 3. In order to move out of the artificial intercontinental stalemate that one may thereby end up with, Chapter 4 will discuss a different ‘cutting across’ form, historicity, cultural embedding and embodiment, by discussing feminist approaches, whereas Chapter 5 aims to radicalize a phenomenological approach to mediation by discussing in greater detail new developments in media theory, particularly those concerning networks and disembodiment.

The main method of analysis for this book will be to provide an in-depth discussion of a few key thinkers whose works highlight how we could theorize media-technology. This, however, is not to merely summarize their main points of view, but to help us think *with* them about the essential characteristics of media-technologies, and how they affect social and cultural processes. The purpose is thus not to give a summary of the field, but to explore how we could better understand the technological dimension of media-processes, which has been too often ignored in favour of analyses of media-content.

The best known approach to theorizing media-technologies is undoubtedly to be found in the work of Marshall McLuhan. It is not for nothing that McLuhan has given the seminal inspiration behind this book. However, it is simply wrong to assume that McLuhan’s work is self-standing and entirely original. In fact, McLuhan was strongly inspired by a wide range of thinkers (including Heidegger, Bergson and Nietzsche) and his aversion to write in a traditional, scholarly manner should not lead one to believe that he was not himself an excellent scholar. Nor should we assume that McLuhan’s approach has died with the thinker. It lives on remarkably well in the work of a number of influential contemporary scholars. Therefore, Chapter 2 introduces McLuhan in

relation to a number of other thinkers, such as Innis, Postman, Carey, Levinson and Meyrowitz.

McLuhanism represents a North American media theoretical approach whose originality and depth continues to provide a strong focal point for analyses of media-technology (Babe 2000). However, there are also distinctive European traditions that could be invoked to develop a sophisticated understanding of the importance of the cultural embedding of the technological dimension of media analysis. The European traditions all share what Carey (1992) referred to as ‘the ritual model’ of media analysis (as opposed to the ‘transmission model’ that dominates North American communication studies).

Yet, Carey’s useful distinction obfuscates the subtle differences between various trajectories of European thought. Chapter 3, therefore, introduces four different thinkers: Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard alongside each other. In addition, the Chapter attempts to bring these traditions together into a more radical thesis on the future of society as a mediascape. Placing Benjamin’s seminal article ‘the Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ alongside Raymond Williams’ writings on television, which have almost equal status as key texts on media technology within cultural studies, Roland Barthes’ essay ‘From Work to Text’ (among others) and Baudrillard’s work on symbolic exchange the simulacrum and hyperreality, enables us to see how a focus on media-technology has also helped to develop a more critical notion of culture that does not slide into sociological or political reductionism. Although by no means identical, all four theorists have placed ‘culture’ to the foreground of analysing media technology, using – often implicitly – an analytical framework inspired by a rather loose association with Marxism (although, they have refrained from reducing media technology to simply a means of production).

The Benjamin–Williams–Barthes–Baudrillard conjunction is not an immediately recognizable one, as they were working within quite different traditions. Yet, in quite distinct ways, all four situate media-technology at the heart of understanding cultural changes, similar to McLuhan. However, unlike McLuhanism, the Marxist influence has ensured a strong connection with more politically orientated media-analyses, such as those of the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School and French Post-structuralism. They enable us to conceptualize media, culture and politics as interconnected fields, without subduing any one of them to the others.

Studies of technology, and especially media-technologies, have been dominated by men. On top of this, other traditions central to media-analyses, such as phenomenology and Marxism, have also been dominated by men. As a result, it is fair to say that there is an inherent masculinist bias in media-technological analyses. Whereas analyses of media content have become profoundly sensitized to the gendered nature of representation, this has not filtered strongly into considerations over the gendered nature of media-technology. This is the more remarkable since from its inception a phenomenology of media-forms also reveals their embodied being (media as extensions of ‘man’).

It is on the basis of this association between technology and the body, that Chapter 4 embraces the feminist challenge. However, this is not done in the form of an indictment, but as a means of deepening our understanding of the primacy of ‘difference’ that constitutes the essence of the ‘historical’ human body (rather than the metaphysical or theological notion of ‘humanity’ or ‘mankind’ in a non-gendered sense).

A clear angle in feminist writings on media technology is its focus on gendered embodiment alongside concerns over notions of domesticity, marginalization and social exclusion (Wajcman 1991, 2004; Cockburn 1992; Cockburn and Fürst-Dilic 1994; Spiegel 2001; Haddon 2003). These analyses are invoked to displace rather abstract and grand ideas of many male media theorists, and bring in a more astute sociological and culturally-specific angle.

Feminist notions of media also enable us to situate media-technologies in relation to the cultural and political, as well as social fields, which is essential to understanding their impact on the specific gendered orderings, which characterize the modern western world. The chapter concludes with a critical appraisal of feminist reflections on media-technology, and points at some shortcomings and limitations, which also include the dangers of deploying an undifferentiated notion of gender itself.

However, as we have already seen, there remains a fundamental issue with treating embodiment on the basis of the primacy of the human body as it privileges ‘man’ as the subject of history and assumes a metaphysical hierarchy of social organization with the human as both origin and destiny.

Therefore, Chapter 5 extends the analysis of media-technology through modes of embodiment by means of an analysis of the emergence of what might be called a ‘vitalist’ paradigm. This vitalist paradigm is mainly derived from Nietzsche, but finds echoes in the more contemporary works of Deleuze and Guattari, Virilio and, most importantly for this chapter, Actor Network Theory (ANT), especially the work of Bruno Latour. As a theoretical perspective, ANT has thus far not been applied to the study of media-technologies. In so doing, the chapter also seeks to make more explicit the possibilities for linking a phenomenological media analysis with the emergent field of ‘new media theory’ with a particular focus on processes of disembodiment, which has given rise to the concept of ‘networked being’.

There is no point in concerning ourselves with media-technology if we refrain from applying some of the generated insights to our own media-saturated, cultural environments. In the last 20 years, we have witnessed an explosion of digital and wireless communication technologies that have again radically reconfigured our everyday worlds in modern western society (although we are by no means equally affected by it or equally benefiting from it). The digital poses new questions regarding a phenomenological understanding of media-technologies. Specific attention needs to be given to digital media because they have forced us to radically rethink the matter of ‘matter’ and the nature of presence and the present (the virtual). The main aim of this chapter is to show how media-technologies connect to more general technological constellations and thereby have come to play a central role in the reconfiguration of the world we inhabit.

It should by now be clear that this book contains a dual purpose. On the one hand, it introduces the reader to a range of ideas regarding (media-) technologies that have – in many cases – occupied relatively marginal positions within the general fields of media and communication studies. In this sense, it is an attempt to alert the reader to some hidden treasures within existing works that can be unearthed to help illuminate our present condition, which is heavily mediated and mediatised.

On the other hand, it is an attempt to go beyond mere synthesis to make a more original contribution to media analysis. It aims to offer an alternative to the stalemate between technological determinism and instrumentalism without resorting to a simplistic notion of ‘dialectics’ (i.e., that it is a combination of both forces affecting each other). Instead, it wants to show how the stalemate is simply a product of ‘bad thought’ or – more charitably – a conceptual confusion. In doing so, it proposes to make a ‘Nietzschean turn’ in media analysis to steer away from ‘reductions’ of media processes to economic, political or social ones in favour of a more biophysiological and phenomenological understanding of media in which history, embodiment and form are recombined to provide an original framework for doing media analysis.

Suggested further reading

Carey, J.W. (1992) *Communication as Culture. Essays on Media and Society*. London: Routledge.

This is an excellent account of how Medium Theory (Media Ecology) can be used to develop a far better and more critical appreciation of the distinctive role of media in communication processes. It has a strong North American and historically-orientated focus.

Moores, S. (2005) *Media/Theory. Thinking about Media and Communications*. London: Routledge.

A very good and much more recent theoretical engagement with different ways of conceptualizing mediation processes. It has a strong sociological orientation on media technology.

Morley, D. (2007) *Media, Modernity and Technology. The Geography of the New*. London: Routledge.

British media studies have been strongly influenced by David Morley and his most recent work provides a wide-ranging set of explorations of the field of media and cultural studies, and a discussion of disciplinary and methodological issues and concerns.

Ong, W.J. (1982) *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the World*. London: Routledge.

This book is a true landmark in media analysis. A highly original and thorough engagement with the shifts and transformations of human culture as it moved from a sole dependency on orality to a new reliance on literacy.

Williams, K. (2003) *Understanding Media Theory*. London: Hodder Arnold.

An accessible introduction to different theories of mass mediation. Indispensable to those who are completely new to the subject.