Chapter 2
The End of Media:
Reconstructing Media Studies on the Basis of Actor–Network Theory

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ABSTRACT

In the network society and the age of media convergence, media production can no longer be isolated into channels, formats, technologies, and organizations. Media Studies is facing the challenge to reconceptualize its foundations. It could therefore be claimed that new media are the last media. In the case of digital versus analog, there is no continuity between new media and old media. A new and promising proposal has come from German scholars who attempt the precarious balance between media theory and a general theory of mediation based on Actor-Network Theory. Under the title of Actor-Media Theory (Akteur-Medien-Theorie) these thinkers attempt to reformulate the program of Media Studies beyond assumptions of social or technical determinism. Replacing Actor-Network Theory with Actor-Media Theory raises the question of whether exchanging the concept of "network" for the concept of "media" is methodologically and theoretically advantageous.

INTRODUCTION

Media Studies are usually concerned with the economic, social, and political conditions of the *production* of media, the analysis of media *content*, the reception and consumption of media products including the characteristics of *users* of media, and finally, the *critique* of media in general from a cultural and historical perspective. Often a particular form of media, such as print media or broadcast media, TV, or film becomes the focus of study with regard to the four aspects of production, content analysis, consumption, and critique. Equally often, a particular genre or format, such as newspapers, documentary, boulevard, comics, reality, or advertising takes center stage. Media content, furthermore, can be classified into

text, graphic, audio, und video, each of which has its own themes, genres, and formats. Audience studies for their part focus on the characteristics of media consumers and consumption patterns. Generally, the theoretical as well as ideological positions of media critique reflect major schools of modern social theory, liberal, Marxist, and postmodern. Despite that fact that many different disciplines are involved and the object of study is admittedly complex, Media Studies seems to be a well-defined terrain, mapped onto different domains and jurisdictions, with relatively clear boundaries, and many taken for granted assumptions about what media are and how they are to be studied.

MEDIA AND MEDIATION

With the advent of "new media," most of the foundational distinctions upon which Media Studies had been built disappear. In the network society and the age of media convergence, media production can no longer be isolated into channels, formats, technologies, and organizations. There is only one all-encompassing technical infrastructure. Participatory culture opens up content analysis and critique to all equally. The crowd has become smart (Surowiecki, 2004) and the cloud is inclusive, non-hierarchical, public, unlimited, and connected (Weinberger, 2012). Active prosumers take the place occupied by passive consumers. Marketing hype becomes a naked conversation (Levine et al., 2011; Scobel & Israel, 2006). The virtual world of media representation mixes inextricably with the so-called real world of physical presence, such that we no longer live "with" media, but "in" media (Deuze, 2011). Interaction moves beyond face-to-face, embodied presence into a many-to-many communication (Shirky, 2008) principally independent of temporal and spatial limitations (Castells, 1996). If all this were not enough to raise questions about the traditional assumptions of what media are and how they are to be studied, we can expect that the internet of things, ambient computing, and pervasive digital media will expand the concept of communication and information exchange way beyond human interaction and make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between media and non-media. Everything is becoming smart, connected, interactive, and media-like. Not just phones, glasses, and watches, but automobiles and refrigerators, entire homes, workplaces, schools, hospitals, transportation hubs etc. are joining the network. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find a situation that is not in some way a computer-mediated environment. These trends raise important questions for Media Studies. Can new media find a place on the traditional map(s) of Media Studies that pre-digital cartographers have left us? Are algorithms media? Or do they merely simulate media? Can 3D printing be considered a medium in the same way as printing a book, newspaper, or magazine? Are a printed gun or biological tissue and organs media products? In what sense can "social media" be considered media? Are Facebook and Google media? If so, all of them or only certain services, such as YouTube or certain contents such as images, video, and text? What about friendships? Are answers to search queries media products? Are Siri and Cortana media? What about AI, big data, learning analytics, and personalized services? Perhaps new media are not "media" at all in the traditional sense. Perhaps Media Studies is facing the challenge to reconceptualize its foundations.

Once media could be defined in opposition to voice and gesture. Voice and gesture characterized communication in situations of human co-presence, situations which sociologists have termed "interaction." It is a platitude of modern social theory to assume that society consists of interactions on the micro level and organizations, institutions, and functional subsystems such as politics, law, business, education, and media on the macro level. On the micro level, social interaction is defined as face-to-

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