
What Is a Journal for?

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<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

A journal needs a project: to survive, to thrive, to matter. Open Access (OA) journals need a project more than any other. OA has yet to develop a business model that will pay for the toil of editors, copy-editors, designers and content managers. Freelance authors have to prefer paying gigs; and academic authors, whose wages pay for the time to write, are under pressure to publish in recognised (established, usually hardcopy) journals with commercial publishers whose subscriptions revenue pays for the labour of publishing. The only possible reason to support an OA journal, apart from a generic desire to support OA as a principle, is that the journal has a project.

Perhaps most of all, a journal needs readers. They don't need to be many. *Art & Language* must have had one of the smaller circulations, but to those in its ambit, it mattered. It broke new ground. We can probably all recall journals whose every issue we seized on hungrily, steering us and our buddies into new paradigms. Some journals had the grace to stop when the work was done. Others turned respectable in middle age. Some began as online communities finding the need for longer, more thought-through pieces. Some have returned to faster, shorter formats. OA online has the great virtue of speed. But it still needs a reason to exist.

So how does *Media Theory* matter? Three challenges: media, theory, and media-theory.

Media, intrinsically plural as object, lie at the centre of an intrinsically interdisciplinary corpus of studies, from social sciences to humanities, professional to creative practice. Coming late to the university, major tracts of media (languages and literature, music, art, photography, architecture, and I would add economics and pretty much every field of the human sciences) had already been colonised, and

others (notably computing and information science) would be colonised at the same time as media and communications were staking out their claims. Each of the competitor departments had developed their own discourses, practices, pantheons, controversies. Throw in emergent discourses of the last 30 years like critical cartography and much of science and technology studies, and broad acres of contemporary philosophy. To matter, *Media Theory* needs to bite the transdisciplinary bullet, refuse the closures effected by disciplinary histories including our own, and demand the right to speak to, through, with and about *all* media. Anything that mediates. Weapons. Sex. Cash. Mosquitoes. Chlorophyll. Seismographs. Neurons. Mediation is not exclusively human, but it is what humans do when they are being human. The ecological principle concerns the connectivity of everything with everything else. What connects, mediates. Media are the materials and energies that connect humans in societies and ecologies. If the project of media theory is to matter, it cannot restrict the object of the study of media to technologically produced, transmitted and consumed media, still less to the sub-disciplinary contest of cinema, TV, Internet, press, radio etcetera. For too long we accepted that as technologies, media were exclusively human and divorced from the physical environment. For too long we ignored workplace media. For too long we believed in the divorce of factual and entertainment media. For too long we failed to insist that geographers and historians worked with and on media, that psychology and the sciences depend on media and mediations. We thought it was okay to be innumerate. We set ourselves apart from business communications. We have colluded in our own multiple alienations.

If media are what connect us, then a profound question about them is: how come we are so disconnected? That is the kind of question about media history and practice that only broad, collective effort could answer. At present, we lack the tools to build collective effort because our theory, like our disciplinary divisions, is composed of diverse, isolated and mutually incompatible schools. We distrust the idea of master discourse, *maîtres-à-penser*, super grand unified theory; but for lack of it increasingly inhabit a field of mutually incomprehensible language games. The terrifying prospect of the 'marketplace of ideas' that our paymasters openly promote in the name of freedom of speech easily displaces claims to academic freedom because collectively

and severally we would rather dump on one another than build an alternative to marketisation. We have no common cause, and no common means to pursue it.

Our distrust of unity actively enables this conversion of a debate that has never occurred into a shopping mall. Our reluctance to speak about truth contributes to the crisis of truth in contemporary democracy. Our reluctance to make value judgements contributes to the general tawdriness. *Media Theory* should absolutely refuse to accept this state of affairs. Theory is distinguished from philosophy by its address to actuality, however we define it. Philosophy starts from axioms: theory, wherever it starts, must always return to the stuff of media: affects, demands, techniques, materials, however we define them. Theoretical schools have become as much echo chambers as the alt-right. We may never reach agreement, but it is absolutely essential to meet and debate, to challenge each other with what we think constitute the object, the method and the goal of enquiry. That is a purpose worth pursuing.

We will only discover whether there is indeed a phenomenon we can call ‘media’ by comprehensively reconceptualising what concerns us as the shared *object* of our studies. An agora of theories is a proposal, not quite for a *method* but for a stage on which the encounter between alternate methods can be staged. The remaining question of media-theory concerns what we might want to produce. Every profession, every discipline, has at its core a specific good: shelter, justice, health, wealth. What is the *good* of a catholic debate about what connects us? Ultimately the goal must be to provide a place where these various goods can be contested. But the more urgent and specific task is to establish a place for that discussion. In the long term, a project worthy of open access engagement and the gifts of work it will demand would be to build a theatre where that drama can unfold. But in the interim, the media skills and knowledge we share collectively are exceptionally fit for debating its design. This is not a demand to abandon specialisation: specialisms have historically led us into the new through narrow gates. Pointing to the marginal and marginalised, the odd and the unique instance have constantly made us pause, rethink, and rewrite our understandings of history and the present. An apparently trivial observation about eyeline matches in classical Hollywood led Laura Mulvey [<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>] to overthrow everything we thought we

knew about how to study film. We are now at a point, however, when specialism defends itself for its own sake, as a value, as connoisseurship all too often framed in the nostalgic desire to regress to an imagined past of genteel appreciation and arcane disputes. Specialisms are not intrinsically valuable. Specialisms achieve value when they reveal a new potential in the stock of knowledge; because potential is power, the capacity to become otherwise, and therefore oriented to the future, not to the past.

The project of a collective media theory might then be to use the dialogue between our specialist objects and schools of thought to unleash the potential each of them has locked up inside its disciplinary firewalls. We may need disputation on the crises of the 17th century Neapolitan baroque as a sketchpad in which we can begin to draft models for the infrastructure of a public debate on the nature of the good and the good life. The debate that never happened between Habermas and Foucault [<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/critique-and-power>] might well have turned out as a dance of dinosaurs, but you have to regret that the apostle of the public sphere never confronted the architect of biopolitics. Or perhaps dead white men send too long a shadow over us anyway. And perhaps dialogue, as in face-to-face disputation between two people, is no longer possible or appropriate in the 21st century. Today, if there is to be any kind of democracy, any politics (if by politics we mean open debate about how we should live together), it will be mediated (the ecological principle implies that the debate be open to non-humans too; technological mediation makes it even more obvious that technologies and natural materials are already implicated). We are media specialists: we should discuss together what different media did, do or can provide to inform the enabling of debate in the 21st century. Popular drama or vanguard architecture? Queer affect studies or big data analysis? How do we end the habit of retreating into our homely circles of the like-minded? How do we create the grounds where disagreement is explicit and fruitful?

A journal has to be a collective enterprise of readers, writers and editors if it is going to live. To do that it needs a project. The excitement of OA is exactly that it opens up the grounds for collective discussion of what we mean by words like ‘open’ and ‘access’. The closed circles of chat among the like-minded about Peircean semiotics or the beta coefficient prediction of social presence in online learning is useful in its

little arena, but if it is to contribute to something less abstruse it must escape its bubble. My own presumptions – such as that the idea of a marketplace of ideas is a self-contradictory insult – have to be up for challenge. Can I continue to dismiss schools that believe the purpose of media is to send messages from here to there, or to return profits, on the grounds that they serve either God or Mammon? Can I go on scoffing at the idea that media have impacts on society with a clear conscience? Or do my declarations that these lines of enquiry are uninteresting, like a student complaining that an event is boring, reveal my failure to discover what is of interest?

Media-theory is not single and it should not be bounded, least of all by its own volition. There should be no agreement that some objects and some modes of enquiry are off-limits, save those that discredit themselves through hatred that refuses dialogue. Media-theory is not a public sphere already defined by consensus to include this and exclude that. Media-theory should not emphasise one of its terms over the other: the most positivist analysis of media is a theory, and the most philosophical statement, by dint of being a statement, is always also a material occurrence. Media-theory does not exist. Any claim that it exists as a defined and circumscribed behaviour is a confession of its failure to model dissent. Media-theory is a project. Perhaps it is interminable. That would be about right, if the goal is not to determine but to enable. Communication is both the means and the goal, a communication which is, if I'm right, going to be rocky, virulent, and always at the brink of scholarly and professional fisticuffs. At least it wouldn't be boring. Only that kind of risk makes a project matter.

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