

Media & Society Pocket Textbook

This is your pocket textbook for **Media & Society**. It's designed as an accessible guide to the ideas we'll explore in more detail in classes and course readings. Use the sidebar to navigate between topics.

Media

Thinking about media

By Marion Walton, University of Cape Town

What did you do when you first opened your eyes this morning? What did you do yesterday evening?

There's a good chance that your morning and evening rituals involved paying attention to some type of media. Perhaps in the morning you checked your [social media](#) timelines for updates from friends on Instagram or new trends on TikTok, or you checked your browser for the news. Perhaps in the evening you settled down to watch a form of [mass media](#), such as a television series on a streaming platform. If you're like most South Africans, the sound of a radio or podcast kept you company at some time in the day.

It's very likely that you used a medium to communicate with others — aural (speech, singing) or visual (clothing, facial expressions, gestures, sign language).

Activity:

Because we use so many forms of media without even noticing, reflect on:

- When do you first remember using media?
- What role have different languages and media played in your life so far?
- Which media industries do you find most interesting?

What are media?

In English, the word *media* evolved from the Latin *medius* ("in the middle") ([Harper, n.d.](#)). In this course we study the physical media, languages, and industries we use to connect and communicate.

We tend to think of print or electronic media, but people have been communicating via media for millennia. For example, the [Iziko Rhino](#) (see Figure 1) is a rock engraving made by Later Stone Age ancestors of the IXam San at Kinderdam, North West Province, between 1 000 and 10 000 years ago.

That engraving's **affordances** — its durability, interaction with surrounding light, even flickering firelight that animates the lines — still connect us to its creators (Hodgskiss & Esterhuysen, 2019). We call these **affordances** the potentials and constraints of a medium ([definitions](#)).

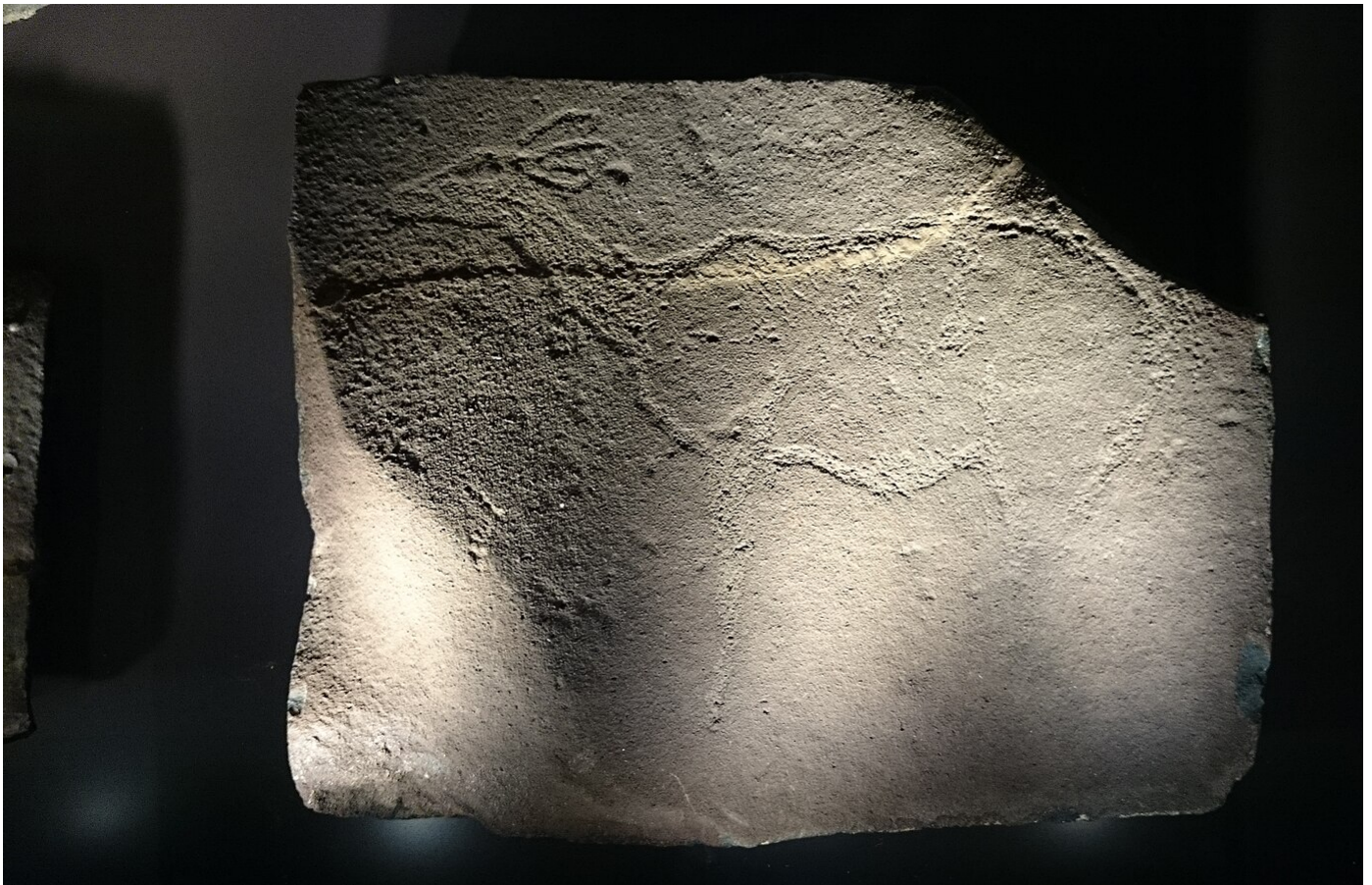


Figure 1: "Iziko Rhino" — Bronze sculpture of the Iziko Rhino outside the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town. Source: Marion Walton.

Many other communication technologies followed: print, digital images, audio/video formats, radio waves, the internet and generative AI.

Oramedia

[Oramedia](#) includes oral storytelling, proverbs, folktales, drama, puppetry and poetry (Ugboajah, 1985). These often use performance, improvisation, mimicry, music, dance, tonal language features and audience interaction (Finnegan, 2012:5–10).

What about digital media?

Today's digital media rely on electricity, internet connections, fibre-optics, broadcast signals and complex production/distribution systems — enabling global communication at the click of a button.

In the case of the Iziko Rhino, a Wikipedian at the Africa Centre in Cape Town published a photograph of the engraving to [Wikimedia Commons](#), making it viewable worldwide.

What makes social media different?

Social media platforms unite users, creators and advertisers on single apps or sites, providing tools for sharing text, photos and video with friends, family, or for entertainment and professional purposes.

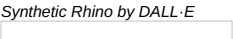
Activity:

Compare posting via (1) email vs. (2) a social media platform.

- Which affordances do you appreciate most?
 - Which do you dislike?
-

Is AI a form of media?

Generative AI systems automate media creation via statistical models: LLMs (e.g. ChatGPT) for text, diffusion models (e.g. DALL·E) for images.



This **synthetic media** raises questions of trust, bias and provenance — capable of bulk misinformation or “deepfakes.”

Meanings of “media”

- 1. **Media of production/distribution/reception:** print, sound waves, rock engravings, fabrics, paint.
- 2. **Medium (mode) of communication:** human languages (isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English), visuals, music.
- 3. **Media industries:** for-profit broadcasters, publishers, PR agencies, social platforms — motivated by ad revenue and subscriptions.

Though the Iziko Rhino lives on a non-profit Wikimedia Commons, we still rely on commercial industries (devices, hosting, electricity, internet) to access it.

Check your understanding

Here’s a TikTok clip by @wehustleclips.
Reflect on Kendrick Lamar’s Super Bowl halftime show ...

About this pocket textbook

This pocket textbook focuses on media in African contexts, emphasizing cultural studies and social semiotics.

Important definitions

- [Mass media](#)
- [Oramedia](#)
- [Social media](#)
- [Synthetic media](#)

Find others in the [full list of definitions](#).

References

Sources are listed in the [List of references](#).

Media & Meaning

By Marion Walton, University of Cape Town

All media are used to communicate **meaning**. Since the earliest days of humanity's evolution (between 100 000 and 30 000 years ago) humans have been developing symbolic communication by using the media at hand, such as spoken language and ochre paint ([Hodgskiss, 2015](#)).


Semiotic resources

Whenever we create or interpret some form of media, we are using [semiotic resources](#).

Everyday media rely on **physical means** such as your own body (e.g. your hairstyle) or clothing and **abilities**, such as the ability to speak, hear or see, and **cultural knowledge** such as the ability to speak one or many languages and the knowledge of other social conventions such as visual codes about which hairstyles, clothing and gestures to use in different places such as home, school or the workplace.



Figure 1: Zulaikha Patel protests discriminatory hair policies at Pretoria Girls High School in 2016. Source: [Facebook](#)

 The photograph in Figure 1 was taken during protests against discriminatory hair policies at Pretoria Girls High School in 2016. **List** all the various physical and cultural resources which (1) the photographer and (2) the student, Zulaikha Patel, used to create the photograph. Why do you think they chose to use these particular resources? (You can submit your answer using the form at the bottom of the page.)

The meanings of the messages we produce every day are conveyed with [signs](#). By “sign”, we mean, broadly, something which stands for something else – we will explore this in more detail later in the course.

Semiosis and meaning-making

We seldom work with individual signs; instead we use combinations of physical resources and cultural knowledge, which we call [semiotic resources](#). (The word “semiotic” comes from **semiosis**, which in turn derives from the Greek word *sēma*, or “sign” ([Harper, n.d.](#))). Semiosis refers to how we use **signs** in **meaning-making** activities (Kress, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2004), or, in other words, the processes by which we produce and interpret messages.

As Van Leeuwen (2004:285) points out, we make meanings based on how we have seen semiotic resources being used in the past.

In the case of visual modes, for example, we might often encounter certain hairstyles and gestures in specific social settings, such as schools or protests respectively. As a result, we come to associate these situational meanings with particular hairstyles and gestures.

In the case of verbal languages, a language such as English has a long history and includes many stereotypical terms which have historically been used to express derogatory judgements about women in past eras and today ([Mills, 2008](#)). Thus we often internalise these sexist and other discriminatory judgements in the process of learning a language and getting to know the world around us.

The potential for a language to influence our thinking is so profound that philosophers have highlighted that we are only able to speak by virtue of our language “putting the words in our mouth”. As Gadamer pointed out, “it is literally more correct to say that language speaks *us*, rather than that we speak it” ([Gadamer, 1982:463](#)), or in Heidegger’s words, “Language speaks.” ([1971:124](#)).

We can also use semiotic resources to create new, changed meanings, because it is possible to use them in new contexts. For example, the photograph in Figure 1 depicts Zulaikha Patel wearing a school uniform, an Afro hairstyle, and raising her fist. This is why [Van Leeuwen, 2004](#) argues that the possible meanings of a semiotic resource are a kind of **affordance**, which has both potentialities and constraints:

“Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses” (Van Leeuwen, 2004:285).

Whether we create a message or receive it, every time we interpret a particular semiotic resource we are **making meanings**. In this way, meanings work differently to actual codes. Codes (such as Morse code or computer code) are specialized systems which allow us to decode a message exactly, once we know how it was encoded. By contrast, people always notice, attend to, select, frame and interpret semiotic resources in a particular context. As [Hall, 2006](#) points out, this means we often “read” media differently from one another.

We will take these discussions further in our study of **Semiotics**.

Languages

English plays a disproportionately influential role in world media. As a result of the colonial dominance of the British Empire, and the subsequent rise to power of the USA, global news flows have been English-dominated and global media have often promoted Anglo-American popular and digital cultures, as we explore in our discussion of media and [power](#).

At least 35 languages are spoken in South Africa, including official, unofficial and marginalised languages. African languages carry a rich heritage of **oramedia** or traditional oral forms and indigenous media such as storytelling, proverbs, folklore, folktales, drama, puppetry and oral poetry.

These oramedia play a crucial role **sharing ideas and values** in African contexts ([Ugboajah, 1985](#); [Ugboajah, 1987](#); [Willems, 2014](#)). Digital media now means it's possible to further extend the reach of these traditional oral forms ([Nkoala, 2023](#)).

Visual modes

Meaning is also conveyed visually through the language of visual design ([Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006](#); [Jewitt & Oyama, 2001](#)), software interfaces, the photographic codes used in print media or websites as well as the cinematic codes in video. We also make meaning through gestures, whether using South African sign language or imitating dance moves on TikTok. An important part of learning about media involves learning the skills to both **interpret and produce** a range of visual modes of communication.

Socially shared **semiotic systems** can thus include written and spoken languages, music, visual conventions such as expressive typefaces, emoji or memes, and photographic and video codes.

Check your knowledge

Activity 3

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress.
[Learn more](#)

Figure 1: Zulaikha Patel protests discriminatory hair policies at Pretoria Girls High School in 2016.



The photograph in Figure 1 was taken during protests against discriminatory hair policies at Pretoria Girls High School in 2016. List all the various physical and cultural resources which (1) the photographer and (2) the student, Zulaikha Patel, used to create the photograph.

Your answer

Why do you think they chose to use these particular resources?

Your answer

Submit

Clear form

Questions

- Which semiotic resources do you enjoy using every day?
- How many languages do you speak?

- Have you ever felt stereotyped by the way someone used language to describe you, or by a visual representation?
- Which languages were you forced to learn at school?
- Which languages would you learn if you could choose any language?