What is not a medium?

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Sean Cubitt recently unfurled an expansive ambit for media studies: "Anything that mediates. Weapons. Sex. Cash. Mosquitoes. Chlorophyll. Seismographs. Neurons."[1]

A couple years earlier, I offered a similar list: "fire, aqueducts, power grids, seeds, sewage systems, DNA, mathematics, sex, music, daydreams, and insulation."[2]

At least we agreed on one thing explicitly—the most *explicit* thing there is. Both lists feature fancy epistemic techniques (seismographs, mathematics), biological basics (chlorophyll, DNA), flora and fauna (mosquitoes, seeds), infrastructures (cash, power grids), and pyrotechnics (weapons, fire). The ability to craft a canon-busting list of items that would require major interdisciplinary skills to study may well be a professional requirement for a media theorist.

The media concept was born expansive. Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* led the way, starting with the light bulb: something that has no content, but enables much else. To obvious picks such as comics, typography, the telephone, radio, TV, and film (this was 1964) he added numbers, money, roads, clocks, and clothing. Other thinkers since have added many more. The vitality of media studies lies perhaps as much in its ability to explode any collection of objects as in its theoretical innovations.

Does such boundary-breaking have a limit? Does the media concept utterly lack edges? People sometimes ask me if everything is a medium. I answer: Of course not—but everything could be. Being a medium is not a permanent state. It is the condition of being in the middle. As Cubitt says, media mediate. They are for something and for someone (and neither of those need be human). To most people, lakebeds, arctic ice, and cave formations are just mud, ice, and rock; but to those with eyes to see, they are valuable records, climate proxies, full of data about earth history.[3] Media are positional.

The recent expansion—or rather the return—of the term *medium* to natural elements both stresses the role of the reader (not everyone can gather or interpret ice-core samples) and, crucially, saves us from falling back onto a subject-object split that puts meaning only on the subject side. That nature is an archive does not mean that its readers are projecting meanings onto it: they are decrypting inscriptions that are very much full of significance, only not recorded in language or by human hand. The media concept does not authorize a free-for-all in the object store; it invites a specific

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[1] "What is a Journal For?" *Media Theory* 1:1 (2017): 187-191 at 188.
[2] *The Marvelous Clouds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 29.
[3] Shannon Mattern, "The Big Data of Ice, Rocks, Soils, and Sediments: Inside the material archives of climate science," *Places Journal*, November 2017.

way of thinking about reading, about the materialization of intelligence in middle things.

Medium is an Aristotelian concept but a Latin word. This should tell you something about its medieval origins. The concept's emergence can be pinpointed quite precisely to Thomas Aquinas's reading of Aristotle's *De Anima* (on the soul).[4] There is no word in the Greek text for the thing that stands between eye and object, ear and sound, though Aristotle gave plenty of reasons to think that way about milieu, ambiance, and environment.[5] Thomas coined a term for what had not been named before in Aristotle, and the word went on its merry way since.[6]

Things in the middle have ambiguous status. They are often considered impure and unclean. A *midden*, according to the *OED*, is "a dunghill...refuse heap ...domestic ash pit." Middens are of as great interest to archaeologists as mass media are to cultural critics; both are full of shells, bones, and other excreta. To *meddle* is to come between in an unpleasant way. *Middling* means of poor quality. *Midwives* perform and enable critical labor but rarely receive the honor they deserve. George Eliot's great novel *Middlemarch* announces already in its title its moral outlook of moving through the midworld. In a more honorific spirit, China considers itself the middle kingdom, and the character for China 中 is also the character for middle. The *Medes* were an ancient people in the middle, with a kingdom called *Media*, and a *maydan*—an open space in a city—descends from the same Indo-European root as *medium*.[7] You can have a *happy medium*. Perhaps that happens when we develop a good *model* that doesn't *muddle*. This cluster of terms points to a series of attitudes of praise and blame, auspiciousness and horror, honor and defilement that are typically associated with the sacred and the profane.

To think well about media, we might revive the middle voice, a grammatical in-between that is neither passive nor active, but almost reflexive. It has largely vanished from English. Once you could say, *the meal is eating*, but now we would need to say, *the meal is being eaten*. *The meal is eating* sounds weird—precisely because the agency is off; it's neither passive, with an unidentified agent, nor active, with an identified one. Yet vestiges remain. *He is shaving* implies: *he is shaving himself. The dishes are soaking. Essay collections don't sell well. That car drives well. It is raining.* Our lack of

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[4] Wolfgang Hagen, "Metaxu: Eine historiosemantische Fussnote zum Medienbegriff," in *Was ist ein Medium?* Ed. Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 13-29.

[5] Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3:1 (1942): 1-42.

[6] The best history of the concept is Stefan Hoffmann, *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002).

[7] I thank Dr. Farbod Honarpisheh for this information.

fluency in the middle voice suggests both why social critics like to scapegoat "the media" and why the specter of technological determinism haunts any effort to say anything in media studies: we are not skilled in knowing how to talk about entities that participate decisively in actions without causing them. To say that a medium matters is not to say that it played a causal role. The medium is in the middle, indispensable to what is going on, but neither the actor nor the acted-upon.

When we turn things over in the midden, we find treasures and trash. The reading depends on us, our communities and worlds. An appreciation for media as infrastructures of being, as ontological operators, as moorings for human craft thus need not be incompatible with a fierce critical commitment to teaching and fighting against their abuse. Media writ large may be as fundamental to human existence as the atmosphere or biosphere, but media, in the more standard sense as institutions and messages, can also be infested with disinformation, palaver, and scum. Media studies should walk between ontological expansiveness and the political-ethical urgency to figure out who is doing what to whom with what effect. The middle voice can be a great way to think, but it shouldn't relieve us from identifying agency and intention. It needs to be employed dialectically.

The task is both to think critically about media as agents of domination and to recognize the ways they suspend us fruitfully in the middle of things. Restricting the media concept to channels or institutions is severely limiting, absolutely, but it can also be limiting to make media too abstract, too primal, too metaphysical. There's great excitement and intellectual power in seeing media as DNA or chlorophyll, no question. But such expansion too needs to be handled with care: there is poetry in elemental media, but it can be dangerous poetry when Section 230, conspiracy theory, a burning planet, and surveillance capitalism (to choose a few examples) are on the agenda. Let us not roll out a red carpet to the monsters that bestride our infoscape. Silicon Valley would love nothing more than to have us all define media as forces of nature. At a human scale, for better or worse, when we talk about media, we have to talk about money and power, at least some of the time.

Everything can be a medium! Yes! Few statements could be fraught with more epistemic, ethical, political and aesthetic weight. It can drive us mad with the infinitude of potential meaning or inspire us to care for things too often treated as middling and mean. It requires the greatest thought and discernment to know when and how a medium is. Let's give that thought and discernment an old name: dialectic. Or maybe even better: responsibility.

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