I consider the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as a decisive event in my biography. But the (childhood) memory of the events at the time mutate with the annual rerun of historical coverage in Germany: Images of crowds filling the streets facing special police forces, masses of people fleeing to Hungary, President Reagan’s iconic appeal to Gorbatchev to “tear down this wall”. Although I’d like to believe in the reality of what I heard and saw and felt at the time, many things of those days are not available to me through direct experience or memory. In fact, I can no longer separate what may have been my own perception of the events and what has been a layering of references and images that are only accessible in mediated form. How to resolve this ambivalence of understanding a biographical event as a media event?

My trajectory as a media scholar is concerned with this question: What reality is present in and through media that we cannot access in ways other than exposing ourselves to their specific aesthetic and cultural forms? Looking back at the authors and themes that I studied, this question seems to emerge as a central concern. Starting with Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, then poststructuralism and Jean Baudrillard, moving on to film history and media archaeology (à la Thomas Elsaesser and Lev Manovich) to land at practice-based approaches to journalism history, reading 1830’s American penny papers through the more recent experience of the blog. While media theory somehow lingered on in the back of my mind, research interests refocused on history, archives – the durable stuff. All this theorising of
“new media” in various strands of research in the 1990s and early 2000s was tiring after some time and there was a good reason to look back at the trajectories that had taken us there. My current interest in critical approaches to digital methods then involves a theory of media that is much more related to practice.

These inquiries boil down to questioning and investigating the ‘content of the form’ that media confront us with, a term I borrow from Hayden White. Media theory then becomes a forum for interrogating how media shape our perceptions and questioning the ways in which this is commonly understood. For anyone having made their peace with the rampant ‘theorising’ of media and society in the post-structuralist tradition or the heyday of Internet research around the year 2000, the question is: “Why should we do media theory (again)”? The following 10 propositions are an invitation to debate, rather than answers to this question. They are propositions rather than assertions, asking to be challenged, affirmed or dismissed. They manifest observations and concerns that have emerged in the recent years rather than being a manifesto. But you can still pin them on the wall. The virtual wall.

I. Media Theory Is Transnational

It may be a very obvious point to claim that media theory is a transnational endeavor. Scholars from all over the world are doing media theory, contribute to international journals, go to international conferences. Why do we need the concept of the nation at all in such networked and globalised times? Because each scholar is located in a specific research environment, where certain traditions (theoretical, conceptual, methodological) inevitably shape what kind of research can be done (e.g., in terms of third-party funding objectives and policies). For a scholar at MIT (Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.) these traditions and objectives of research will necessarily be different than for a literature scholar working in Würzburg (Germany) or a social activist in Mumbai (India). We engage with scholars who share our interests across nations, but the national traditions in doing media research should not become obliterated in such transnational dialogues. This is an important point to keep in mind as many dialogues are now held in English-language publications. There is a
danger of limiting the plurality of approaches to media theory by assuming that everyone has more or less read the same books and articles. This is a particular problem for non-native speakers of English, not because they can’t master the language, but because they need to summarise entire strands of knowledge for audiences outside their own disciplinary or national location. All too often, this non-English legacy is simply dropped from the discourse because it would involve too much explanation, background and reflection. Seeing media theory as transnational offers a way of appreciating these disciplinary traditions and positions, and of understanding the situatedness of scholars who uphold them. Trust in your voice.

2. Media Theory Is Interdisciplinary

The dominant strands in media theory go back to critical theory, philosophy, history of communications media, the arts and literature. It is a syncretic field of endeavour, informed by artistic practices and critical traditions, by different conceptions of what a medium is and what historical benchmarks are considered important. While the notion of a discipline is closely tied to a specifically modern view of fields of expertise, media scholars often override and question these boundaries between disciplines. They are interested in the overlaps and juxtapositions between disciplines that have touched on media at some point. In turn, taking interdisciplinary endeavour seriously requires becoming aware of how boundaries operate, and what ontological and epistemological assumptions go into their creation. Media scholars then are ideally positioned to take interdisciplinary thinking into contexts where it is merely advocated but not practiced. Think across boundaries.

3. Media Theory Can Be Applied

For scholars working in hermeneutic traditions of Western philosophy, the mere thought of applying theory triggers an immediate defence mechanism. Theory is knowledge creation, pure and simple. You won’t find Microsoft Research banging on your door in reaction to a fine, sophisticated piece on post-humanism. Or maybe you will? These days, the transitions between fields occur far more often and frequently, between theory and practice, between thoughts and actions. Activists come together to form a start-up for public interventions. Artists adopt theoretical principles to
create new sensory and aesthetic experiences. The same principles may be taken up by designers and software developers to create real-life products. While you may reserve a place in your heart and mind for doing theory as a purely critical endeavour, which is absolutely essential in these output-driven times, you have to be ready and open for theory to materialise in unforeseen ways. These materialisations can then serve as a trigger and inspiration for doing theory. *Welcome to entropy.*

### 4. Theory Has a Context (and a Motivation)

In an interdisciplinary setting such as this journal, individual assumptions about what media theory is or should be need to be made transparent. When a scholar in the tradition of critical theory confronts an investigation of montage practices in early Modernist art film, both theories of media need to be set in their respective context beyond a mere literature review. You cannot assume that your audience or interlocutors will share the same assumptions about either medium or theory than your disciplinary fellows. This situation can be a real challenge and a real chance for surprising encounters. We confront theory against assumptions and objectives that we situate and rationalise in personal, professional and theoretical terms. But in an interdisciplinary setting, these tacit assumptions should be put on the table before going into critical engagement with an idea.

A second point about context concerns the historical circumstances in which certain ideas emerge. This may be a point of fervent dispute: We can either ignore context and assume a continuous flow of ideas and arguments that apparently have no time, including the time of our own theorising; or, we can understand certain theoretical positions against their historical relevance, and explain first where a particular theory comes from. We don’t need to use context as explanation, and thereby contribute to historical relativism. But I think it makes a difference whether you discuss Baudrillard’s notion of simulation against the background of French post-structuralism, the events of May 1968 in Paris or the rise of the Internet. *Situate yourself.*
5. Media Theory Is Not a Field

Acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of media theory, I would like to address the notion of field. Media theory itself is not a field, I would argue, because it attracts incursions from such a wide array of discourses, disciplines and backgrounds, that media theory does not generate a kind of knowledge that would be comparable across contexts. It is hard to assume that someone can do media theory “better” than someone else, if both come from totally different backgrounds. Media theory rather delimits a space of inquiry where positions can meet outside their own disciplinary contexts.

The notion of the field, at least in its sociological understanding following Bourdieu, also entails an argument about positioning actors in power relations to each other. The production of knowledge and theory in relation to fields is here closely aligned to struggles over authority. While such dynamics of established and incumbent actors can be observed in many individual fields (aka disciplines), the fact that media theory itself is not such a field creates a comparatively more even space in which arguments and positions can develop more liberally than in a closer disciplinary corset. In an ideal world then, a junior scholar should here have the liberty and productive environment to formulate and defend his or her position through a critique of established scholars. Media theory is strengthened by drawing on several fields of knowledge and inquiry, affirming the intellectual freedom within a common space rather than disciplinary hierarchies. *Dare to be a commoner.*

6. Debate Needs Positions (but Positions Are Not Everything)

Scholars struggle to attain a position within the fields of knowledge they work in and within the institutions they work for. Obtaining this position is a struggle for recognition, maintaining it is a social skill. But being able to question your own position and being open to new ideas is the backbone of academic inquiry. We need positions to be able to debate. But positions themselves have their own shelf-life. *Speak and listen.*
7. Define Medium/a

Judged from your own position and background, medium/a is probably not a problematic category. For some, speaking of the media covers the BBC, the Washington Post, the Times of India or Le Monde. Others talk about voice and the body as media. Yet, some just mean this or that technical device, such as the telegraph, electricity, television, databases. In different strands of research, media include anything from Alberti’s conception of perspective to sensing devices or blockchains. For a journal as interdisciplinary as Media Theory, a (working) definition of medium/a should introduce every contribution. Even if it is blown to pieces in the paragraphs that follow or if it merges with other definitions into a new lifeform. What medium/a?

8. Media Are Everywhere (but Not Everything Is Media)

One lesson of caution we can draw from the media theory of the 1990s and early 2000s is that the mere proliferation of a technical device or infrastructure does not explain its variegated uses and meanings. One fallacy of the early theorising of the Internet was the assumption that every part of the social would inevitably change and, more importantly, would change in the same direction. At the same time, this period and body of work has been incredibly influential and has contributed to the enormous variety of approaches in which media are nowadays theorised (again). But there is a certain tendency to repeat the prophetic fallacy of new media forms, especially in the fields of social media and mobile media research. Just because a media form or technology appears everywhere at more or less the same time, this need not be a revolutionary moment in a theoretical perspective. With the rich legacies of media theory represented in this journal, the detached theoretical perspective may serve as a cautious marker of critical distance in the face of accelerated technological change. Think beyond media.

9. What Media Theory Is Not About

There are legions of journals to pick from when you want to publish results of research. The really good ones manage to foster a dialogue between their contributors and audiences because all can share a common concern, a need to
articulate and reflect positions. When you contribute to *Media Theory*, think of Theory first and be aware of the legacies. The dynamics and economics of research today often create an immediate urge to publish. For an empirical paper, some discussion of theory is usually a sign of good style and disciplinary conventions. But for a journal dedicated to media theory, the dialogue across fields and its representatives is essential for creating an identity. Media theory is not about blowing up an observation or finding about media beyond its proportions. *Think theory.*

10. **Media Theory Is Open Access**

Open access is going to redefine how scholarship is done and how it is communicated. At the moment, this idea is still in a transition period because of the disciplinary and economic legacies in academic publishing. It takes courage and resources to launch a fully open access journal that can rely on an academic community to support it. But there is an ambivalence here, between open access and being accessible. Natural scientists are very good communicators of their research, I think, because they learn throughout their studies that everything they need to explain to the public will be horribly complicated. The humanities and social sciences have often not made this realisation yet. They address media, the social, communication and so on from an unquestioned perspective of relevance to the wider public. But these individual positions on media, the social, or communication do not necessarily address public concerns because they refer to legacies and concepts which only a few share. One central challenge of media theory is to be accessible without denigrating the quality of theory. As a result of open access, scholars also need to be ready for critique and reactions coming from beyond the realm of the usual suspects. *Be open and be accessible.*

**References**

This list is open to your imagination and the power of your databases.

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