What Is Media Theory?

SIMON DAWES

Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), France

With the relative ease with which new journals can now be established, the launch of a new journal of media theory obliges us all the more to justify the need for such an endeavour (Cubitt, this issue), to argue that we do indeed need yet another journal theorising media (Shome, this issue), and to convince at least some readers that the journal deserves the name, Media Theory (Mitchell, this issue). For this launch issue of the journal, editorial and advisory board members were invited to set out their own views on the importance of (a new journal of) media theory. While the journal can hardly satisfy the occasionally conflicting and contradictory wishes of everyone on the boards, this special issue represents a pluralistic manifesto for the journal – manifestos for various possibilities and directions for Media Theory.

Media, Theory and Media Theory

Media Theory is not, therefore, a journal that privileges any particular theoretical approach, perspective or tradition to the study of media, but nor is it simply a matter of disinterestedly presenting their diversity or that of the range of theoretical concepts or tools proposed or applied in media research. Rather, in emphasising ‘media’, ‘theory’ and ‘media theory’, the journal aims to deprovincialise media theory by bringing into dialogue and debate the diversity of ways in which media are theorised. For despite the inherently interdisciplinary histories of the various disciplines in which media is studied internationally, there remains a tendency to restrict one’s reading to one’s own field or disciplinary, geographical or linguistic bubble, applying and developing theories without sufficient knowledge of how those theories have already been debated and developed elsewhere. And although media research has
been institutionalised in media, communication and information studies disciplines, departments, research centres and journals around the world, much of the theoretical media research continues to be done outside of those fields. In many of the most well-established (and often commercially published) media journals, the theoretical element of individual articles is often restricted to the opening literature review section of peer-reviewed, empirical ‘research’ articles, while articles that are devoted to theoretical engagement and close reading of theoretical texts are demoted to un-peer-reviewed ‘commentary’ sections. Conversely, the more ‘theoretical’ media journals (normally more recently established, online and open access) tend to focus on particular schools or, if they are explicitly open-goaled and interdisciplinary, to either privilege dialogue between particular approaches or disciplines, or to feature multiple disciplinary approaches without much evidence of dialogue or rapprochement between them. This journal aims to offer the best of both these types of media journal, as well as those non-media-related journals that privilege theoretical exploration and debate, with a particular focus on transcending theoretical, disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

The aim is not to establish a particular theory of any particular media, or to present the various theories of the various media; it is rather to theorise media by unravelling and teasing apart, by undermining and critiquing, and by providing genealogical accounts of alternative attempts at theorising media. To do so necessitates the transcending and transgressing of disciplinary boundaries, and the bringing into dialogue of diverse theoretical approaches. The journal will endeavour to encourage the Marxists as well as the Foucauldians, the media historians as well as the media archaeologists, those who follow in the footsteps of Williams as well as those who stand on the shoulders of McLuhan, and those from within the British cultural and media studies tradition as well as those within German cultural techniques and media theory, to write as much for each other as for the already converted, resisting the temptation to settle for the journal becoming an echo chamber for any one approach. For *Media Theory*, to theorise is therefore to ‘make, adapt, stretch and compact distinctions between terms that are generally familiar’ (Baehr, 2000: xix), to ‘dismantle’ traditions (Baehr, 2000: xlv), to ‘flush out assumptions’ (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 30), to reconstruct the genealogy of theorisations and to reveal the
'dissension of things' (Foucault, 1977: 142); it is the “never-finished task and vocation of undermining philosophy as such, of unravelling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds” (Jameson, 2009: 59). Unlike (media) philosophy, (media) theory must always return to the stuff of media (Cubitt, this issue) and to its own mediation (Mitchell, this issue). On one level, this means continually asking the question, what is, or are, media? More than a particular technology or industry, anything can become a medium – from sex to seismographs, from chlorophyll to cash (Cubitt, this issue), from a grain of sand to the universe (Mitchell, this issue) – but not everything is always-already a medium. Infinite, indefinite (Mitchell, this issue) and ‘intrinsically plural as object’ (Cubitt, this issue), there is nevertheless always something outside media – the unmediated, the immediate, the presentation as opposed to the representation (Mitchell, this issue). One task is thus to perpetually reconceptualise what concerns us as the shared object of our studies, refusing consensus on what is to be included or excluded.

Thus far, the contributions to the journal have been from mostly – if, thankfully, not yet dead – white men from the global north. If the journal is to be effective in its pursuit of deprovincialising media theory, then more effort needs to be made to include and engage with theories and theorists from normally neglected communities and locations. The effort to deprovincialise media theory goes beyond inclusion of and dialogue with multiple disciplines, locations, identities and perspectives, however; it means decolonising and geopoliticising theory (Shome, this issue) and generating a critique of media power.

Aware of its own mediation as an online and open access journal, Media Theory will aim to be a journal that is both recognisably an academic journal, by paying heed to scholarly conventions, as well as something new, by challenging those conventions and what we have come to expect an academic journal to be. Adhering for the most part to referencing conventions, the double-blind peer-review process, publishing ethics, indexing and archiving, and publishing articles with a creative commons licence that ensures the integrity and authorship of the article, we will nevertheless be open to experiments in radical open access publishing, including the possibility of open peer-review and remixing content.
At the heart of the project behind this journal, therefore, is a focus on deprovincialisation (media theory from the global south; queering media theory; etc.), radicalising open access publishing (remixing; rethinking peer-review; theorising ‘openness’ and ‘access’), and problematising the concepts of ‘media’, ‘theory’ and ‘media theory’, as well as a conscious and consistent endeavour to bring into contact and into dialogue diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, so as to develop a transnational and transdisciplinary forum of debate on media theory and academic publishing. *Media Theory* is thus both an academic journal on media theory, and an opportunity to self-reflexively critique and debate what media theory and academic journals are, have been and could possibly be.

**Media, Metaphor and Representation**

The first section opens with essays on media, metaphor and representation, beginning with W.J.T. Mitchell’s metaphorical reflection on what we talk about when we talk about media: ‘Counting Media: Some Rules of Thumb’. Distinguishing between five overlapping and contradictory rules of media (the rules of none, one, two, three and all), Mitchell insists on the need for media theory to engage with media ‘on its own field’, to question its own antitheses and to be self-reflexive about its own metalanguage. Setting out the three basic orders of media – images/sounds/words – and mapping them onto other familiar triads from the history of media theory, from icon/index/symbol to gramophone/film/typewriter, he also reminds us that media is itself one part of a triad: that between sender and receiver in the transmission/communication model. Ultimately, he argues, media can be both everything and nothing, while everything and nothing are, in turn, always potentially media. Beyond the unambitious and yet impossible task of simply defining, listing and counting all these different potential types of media, or asking when and how something becomes media, Mitchell argues that the task of media theory is to provide an ‘account of such counting’; of the ways in which we have theorised media, as much as a theory of media itself.

For Liam Cole Young, such attempts at triadic thinking highlight the importance of imagination, conceptual modelling, speculative thinking and experimental writing to media theory. In his article, ‘Imagination and Literary Media Theory’, Young laments
the waning importance of literary studies (in favour of communication studies and anthropology) to media theory, reminding us that imagination – as object as well as method – has been an “engine” that has driven media theoretical debates over the past sixty years or so. In emphasising the imaginative thinking, close reading and experimentalism of the literary stream, Young shows how media theory has been able to ground abstract ideas in material, discursive and technical contexts that have otherwise been neglected by more historical or philosophical approaches. In light of the contemporary complexities of everyday life and new forms of computation, commerce and governance, he argues that a return to the literary roots of media theory could help provide the new metaphors we need to understand the relation between technological and social change.

For Scott McQuire, we must continue to question the general understanding of ‘media’, where ‘mediation’ is seen as the production of ‘signs’ related to or representing something – such as voice, experience or event – that is somewhere else. In ‘Media Theory 2017’, he looks back at Derrida’s theorising of ‘writing’ in *Of Grammatology* to argue for the contemporary importance of theorising presence, absence and temporality in media that have become digital, mobile and ubiquitous. Despite numerous media studies attempts at theorising the secondariness, supplementarity and representationality of media, McQuire argues that new terms and concepts are needed if we are to understand the ways in which profound changes in all that we have understood as media – “in terms of scale, integration with everyday life, transformation of the archive, and the growing convergence of media platforms with other domains such as transport, logistics, finance, health, and e-commerce” – constitute a new register of experience that requires a radical rethinking of assumed relations of presence and absence.

**Locating Media, Theory and Society**

Responding to transformations in, and the increasing imbrication of, media technologies and society is often presented as the study of ‘media and society’, where ‘society’ could mean ‘anything else’, and where any theoretical engagement is with a separate body of (non-media-centric) knowledge developed within other disciplines. There has in recent years, however, been a debate on whether or not media theory
should be privileging media-centric approaches instead. In considering the merits of the two approaches in ‘The ‘Theory’ in Media Theory: The ‘Media-Centrism’ Debate’, Terry Flew situates them within wider and more historical debates about the relation between materiality and discourse in the work of Hall, Laclau & Mouffe and others, as well as in the debate between McLuhan and Williams on, respectively, the media’s influence on society or the social shaping of media. Turning to the mediasphere, medium theory, media ecologies, mediation and mediatization, Flew argues that the journal should be open to consideration of those perspectives on the media that come from within the study of media itself, and engage in more speculative accounts of where our media technologies may be leading us socially, culturally, politically and economically.

In retheorising ‘media’ and its boundaries, it becomes essential to reconsider the boundaries of ‘media theory’ too, and, in ‘Configuring Media Theory’, Marc Steinberg questions the provincialisation of media theory by asking ‘what counts as (media) theory?’. If we are delimiting media theory to critical theory, then we ignore those theorists, such as Alvin Toffler, that fall on the wrong side of the divide. Likewise, we may also be delimiting which regions of the world produce theory. For Steinberg, the need to locate media theory is a question of genre and industry, as well as of geography, as different systems of print capitalism in other countries would produce academic publications with different standards and forms, which would in turn produce different kinds of theory. Considering the diversity of types, media and milieux of theory conducted in Japan, by media figures, artists and entrepreneurs in popular paperbacks, manga and weekly magazines for general and professional readerships, as well as university lecturers writing in hardbacks produced for their students and colleagues by commercial academic publishers or university presses, he proposes that media theory is thus a ‘configuration’ more than a definable entity as such; one that requires us to reflect upon the institutional and geographical conditions of media theorisation.

In doing so, we can more ambitiously aim to geopoliticise and decolonise media studies, producing new epistemological frames within which to study media. This is what, in her article, ‘Going South and Engaging Non-Western Modernities’, Raka
Shome argues the journal should be doing. Taking issue with the ‘comparing media systems’ and ‘media/communication and development’ approaches, as well as the more recent emphasis on ‘dewesternising media studies’, Shome argues that they tend to position Southern media (studies) in opposition to those in an invisible North/West. For Shome, therefore, theorising media – rethinking “what media means, what it can mean, its histories, its scope of operations, and even the objects that may count as media” – is a question of geopoliticising knowledge production and non-Western mediated modernities on their own terms. Such a task also entails rethinking what ‘theory’ might be in relation to media and media studies.

**Machinic World**

The urgent need to develop new theories and concepts to keep up with rapid technological and social change has always been an important rationale for media theory. Today, as abstract data is captured, stored and analysed by machine learning systems in increasingly complex ways, new conceptual models for thinking about machine learning and artificial intelligence are required if we are to understand and critique what is happening beneath the surface of these new computational forms. In his ‘Prolegomenon to a Media Theory of Machine Learning: Compute-Computing and Compute-Computed’, David M. Berry attempts to do just this by drawing on Spinoza’s distinction between *Natura naturans* (‘naturing Nature’) and *Natura naturata* (‘natured Nature’) to think through the difference between constitutive and operative types of machine learning. In suggesting these concepts, he draws out the significance of recent developments in this complex technological field not just for media theory and digital humanities, but for social theory and human attention too.

Despite acknowledging the significance of algorithms to our everyday lives, however, most of us have no idea how they actually work, nor of the extent to which our tastes and desires are shaped by machinic operations. While Berry interrogates the medium specificity of algorithms and software to understand the former, Ned Rossiter considers the algorithmic production of subjectivity and affect in order to propose a response to the latter. In ‘Paranoia is Real: Algorithmic Governance and the Shadow of Control’, Rossiter responds to recent debates on fake news and post-truth politics to argue that meaning and truth are tied less to representation these
days (if we accept that we have moved from a logocentric to a machinic world) than to algorithmic calculations of anticipation and pre-emption. The task becomes, therefore, one of developing techniques and tactics to assist our political and subjective orientation in worlds of algorithmic governance and data economies.

But ‘What Are the Theoretical Lessons when Agnostic Hacker Politics Turn to the Right?’, asks Johan Söderberg. How do we stop these new techniques and tactics being hijacked by corporations or by the far right? Although originally allied with left-liberal causes, for example, Internet subcultures and discussion forums provided the breeding ground for the return to the mainstream of neo-fascists and white supremacists under the self-proclaimed banner of alt-right politics. Fake news and the alt-right may urgently demand new theoretical responses, but the they also pose questions for the efficacy of previous theorisations of media, and for the future of media theory itself.

**Form and Matter**

While some are convinced that theory has had its day and is no longer relevant, particularly in a context of big data, algorithmic automation and the computational turn, M. Beatrice Fazi makes the case, in her article, ‘The Ends of Media Theory’, for the continued need for theoretical enquiry and speculative endeavour. Situating the ‘end of theory’ discourse in the historical context of long-standing critiques of rationalism and logocentrism, and drawing on Jameson’s distinction between theory and philosophy, as well as Horkheimer’s distinction between traditional and critical theory, Fazi focuses on the importance of abstraction, conceptualisation and problematisation to both (media) theory and (media) philosophy. Arguing that new concepts are needed to perceive and think in a highly techno-mediated world, to “think computation precisely as a problem; as a problem in need of relevant concepts”, Fazi argues that media theory is only an abstraction in the Whiteheadian sense that experience is always-already abstract, and that to abstract is not, therefore, to move away from the real, but rather “to construct it in terms of its actuality”.

Attempts to grasp the character of “rapid and radical social change” and to construct reality in terms of its actuality have led many media theorists to relish the dissolution
of the opposition between form and matter. For John W.P. Phillips, however, there remains a tension between those that privilege form and those that privilege matter, putting a strain on the very idea of ontology itself. In ‘The End of Ontology and the Future of Media Theory’, Phillips grapples with theoretical and philosophical attempts to “think things”, to “think the media” in terms of the physical existence of “the between”, and to think the way each media platform is “displaced by its own mediatic disruption”.

Responding to this dissolution between form and matter, Mickey Vallee’s article, ‘Contiguity and Interval: Opening Media Theory’, turns our attention to the borders of mediation. For Vallee, media are both here and there, and mediation, which both connects and disconnects, is only possible in terms of its own ruptures and intervals. Arguing that the contemporary boundaries of mediated environments are expanding and collapsing in continuous variations, affecting the very definitions of ‘media’ we have come to depend upon, he turns to topology as a creative way of exploring media as open and fluid. Understood topologically, there is no division between the contiguous and the interval, but rather these terms are nodes in a network of continuous variation that underlies evolving definitions of media, bodies, environment, time, place and space.

Turning to the simultaneity of processes of stratification and mediation in his article, ‘Media Theory: How Can We Live the Good Life in Strata?’, Rob Shields reminds us that media not only transmit and store, classify and relate; they also isolate, juxtapose and stratify. For Shields, media needs theory to understand the “layered, stratified and mediated world of many (local and global) scales, contending histories and futures that haunt our present as anxieties”. But the purpose of theory is not just to help us understand or critique the contemporary condition; we need media theory, he argues, if we are to learn how to live the good life in such mediated and stratified times.

**In the Spirit of the Manifesto**

Although all the authors who submitted articles to this inaugural issue were asked to provide manifestos on what they would want a journal on media theory to be and do,
the following were written very much in the style or spirit of a manifesto. Taking the early 20th Century _Blast_ Manifesto of the British Vorticist movement as her starting point, for example, Jane Birkin shows how the manifesto can be considered as a material object that makes declarations in form as well as content. In her article, ‘Manifesto: Graphic, Sonic, Affective Object’, Birkin goes on to draw on a range of concrete poetic and graphic modernist manifestos to highlight the performativity of their ‘moving information’.

In his call for ‘Open Theory’, Sunil Manghani similarly draws upon a wide range of examples, from the _Communist Manifesto_ to Bono and _1984_, to illustrate a wide range of issues – from reading and writing, through production and reproduction, to the relation between (online) journals and their ‘audiences’ – and to argue that _media_ “gets us faster to what we already know” and that _theory_ “only applies each time it is evoked”.

In Gary Hall’s ‘The Inhumanist Manifesto’, he adopts the manifesto mode of political writing to consider the links between his research interests in posthumanism, piracy, Marxism, open access and the commons, on the one hand, and, on the other, the various publishing ventures with which he’s been involved. Taken together, they demonstrate a manifesto by example, in which Hall presents his own privileging of collaborative, non-competitive and not-for-profit work, emphasises the performative generation of projects as hyper-political, media gifts – providing space for “thinking about politics and the political beyond the ways in which they have conventionally been conceived” – and argues ultimately for the displacement of the humanist categories that underpin our ideas of academia, publishing and critique.

In the penultimate article of the issue, ‘10 Propositions for Doing Media Theory (Again)’, Christoph Raetzsch discusses the significance of the journal’s open access format, its focus on theory, and its emphasis on the international and transdisciplinary scope of media theory, which “delimits a space of inquiry where positions can meet outside their own disciplinary [and geographical] contexts”. Representing the rich (historical, geographical, disciplinary) legacies of media theory
in the journal is important, he argues, to promote the kind of detached theoretical perspective that is required to provide critical distance in the face of accelerated technological change.

Finally, the issue ends with the first article to have been submitted to the journal: in the author’s own words, an ‘unrefereeable rant’ on the kind of journal *Media Theory* needs to try to be. In ‘What Is a Journal for?’, Sean Cubitt argues that to survive, a journal needs, more than anything, a reason to exist. For him, this should be a transdisciplinary project to actively refuse disciplinary closures, and to critically interrogate the scope and limits of specialisms and disciplines, in contrast to those who would defend them for their own sakes. Because specialisms are not intrinsically valuable or collective enterprises, he insists, the journal’s transdisciplinary project should be to collectively enable (not determine) media theory, and to foster dialogue between specialist objects and schools of thought so as to “unleash the potential each of them has locked up inside its disciplinary firewalls”.

We’ll try our best. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy the ‘Manifestos’ issue.

**References**


**Simon Dawes** is the founding editor of *Media Theory*. He is Maître de conférences (Lecturer) at Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), France, and the author of *British Broadcasting and the Public-Private Dichotomy: Neoliberalism, Citizenship and the Public Sphere* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Personal website: [https://smdawes.wordpress.com/](https://smdawes.wordpress.com/)

Email: simondawes0@gmail.com