

Communicative implications of media characteristics : international and intercultural perspectives

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Guest Editor Introduction

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COMMUNICATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA CHARACTERISTICS – INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

I.

Differentiation within media studies has continued through the present day. The content of public media is analysed; it is discussed what types of media are employed by whom and for what purpose (and with what success); or the impact of media is studied, with this impact varying greatly in nature and intensity depending on whether short-term or long-term, emotional or rational-cognitive, individual or social effects are at issue. What is striking is that the various media stand in such different positions in a complex network depending on the questions raised. Generally our attention is drawn to the producers of media (and their interests), to the content of media, or to its users. Much less common is attention to a given medium itself. But how does the medium affect the process of communication? Are there constraints immanent in a medium that act on the content or on users' behaviour? The importance of these questions is clear: For example, we can easily appreciate that for individuals, and indeed for society as a whole, no single television broadcast or website was ever as significant as the penetration of the social body by television or the Internet as *media*. The special section of this edition of

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Studies in Communication Sciences is accordingly devoted to the issue of specifics immanent in media and to their consequences.

But there are also understandable reasons for the hesitant and cautious treatment of media-immanent specifics. For it is considerably less problematic methodologically to analyse the content of a novel or empirically to check the effects of newscasts than to generate objective, valid and reliable information on media characteristics. In particular, formal media specifics can be ascertained only in the long run.

Nevertheless, the fact of medium-immanent specifics is largely accepted on the concrete level of design: It's self-evident that content must be differently processed for presentation in television as opposed to in a newspaper article. Some content simply cannot be adequately presented through each and every medium; at least the areas of focus shift from medium to medium, so that supposedly identical content appears differently and has a different impact. In some cases, for example, we need images for making it easier to recognise visual relationships, while in other cases a given medium is more suitable for conveying abstract content. (The consequences of these medium-immanent effects are all too often ignored even on the micro-level, however, so that sometimes a film is reproached with inappropriately presenting the content of a written source – precisely because the filmmaker had worked appropriately to his or her medium with the very aim of creating a film and not writing an abstract text.)

The above remarks about design clearly concern not an empirically testable matter, but rather a phenomenological view. All the more salient is then the issue of how medium-immanent consequences are to be methodically and appropriately detected and described in terms of social phenomena, for example. But since these consequences exist and are evidently far-reaching, it is a task, indeed, an obligation, of media and communication studies to address them.

Anyone attempting this, however – and since the 1950s writers like Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, Walter Ong and others have tackled the issue – has always had to expect ambivalent reactions.

The continued perceived relevance of these thinkers is evidence on the one hand of an obviously wide-spread sense that “there's something to” their books and articles. And indeed the awareness of the significance of

such formal social effects of media has been large enough for even *Unesco* to launch projects gradually introducing specific media (at the time primarily radio and television) in developing countries on the grounds that these media would supposedly lead “automatically” to “social modernisation” by altering traditional social structures and contributing to nation building – an issue once again topical today.

When the time came for empirical testing, however, the *Unesco* programmes found that not all their initial assumptions were valid. For example, the social categories of the time, like membership in a peer group, were then considerably (still) more important than the influence of the media. As a consequence, the advocates of formal media theories encountered the objection that some of their statements were false or even that the overall concept was not much more than a chimera. Of course, this applies all the more to theories like those of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, which claimed an even wider scope of applicability. Nor did McLuhan and Innis have much of a counterargument, not even having empirically tested their theories – apparently because this was not possible methodologically.

In the meantime, however, in purely quantitative terms the media have already come to play a significantly greater role in people’s lives the world over. This trend allows us to address the pertinent issues anew, and on a better empirical basis. Such is the primary concern of this edition of *Studies in Communication Sciences*. Not the content or effects of media, but the consequences of the specific characteristics of media, or rather individual media, are the focus of this special section.

To be sure, the methodological problems remain, and they also played a role in the preparation of this edition. Many of the authors therefore had to accept risks and ultimately deal with frustration. The majority of submissions received by the editors in response to the *call for papers* were rejected by the reviewers, with the majority of strictly quantitative-empirical studies being variously evaluated and discussed or rejected – underlining again the methodological difficulties. In view of this situation we must express our gratitude not only to the successful submitters, but also to the authors whose contributions did not pass the review stage.

Many of these difficulties were to be expected, of course. Thus the advent of an increasingly impressive global dissemination of the media

should move us to a further level. The call for papers was expressly formulated in a cross-cultural way: If indeed there exist specifics inherent to different types of media, these characteristics must be ascertainable irrespective of cultural imprints – cross-cultural observability could then serve as an indicator for formal media effects, and contribute to the validity of the results. Such a comparative approach moreover fits the character of a journal like *Studies in Communication Sciences*, interfacing as it does between different cultures. This cross-cultural aspect underlies the articles to a various extent, and at least gleams through each one.

II.

Last, but not least, such a cross-cultural call for papers directly ties in with the aforementioned *Unesco* projects. Indeed, the first article of this special section, by CHANTAL DE CORTE from the Université Laval (Quebec, Canada), expressly refers to these projects. She analyses various media theories and raises the question of whether and how they explain media-induced social change; she also indicates why an incorrect theoretical approach may have contributed to past failures. She accordingly proposes replacing the modernisation model (as well as the dependency model) by a participation model that moves communication initiated by the given medium into the focus even of development processes.

JÖRN H. B. LENGSELD from the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland) has contributed a classical, quantitative study covering 29 countries. In particular, Lengsfeld re-analyses data from various periods of time obtained from the *European Social Survey*. The data refer to the media consumption in different countries, and reveal that specific media do not dominate more or less “automatically.” Regarding television, radio and newspapers, Lengsfeld observes an astonishing variability of use, depending on the country and its cultural traditions; the diversity of media use is surprisingly also much greater than the economic diversity. The article thus makes an important contribution to demarcating media specifics from cultural or economic dimensions, with the cultural background dominating the other variables in the context of this study.

Demarcation also involves (apparently) opposing observations. CARSTEN WILHELM from the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon (France),

for example, finds that behaviour with respect to a virtual community is affected more by the media-induced characteristics of the latter than by the cultural differences between the media users themselves – at least in the specific context he examines of collaborative online interactions. Wilhelm's research concerns the use of media in the education sector, especially in co-operative learning by means of digital media. Obviously we must distinguish (at least) between the type of media use and the behaviour with and in the context of media.

Still more complex is the subject studied by BJØRN VON RIMSCHA and PATRICK RADEMACHER from the University of Zurich (Switzerland): the interactions between media-related, social, economic and legal trends on the one hand and advertising strategies on the other. They were able to isolate five main players whose roles and significance have changed due to new trends in media like the increasing importance of product placement. Media trends studied as processes in a downright exemplary way, with consideration of the widest variety of causal relationships, alter the social network and result in clearly definable winners and losers. Stemming from Switzerland, the study also includes considerations of parallel trends in Germany.

III.

Let me conclude with two observations on the meta-level. Nearly all articles (including those rejected) come from young scientists – a fact that is statistically significant, even if the sample is of course too small to be considered as more than indicative. Still, this response shows that our call for papers struck a deep chord, and that this new, or perhaps revived, subject might have great importance for the future.

The second observation: The distribution of submitted articles from the different regions at least of Western Europe, Asia and North America (and consequently from different cultural and therefore also academic traditions) is quite balanced, as becomes much more apparent when the rejected papers are considered. The different academic traditions and cultures are however still quite distinctive (even if, again, our sample is too small for a truly generalised statement). All the same, the observation suggests that the medium of the “academic article” does not necessarily

dominate the cultural dimensions – something that particularly shouldn't dismay the Editors of *Studies in Communication Sciences*, a journal that also aims to mediate between cultural spheres.