

Norm Friesen *Editor*

Media Transatlantic:  
Developments in Media and  
Communication Studies  
between North American  
and German-speaking  
Europe

 Springer

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: The Geopolitics of Media Studies

Norm Friesen and Richard Cavell

**Abstract** This geography of media studies is concerned with the geographical, institutional, and national co-ordinates of mediatic inquiry; but at the same time, it insists that these concerns be translated through a local/global dynamic, such that the terrain it maps is tectonic and trans-locational. Speaking of the “transatlantic,” attention is consistently directed in this volume and this introductory chapter to the “trans,” that is, on sites of dynamic interfusion of cultural vectors, while maintaining the central focus of the present volume on two specific sites of hyper-active media theorization: North America, especially Canada, and Germany. This conjunction is historically justified, as the present volume argues forcefully, even where the outcomes of media research differ radically, as in the inquiries into orality and literacy of Innis and Kittler.

**Keywords** Media theory • Transatlantic • Communication • German-Speaking Europe • North America • Friedrich Kittler • Harold Innis • Marshall McLuhan

The study of culture—including media culture—reached an epochal moment with the acknowledgement that cultures are situated, and, to that extent, plural. This situation was at once ideational and geographical—a cultural geography, in short, which became increasingly concerned with the *location* of culture (as Homi Bhabha 1994 put it). With this realization, the Enlightenment notion of a universal culture could no longer be sustained, and this is an especially important principle in the study of media, whose very ubiquity leads ineluctably to the idea of mediation as the new great universal. This volume of essays, written by an international roster of major practitioners in the field, acts as a cogent rebuttal of the notion that media—and theories of media—have an untrammelled spatial and temporal scope. As Harold Innis asserted half a century ago, media have spatial and temporal *biases*, and this volume is, in many ways, an inquiry into these biases at all levels of production.

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The very idea that the study of media might have a geographical bias serves to remove media studies from a triumphalist notion of progress (“old” media being supplanted by “new” media which spawn new media theories, and so on; cf. Chun and Keenan 2006), and to re-mediate media studies in terms of geographies, nations, and institutions. Foucault’s work of the 1970s served to introduce the notion of radical disruption into our ideas of cultural production generally, where the motive force was revealed to be not enlightenment but power. Curiously blind to media per se (Kittler 1999: 94), Foucault’s work nevertheless had an orthogonal influence on 1980s cultural theorists such as Bruno Latour (1986), for whom the role of technologies in the production of knowledge took on a powerful dimension, to the point that machines themselves were granted agency, a move which resonates with the media theories of McLuhan (to whom Latour expressed an agonistic relationship (Kuklick 1986)) and even more so with the late Friedrich Kittler, the most important media theorist since McLuhan. The parallel to Latour’s theories in media studies would be the “materialist” moment heralded by the publication of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer’s *Materialities of Communication* (1988). This collection focused on the concrete technical preconditions for the emergence of meaning, the conditions for the possibility of interpretation and understanding themselves. These developments in media theory had one point of origin in McLuhan’s notion that “the medium is the message,” perhaps the most (willfully?) misread of his dicta; whatever else it meant, it announced the end of hermeneutics, and it is this death knell to traditional critical models within humanistic inquiry that can serve as the agonistic point of origin for the institutional study of media.

A geography of media studies, then, is concerned with the geographical, institutional, and national co-ordinates of mediatic inquiry, but the present volume insists that these concerns be translated through a local/global dynamic, such that the terrain it maps is tectonic and trans-locational. Speaking of the “transatlantic,” attention is consistently directed to the “trans,” that is, on sites of dynamic interfusion of cultural vectors, while maintaining the central focus of the present volume on two specific sites of hyper-active media theorization: North America, especially Canada, and Germany. This conjunction is historically justified, as the present volume argues forcefully, even where the outcomes of media research differ radically, as in the inquiries into orality and literacy of Innis and Kittler.

Geographically, Canada has often been said to have embraced communications as the strongest fiber in what is otherwise a dispersion of a small population over a vast territory. The proposition that Canada is “a country that exists by reason of communication” (H.J. Boyle as quoted in Babe 1975: 5)—that Canada has a uniquely symbiotic mediatic constitution—has come to be labeled “technological nationalism” (e.g., Adria 2010). While the image of a people stranded in a hostile and unforgiving terrain, terrified that they might have forgotten to charge the batteries in their BlackBerries, is a fantasy, the notion that the spacetime dynamic posed particular problems in Canada resonates to the present day through our experience of time zones, invented, in fact, by a Canadian. And it was the role of communications in establishing modern Germany—no longer to be the *informem terris* of Tacitus’s *Germania*—that attracted the Toronto scholar of orality and literacy, Eric

Havelock's, attention, the day that he heard the sound of Hitler's voice emanating from a loudspeaker set up in the street (as Winthrop-Young and Wutz 1999 have noted).

Was this a manifestation of the German *Sonderweg*, translated into mediatic terms? Was it part of Germany's *special* and tragic historical *path*, leading only circuitously to liberal democracy? Such a national *Sonderweg* is traced not only in the mediatic shaping of German politics and history recalled by Havelock, but also by theorists of media themselves. In 2009, the Media Studies department at the University of Siegen hosted a conference whose title asked specifically whether media studies represent "*ein Deutscher Sonderweg?*" The answer, according to observers of this short-lived discussion, was an uncomfortable but unequivocal "no." As Claus Pias puts it in his chapter in this collection, the *Sonderweg* discussion was unavoidably "clumsy, with the protagonists feeling their way along via a mixture of personal anecdotes, vague histories of ideas, and national-cultural innuendo; as a result their conclusions lagged behind available historical scholarship" (see Chap. 2, p. 19).

This *Sonderweg* thus turns out in one sense to be rather like Heidegger's *Holzweg*: a "wrong track" or a "cul-de-sac" (Young and Haynes 2002: ix)—a blind alley of dubious, dilettantish distinctions in which the posthumous Heidegger seems increasingly implicated himself. However, the term can also have positive connotations: a *Holzweg* can also be one that leads to a clearing, an opening, a place of illumination or *Lichtung*, "the clearing of presence." This clearing is the site both of being and of unconcealment, *aletheia* or simply, "truth"—although it is not directly accessible as such. It is also here that we find technology: "Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where truth happens" (Heidegger 2002: 319). But technology, reached through this path, includes not only Heidegger's familiar examples of the Rhine-River dams or the peasant's shoes. It also includes the mechanization of hand-writing in the form of the typewriter: "In the typewriter we find the irruption of the mechanism into the realm of the word," Heidegger writes. "The typewriter leads again to the typesetting machine... [It] veils the essence of writing and of the script[,] transform[ing] the relation of Being to [man's] essence" (1992: 85).

Heidegger is not only situating media technologies and techniques—printing, typewriting, handwriting—firmly in his ontological history or *Seinsgeschichte*; he is also unlocking the great repressed of philosophy, namely, the subject of mediation itself. Even though Heidegger recommends "avoiding" and "renouncing" the typewriter, his ontological analysis of this machinery presents the initial steps toward the insight that all philosophy has actually been the philosophy of media—from Plato's critique of writing and poetry to "the end of the book and the beginning of writing" in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1974).

A concomitant of the approach taken in the present volume—one that focuses on the transitional and the multi-locational—is that questions such as "what is a medium?" or "what is the origin of media theory?" are inoperable. Mediation remains so fundamentally central to our understanding of ourselves and the worlds we have made that it tends to remain invisible, as McLuhan suggested all total envi-

ronments were fated to be. The question of what a medium *is* thus remains historically and culturally bound, apt to change with the scenery. It is in any case a question having to do with process, rather than with a product. Similarly, the foundations of media theory shift with the questions one asks: Plato is foundational, but so is McLuhan. And if all philosophy is philosophy of mediation, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* merits much greater attention than it has received in media theory, its Dionysian and Apollonian modes leading, directly or indirectly, to McLuhan's "hot" and "cool" media. It should thus come as no surprise to find a number of authors in this volume placing their thoughts on media directly within the ambit of classical philosophy, for example Krämer and Mersch. The institutional traditions of the German university make this a "natural" association; in Canadian media theory, this approach is largely confined to Innis, and hence the later Kittler's tendency to refer more easily to Innis than to McLuhan, who tended to save his philosophical speculations for his letters. For example, there is McLuhan's 1971 letter to Claude Bissell, where he writes that "all technologies whatever, have for 2,500 years been excluded from philosophy" (McLuhan et al. 1987: 429), a comment that so impressed Kittler he spent two essays discussing it.

It would be a misconstrual to suggest that media theory in Germany began with Kittler, just as it would be to suggest that McLuhan represents a mediatic *ab ovo* for North America. Friesen's and Darroch's chapters go some way toward correcting this misconception. In the case of Germany, there are at least two early contributions which need to be highlighted: that of Vilém Flusser on the one hand and of the Frankfurt School and its progeny (especially Hans Magnus Enzensberger) on the other. Flusser's life was truly transatlantic—taking him from Prague to London, São Paulo, France, and Germany—and his media theories are concomitantly *sui generis*, such that their exclusion from this volume should not be surprising. Flusser wrote in German as well as Portuguese, and after the publication of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983 in German, 2000 in English), he enjoyed the life of an academic celebrity in Germany until his untimely death in 1991.

Enzensberger and the Frankfurt School offer a valuable foil for the media theory in this volume. Frank Schirrmacher, author and the editor-in-chief of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* has recalled that it was McLuhan's work that provided an alternative to the invariable negativity of the Frankfurt School:

[McLuhan served as] an antidote... If one was interested in culture and media, he was an antidote against a form that was then very strong in Germany, possessing great moral force. This was the critique of the consciousness and the culture industry. We all know the names: Adorno of course, Enzensberger, the Frankfurt School... (Scobel 2011)

It is against the insistence that media are simply mechanisms of ideological falsification and manipulation that Schirrmacher and others of his generation instinctively recoiled. This insistence, and the responses to it, are central to postwar German intellectual history. It begins with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944, in which Adorno and Horkheimer broadly dismiss radio, film and television as products of pernicious "culture industries." "The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimate the trash they intentionally produce" (2002: 108). This

“truth”—and others on offer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—was rediscovered and updated by the left in the 1960s. In the hands of the poet and critic Enzensberger, the monopolization of culture became nothing less than the industrialization of mind and of consciousness itself, and unlike Adorno 20 years earlier, Enzensberger’s target was none other than Marshall McLuhan: “this charlatan’s most famous saying the medium is the message—...tells us that the bourgeoisie [has the] ...means at its disposal to communicate something to us, but that it has nothing more to say” (2002: 271). The consequences of such an unequivocal dismissal of McLuhan as an apologist for the mediatic status quo is described in the chapters by Pias and Leschke: it effectively put the German reception of McLuhan on ice until the late 1980s, when Enzensberger himself changed his stance toward McLuhan (cf. Gemünden 1998: 73). And now, some 40 years after Enzensberger’s review, even more has changed. The bourgeoisie is a less compelling political category than, say, bisexuality or the biosphere, and Enzenberger himself has served as an apologist for the nation (re) building projects of the US Republican right. In this context, it has almost become a point of pride to say that one was taking McLuhan seriously in the 1960s or 1970s.

This is the intellectual background for the rise of Kittler’s maximalist theory of mediation: “media determine our situation” (as cited in Winthrop-Young and Wutz 1999: xxxix). Although he has been recently memorialized as “the Derrida of the digital age” (Jeffries 2011) and “a teacher of an entire generation” (Poschardt 2011), Kittler did not establish a school of media theory as such. Instead, he stands at the forefront of nothing less than a newly founded discipline, *Medienwissenschaft*, the study or “science” of media. Some 50 academic departments dedicated to this science have been founded in German universities since the 1980s, with the attendant journals, textbooks, conferences and other forms of academic production following. (The Canadian Communication Association for its part lists 22 programs in communication studies on its side of the Atlantic.) The connections between this new German discipline and Canadian theories of media and communication are rich and complex. This is evident not only from Kittler’s work, with its considerable debts to McLuhan and Innis, but also in the theoretical developments of subsequent generations of German media theorists, including those whose work is included in this volume.

The intellectual currents underlying these developments run deeply and are far-ranging. They involve figures such as Sigfried Giedion, whose professional life traced routes (as Friesen and Darroch show, below) from historical studies in the Parisian *Bibliothèque nationale* with Walter Benjamin to meetings in Toronto with Edmund Carpenter, and their multidisciplinary “Culture and Communications Seminar.” Of course, also deeply implicated is the work of the Toronto School itself (Carpenter, McLuhan, Innis and others) and more recent scholarship in German media that has crystallized around the work Friedrich Kittler. Kittler’s work has been labeled as an extension of the contributions of Innis and McLuhan; and like many German media theorists (and McLuhan himself), Kittler was originally trained as a specialist in literary studies. The importance of McLuhan and Innis in the work of Kittler and other German media theorists is widely acknowledged in Germany; however, it has been little explored on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

The chapters in this book focus on theoretical developments of significance on both sides of the Atlantic, as they converge and diverge in a variegated cross-cultural geography. We don't for a moment in this volume mean to imply that the only media theory of note in Europe is German. Turing's and McLuhan's heirs are to be found in Renato Barilli, for example, whose work on mediation has found purchase in the writing of Umberto Eco and (surprisingly) Antonio Negri; Derrida's philosophy can be read as a profound meditation on mediation that is being continued by Bernard Stiegler and Jean-Luc Nancy. Their work provides a necessary context for this book, but remains beyond its explicit scope.

In bringing together these different developments and traditions, this collection does much more than present a new and colorful chapter in the international reception and interpretation of Innis and McLuhan. As already indicated, the text gives an unusual geographical emphasis to media theory and to theorizing itself, both of which (with a few exceptions, e.g. Cavell 2002) are generally assumed to be relatively independent of place, and of historical and cultural specificities. This book also represents a unique addition to English-language texts related to Kittler: although selected books and papers of Kittler have been translated, the present volume contains a number of essays responding to and building on Kittler's work. Finally, and most importantly, this book introduces readers to the new field of *Medienwissenschaft* in German-speaking Europe—its debates, discourses and modes of self-legitimation.

The essays collected here begin with chapters by Pias and Schröter which provide overviews of the theoretical and disciplinary terrain of *Medienwissenschaft*, providing the necessary background to recognize how Innis, McLuhan and the Toronto school have been situated and mobilized in it. The next section traces historical transatlantic connections leading to Marshall McLuhan, with essays by Friesen on the constellation as a metaphor in Walter Benjamin, Sigfried Giedion and McLuhan, and by Darroch on the relationship of Giedion to McLuhan's Culture and Communication Seminar group in Toronto. These discussions are given a still broader context with Heilmann and Gibson's essays on the orality/literacy dynamic attributed to classical Greece in recent historical and theoretical work. Mersch and Cressman undertake in-depth analyses of the ontological and material dimensions of media and mediation. Finally, Leschke and Krämer offer differing ways of understanding the recent past of media theory, and on that basis propose possible future directions for research. In what follows, these contributions and their organization in this volume are outlined in more detail.

The first section of this volume, "Theory and Nationality of Media," offers essays that examine, each in its own way, the internal constitution of German *Medienwissenschaft*. The first traces the diachronic axis of recent cultural history, and the second works synchronically, focusing on more recent attempts at self-definition and intradisciplinary self-differentiation. The first chapter, by Claus Pias, begins by asking pointedly "What's German in German media Theory." It invokes the metaphor of a multi-generational family history in articulating its response, one that begins with brave and pragmatic founders, passes through intermediate work of reinforcement and reflection, and concludes with radical questioning and renewal.