

## Transductions<sup>1</sup>

Proposal for a Book Series (with a different name!) on Duke University Press

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It seems every book we open—even the most esoteric histories (including our own)—situates itself within the changing field of culture, technology, and knowledge that defines the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Central to this situating rhetoric is an inviting and shadowy concept: *media*. The term is notoriously difficult to define. Consider Lisa’s definition from *Always Already New*—media are:

socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associate protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collection of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation [...] If media include what I am calling protocols, they include a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus [...] so telephony includes the salutation “Hello?” (for English speakers, at least), the monthly billing cycle, and the wires and cables that materially connect our phones. E-mail includes all of the elaborate layered technical protocols and interconnected service providers that constitute the Internet, but it

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<sup>1</sup> Please consider our series title provisional. We want something more exciting but we haven’t yet come up with anything better. We would be grateful to reviewers or staff for suggestions. It appears to take us both some time to coin a term.

also includes both the QWERTY keyboards on which e-mail gets “typed” [again, for English speakers] and the shared sense people have of what the e-mail genre is.<sup>2</sup>

Media have encapsulated the technologized world of culture and communication for decades. In his “Genesis of the Media Concept,” John Guillory suggestively argues that the term *media* was “absent but wanted” for centuries before it came into common usage. Today, the term remains wanted, but is everpresent. It shows up in fields across the humanities and social sciences. “Media studies” has been claimed a subfield of countless academic disciplines and quasi- or inter- disciplines, from communication studies to literature, sociology, American studies, music, history, philosophy, anthropology, geography, and many others. In the conclusion to his essay, Guillory writes of Adorno and Benjamin, noting that “the question of mediation and its relation to media emerges but fails to be resolved, which has been more or less the story of this relation since.”<sup>3</sup>

If “the emergence of the media concept in the later nineteenth century was a response to the proliferation of new technical media [...] that could not be assimilated to the older system of the arts,”<sup>4</sup> we have started to wonder if there is a similar transformation afoot today. Have we reached a point where desire for the term *media* has outstripped its analytical usefulness for considering the many and multifarious relations among culture, technology, knowledge, power, communication, subjectivity, and a host of other concepts? Make no mistake: we are

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> John Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” 321, 62.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 321.

not proposing an alternative to *media* as a master concept for thinking through these connections; nor are we proposing that the term be wholly abandoned. We merely note the term's insufficiency in the shadow of all that scholars have asked it to do. The media concept is no longer enough.

The same conclusion might be reached as we consider the changing articulations of technologies, knowledges, institutions and cultures around us. Changes that previous generations of scholars might have conceived as "changes in a medium" no longer happen at a single register. A few generations of scholars in the humanities might have organized their inquiry in terms of relatively "set" media like television, radio, cinema, books, music, installation art. Today, even writers who are unwavering in their commitment to a single medium begin with the presupposition of contemporary upheaval. That upheaval calls assumptions of prior stasis and cogency into question. Which aspect ratio or film stock is essential for the ontology of cinema? Which organization of broadcast, consumption, platform and color is the most fundamental to the ontology of television? Jonathan recently took up the question of *format* as an organizing metaphor of communication history in his forthcoming book on mp3s,<sup>5</sup> but the point is more general. Academics have tended to condense massive fields of cultural relations into boxes—we would say *boxes* in the "literal and metaphorical sense" except the closed-off nature of a television, a movie theater, a phonograph or an iPod is already metaphorical. Future changes in the sensory world around us can happen at multiple registers,

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*.

from the vast and tiny infrastructures that subtend global communication, to the platforms, portals and protocols through which people seek to relate to the world.

This state of affairs leads us to wonder not only about the future, but how little we may know about the near and distant past. Our aim in launching a new book series is to find other authors who share our intellectual struggle, who seek to move above, below, beyond and around the boxes we used to think of as relatively settled or “mature” media (to use Friedrich Kittler’s term for assessing the state of radio in 1992),<sup>6</sup> and in so doing offer new ways of thinking through the interconnectedness of knowledges, technologies, subjectivities and cultures.

To risk stating the obvious, there is currently a publication boom in media studies. The best ones cut across the conversational spheres of conferences, disciplines, journals, presses and associations. This is an intellectual condition to which we aspire in our own work, and we plan to publish authors who share the same aspiration, and who hold to the value that it is better to advance a question across fields than to hold tight to the tools of any particular academic discipline or quasi-discipline.

### **Our Approach (and “Transduction” as a Temporary Metaphor)**

In truth, we are seeking a sexier title for the series. We are using *transductions* as a placeholder for now because it nicely gets at some of the core themes we hope to address. Transduction is the process whereby energy is transformed from one form to another. In media, a transduction happens when

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Kittler, "Observation on Public Reception," 75.

machines change a signal from one form to another: a phonograph needle transduces vibrations into patterns in electrical signal; a digital camera transduces patterns of light into arrangements of bits; a laser printer transduces a data stream several times as it becomes print on the page. Jonathan used the term transducer to explain the difference between 19<sup>th</sup> century sound reproduction technologies like the telephone and phonograph and what came before: the new sound media all turned sound into something else—electricity, grooves on a cylinder—and then turned it back into sound.<sup>7</sup> But of course, the term has a much longer intellectual history. Gilbert Simondon (and later Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) used the term as an alternative to theories of mediation, where transduction described the process of modifying logical, spatial or scalar relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is “the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis for another.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, the term has had a life in media and cultural theory through the work of scholars like Adrian MacKenzie, who uses the term “to show how technologies are both difficult to access in terms of subjects and societies, yet indissociably folded through collectives and cultures,” and Stefan Helmreich, who brilliantly uses the term both as a technical-perceptual construct and as an alternative to metaphors of immersion that dominate ethnographic thought.<sup>9</sup>

Although it does not roll off the tongue, *transductions* suggests the type of work we hope to nurture and publish. With this series, we aim to support and

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Volume 2, 345; Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of the Individual."

<sup>9</sup> Adrian MacKenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*, xi; Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive Soundscapes, Submarine Cyborgs and Transductive Ethnography."

sustain a study of media that begins from assumptions of mediality, rather than concepts of mediation or a primordial unmediated state; offers sustained meditations on the relationships among people, technologies, knowledges and cultures; treats the configuration of senses and cultures as an open question rather than beginning from fundamental hierarchical assumptions (such as “the primacy of the visual”); and attends to the constant switching of registers, protocols and domains that is the signature of the last and coming century. The body of work under the names “media theory” and “media archeology” begins to get at these kinds of questions. To that conversation we hope to bring a stronger commitment to contextualism and materiality. Materiality is both a fashionable and contested term in contemporary theory. Writers like Friedrich Kittler, Mark BN Hansen and Matt Kirschenbaum have extended the reach of formal analysis into the materiality of communication. Hansen describes this concept of materiality as “technical materiality for the possibility of thinking” and counterpoises it to phenomenality. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz argue for a media theory that will focus “on the intrinsic technological logic, the changing links between body and medium, the procedures for data processing.”<sup>10</sup> We share these authors’ fascination with the finely grained detail of technical process. But we hope the work in our series will connect those conceptions of materiality with others, most notably Raymond

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, “Translator’s Preface” in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone-Film-Typewriter*, xiv; Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*; ———, “Media Theory,” 298; Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, 9-12; Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*. Though this line of thinking is often said to have descended from McLuhan, Heidegger is an equally important source.

Williams' notion of the materiality of a technology as inseparable from its embeddedness in social relations and its situation in time and space.<sup>11</sup> As Lisa has written, when discussing the materiality of media, "it is better to specify telephones in 1890 in the rural United States, broadcast telephones in Budapest in the 1920s, or cellular, satellite, corded and cordless landline telephones in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Specificity is the key."<sup>12</sup> Our series is intended to sustain the burgeoning interest in materiality, but also promote a commitment to radical contextualism, drawn from a range of politicized intellectual movements currently in constellation with English-language cultural studies: feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, postcolonialism, Marxism, disability studies, animal studies and environmental theory, to offer an incomplete list. This diverse field of work is distinguished by its attention to the changing relations of culture and power, a preoccupation we share.

We have an interest in publishing subject matter that follows our own expertise but also touches at its edges: the cultural history of media and communication technologies, sound studies, print culture, and digital and new media and the histories of the production of knowledge. We are also regularly in touch with anthropologists of media and given Duke's strong record in publishing theorized anthropology, we hope that some of that work might also appear in the series. An art historian working on problems of media, sound or print might also be of interest to us, though again we would need to make sure the manuscript is

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*; ———, *Marxism and Literature*. See also Charles Acland, "Introduction."

<sup>12</sup> Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 8.

reviewed within its own field. In all cases, we want work in the series to embody a contextualist approach, where the empirical matter under consideration is opened out into a larger field of context and contestation, and where both the field of knowledge and the knower are problematized.<sup>13</sup> We are not simply interested in being a home for more books on print, media history, digital culture or sound.

Methodologically, we hope that all of the books in the series will be explicitly concerned with the work of “object construction,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term for the most fundamental intellectual operation.<sup>14</sup> There is no shortage of scholarship on communication, technology and culture. What we are looking for is work that moves transversally<sup>15</sup> across registers, that asks new kinds of questions or defines new problems, that situates their subjects across—and not just within—fields of knowledge, and that connects materials to theory and theory to materials.

Although we do not want to fetishize interdisciplinarity, we also have no allegiance to any particular academic field or discipline, and could imagine publishing work by scholars in a range of departments and from a range of intellectual traditions. We are particularly interested in supporting the work of junior scholars who are pushing the boundaries of their fields, and combining theories and objects in new ways. This is our primary motivation in starting a new series.

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<sup>13</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 183-202; Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, *Culture + Technology: A Primer*, 109; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, 17-26.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, 33-55; Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 220-24.

<sup>15</sup> Here we have in mind Gilles Deleuze’s commentary on Foucault’s methods of object construction: Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 20, 31, 78, 94.



### **Some Examples of What We Hope to Publish:**

The first two books on the series are likely to be our own. Jonathan Sterne's *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* is currently going into production and scheduled for fall 2012 release. Lisa Gitelman's *Making Knowledge With Paper* is currently aimed for publication in 2013. After that, we know of the following projects that we find potentially of interest:

[discussion of other books snipped]

### **What the series will not publish:**

→ We are not interested in publishing “straight up” histories or ethnographies of particular media or technologies (histories of television, radio, magazines, popular music, etc). Our goal is to think and write transversally about technology and culture, so well-established objects will not be our primary concern. Additionally, Duke already has a strong presence in Cinema, Television Studies and Popular Music, and we aren't particularly interested in hijacking books that would go elsewhere in the catalogue.

→ Conversely, we do not intend to publish pure theory. We expect that all of the books we consider have a significant empirical dimension, whether than is in the classic sense of history, ethnography, phenomenology or textual interpretation, or in terms of the “new empiricisms” afforded by poststructuralist, postcolonial, antiracist and feminist thought.

**[Markets, Logistics, Bios all snipped]**

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