Industry Proximity

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Abstract:

As John Thornton Caldwell recently argued, industrial proximity today is both unavoidable and obligatory for media industries research. For scholars researching digital media infrastructures and the complex on/offline ecologies of media, however, the imperative of getting “close” or “inside” the field often poses more challenges than opportunities. While today’s content providers, delivery pipelines, and data centers arguably have become what telecommunication networks once were to communication scholars, traditional media industries research seems barely suited to cope with this development. This essay argues for a form of “reverse engineering” that builds on insights outside of media industries studies’ own orthodox methodologies, and for interventionist formats of digital media research.

Keywords: Digitization, Distribution, Internet, Technology, Video

Opening his keynote speech at the 2013 International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference in Dublin, noted political economist of media Richard Maxwell came up with what he had found to be an “interesting” statistic: “Did you know that 90 percent of all of the data that exist today were created in the last two years? [...] Like, ‘OMG.’ It makes you think that since Gutenberg we were twittering on our fingers [sic].”² Pointing to the many different ways political economy could make use of such statistical evidence, Maxwell invoked surveillance issues and the security state before turning to the actual topic of his talk: the environmental consequences that arguably follow our uses of digital media technology. Focusing on mobile computing whose “dirty business” he dissected from an “eco-materialist point of view,” Maxwell invited us to rethink the very foundations of media and communication studies, an imperative articulated more fully in his and Toby Miller’s recent book, *Greening the Media* (2012). Media studies, the diagnosis reads, abstains from deep analysis of technology’s materiality due to its humanist and scientist bias, a bias to be overcome if we ever are to understand where our media originate.

However, a viable starting point for such an endeavor could actually be Maxwell’s talk itself. Where does that statistic come from? Any Internet search relates its claim to the executive summary of an IBM report widely quoted online since 2011, entitled *The IBM CMO Study*.³ This report is based on data collected from 2008 to 2010, through interviews with 1,700 chief marketing officers worldwide, in order to assess if marketing organizations are prepared to manage media change, with the barely concealed aim of advertising IBM’s own data mining

services. Even the full, internal version of the original report does not contain any data itself; it merely adds that “we now create as much information every two days as we did from the dawn of civilization to 2003.”⁴ As a source for the latter statement, the IBM report footnotes a 2010 *TechCrunch* interview with Google’s then executive chairman, Eric Schmidt.

Whatever its original source, it is difficult to understand what such a statistical finding is supposed to tell us. Given that large private IT (information technology) corporations are notoriously secretive about the actual volume of data traffic, any “big data” estimations can hardly be verified. And what data are we speaking about? Data initially appear unstructured and useless, as chaotic or repetitive noise. Once data are turned into exploitable information, that information still would need to travel through different pipelines, with widely varying implications for the world’s economies or ecologies. While Maxwell and Miller rightfully criticize Facebook and Google for their staggering electricity consumption as much as the “YouTubers, bloggers, and other volunteers in the digital congregation,”⁵ Maxwell’s talk is made accessible via YouTube and also linked to Facebook, where Miller and Maxwell advertise both their book and brand of political economy in separate (and rather popular) profiles. According to the Schmidt statement quoted by IBM, it is exactly such user-generated content that makes for the five exabytes of data every second day or, what Miller and Maxwell have referred to as “the irony of exemplary ironies.”⁶

But does it matter? My point here is not to devalue critical research on media ecologies; indeed, such research is certainly needed. Nor am I aiming to expose political economy’s “data bias” or putative weaknesses in Maxwell’s (and Miller’s) widely discussed argument. Rather, my question is this: If science is in the business of producing objectivity, how does this production relate to the objectivities produced by the business? Where to locate the politics today given that we arguably have come to live in, rather than with, media?⁷ Media industry scholars always face the dilemma that quantitative analyses are put at the core of analyzing industries,⁸ while simultaneously taking part in the very production of “the industry” itself, with statistics serving as an industry mechanism for managerial efficiency and centralized control.⁹ This holds especially true for IT-based industries and services whose operations are essentially invisible and subject to representation in infographics, telecom maps and metrics, data center imageries, marketing taglines, and the like. How are we ever to get out of what John Thornton Caldwell aptly describes as “contact zones that media industries stage carefully around us as we study them?”¹⁰

In my current research on Sweden’s digital media infrastructure, I am confronted with an excess of visibility when it comes to new servicing platforms, to internet service providers, or the people using them, while the more complex technological, material, or social dimensions remain hidden, or in engineering terms, “blackboxed.”¹¹ Rephrasing my question above, how are we ever to get “close” to these industries? While today’s content providers, delivery pipelines, and data centers arguably have become what telecommunication networks once were to communication scholars, macro-political institutional analysis seems barely suited to cope with this development. “Who owns the physical infrastructure that we use and need? The layer upon which all of our communication is based,” a Swedish blogger worried recently. He continued, “The Internet is no longer just a playground, it’s not just for entertainment. It’s for real, we’re totally dependent on it.” In another ironic twist, these are the words of Peter Sunde, co-founder of The Pirate Bay, a website that facilitates peer-to-peer file sharing.¹²

Media industries constitute a zone where agency is permanently subverted, undermined, blackboxed, and distributed. Research on media industries thus necessitates an awareness of the

politics of our own data gathering and of what Langdon Winner called the “politics of artifacts,” an acknowledgment that technologies mediate the relation between us and our world so thoroughly that our ability to understand “subjectivity” and “objectivity” comes to depend upon our ability to grasp how these artifacts amplify the “forms of contact” that relate us to one another and our environment.¹³ If even cyberlibertarianism’s “smart kids” like Sunde can’t acknowledge that our media ecologies are beyond grasp then we need to follow Maxwell’s and Miller’s call for studying these ecologies. For that, however, we do not need to reinvent media and communication studies.

By evoking a schism between humanism and scientism, a study of media that deals with numbers and another dealing with qualities, and the old debate between naturalistic versus interpretative forms of scientific work, *Greening the Media* questions the contribution of “orthodox histories” to media industries scholarship. I would like to argue, however, that decades of historical, philosophical, and other “humanist” research have been vital in providing both the documentation and methods for the most pertinent research on media industries today. Rather than creating another divide between humanities and social sciences, online and offline, “old” and “new” media, or in-between the very disciplinary fields involved in media industries research, we need to make their inherent tensions productive. Infrastructure studies and media archeology offer two examples for approaches that are productive in this sense. Sociologist Susan Leigh Star, for instance, asks us to go beyond any a priori idea of what infrastructures are (i.e., a means of control over information) in order to understand how they work. Instead of assuming that control is always already contained in, and guaranteed by, some form of ownership over pipelines or internet protocols, she suggests seeing infrastructure as a specific outcome of “distributions” between the social/technical and global/local, an outcome that reflects everyday decisions in infrastructure design, development, or enactment.¹⁴ Media archeology, in turn, has long engaged in the study of the material, non-representational dimensions of media that Miller and Maxwell now request, with the explicit aim of identifying structures of power through technology and policy analysis.¹⁵

Such “reverse engineering” that builds on insights outside of media industries’ own orthodox methodologies may even lead to new, interventionist formats of research. If it holds true that capitalist media industries manage to “colonize any new public good,” turning any “subversion into profit,”¹⁶ then it might be high time to turn subversion into a research strategy and the industry’s contact zones into zones of experiment and play. Together with Swedish internet activists Rasmus Fleischer and Christopher Kullenberg, who hold doctoral degrees in musicology and philosophy/theory of science, respectively, along with ethnologist Anna Johansson and my cinema studies colleague Pelle Snickars, I am currently preparing a research project that sets out to investigate music distribution and aggregation services. This project’s methodological innovation consists of following digital files rather than those involved in making, using, or collecting them. After initial talks with Spotify’s management, we asked how we would be able to get “close” or “into” its music distribution engine. Instead of being content with the study of the industry’s extensive self-representations, we decided to “unbox” online music aggregation by creating a non-profit digital record label that would allow access to the industry through its very own distribution platforms. “Following the thing”¹⁷ allows us to study “the digital” with the same tools that organize information, and to get beyond interview answers to questions about unexpected file “behavior,” aggregation platform strategies, processes of (de)valuation, and the infrastructures that make all these possible. While certainly not intending to “rethink” the field as such, this project design allows us to bring politics back in an interventionist form reminiscent of what ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel once called

“breaching experiments”: by breaking the rules of unstated social roles in order to study them.¹⁸ Whatever data our media have become, we still may metaphorically “hack” ourselves into the material infrastructures providing them, shedding light on their built-in political values and our own.

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 - ² Richard Maxwell, [“IAMCR 2013 Plenary No. 3 – Conference video,”](#) DCU School of Communications, June 27, 2013, published June 28, 2013.
 - ³ [“From Stretched to Strengthened: Insights from the Global Chief Marketing Officer Study,”](#) IBM, 2011.
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29, 161.
 - ⁶ Maxwell and Miller, *Greening the Media*, commenting on how Manuel Castells had overlooked IT’s polluting side while detailing the reliance on such technology, 13.
 - ⁷ See, e.g., Mark Deuze, *Media Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
 - ⁸ Toby Miller, “Can Natural Luddites Make Things Explode or Travel Faster? The New Humanities, Cultural Policy Studies, and Creative Industries,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 192.
 - ⁹ Nitin Govil, “Recognizing ‘Industry,’” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 175.
 - ¹⁰ John T. Caldwell, “Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood’s Blackwaters,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 165.
 - ¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). See also Jennifer Holt and Patrick Vonderau, “Where the Internet Lives: Data Centers as Digital Media Infrastructure,” in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, eds. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming 2014).
 - ¹² Peter Sunde (brokep), [“Intertubes,”](#) *Copy me happy* (blog), May 26, 2013.
 - ¹³ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); see also Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) and Josh Braun, “Over the Top: Online Television Distribution as Sociotechnical System,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6 (2013): 438.
 - ¹⁴ See, e.g., *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life*, eds. Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2009), and Geoffrey Bowker et al., “Toward Information Infrastructure Studies: Ways of Knowing in a Networked Environment,” in *The International Handbook of Internet Research*, eds. Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew Allen (Heidelberg/London: Springer, 2010), 101.

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- ¹⁵ Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archeology* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 164.
¹⁶ Sean Cubitt, "The Political Economy of Cosmopolis," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 59-60.
¹⁷ George Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.
¹⁸ Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Malden: Polity Press, 1991).

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