ACADEMIA   FOCUS ON  **Media Studies**

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# Media Up Close

The tale of human progress is also a story of advancements in media technologies. But should we necessarily greet the changes now on the horizon with optimism?

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One way for us to understand how modern societies interact with media technologies is by examining their accessibility to the public and their impact on our perceptions. In the modern-day world, characterized by the prevalence of electric and electronic media, we acquire knowledge and construct our awareness primarily through forms of media that facilitate remote ways of perception and access. Media devices enable us to extend our reach beyond what we can perceive directly through our senses, beyond passive observation. Radio, television, and cinema – which can be described as "telemedia" (where *tele* means "at a distance") – guide us on journeys through ideas and narratives that defy the boundaries of time, granting us glimpses into worlds beyond our imme-

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While reading, enjoying visual performances, and immersing ourselves in music, we smoothly transition to interactive menu options. This fosters a habit of constantly interacting with our devices, tapping away at the screen. We also gain the ability to actively upload our own content, rather than passively downloading the content of others, which has been and continues to be the standard in the world of mass media. This marks one of the elements of the transition from analogue communication, characterized by a mass scale and one-way messaging, to multi-directional digital and network interactivity.

The shift in perception from the far to the near, from telemedia to microperception technologies, marks yet another step in the history of humanity's pursuit of conquest and colonization. Humans have an insatiable appetite, always craving new resources and fresh energy. When it comes to media, this drive has typically entailed controlling both individual and

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diate surroundings. However, such well-established telemedia are nowadays increasingly being supplanted by digital media technologies, offering a more immediate sensory experience. This change not only entails a shift in perspectives and the dominance of novel modes of information engagement, such as interactivity, but also brings the media devices physically closer to users and their senses, fostering ongoing bodily, sensory, and cognitive engagement.

The more traditional "long-distance" media and the related imagination of the global village therefore need to become reconciled with "up close" media technologies we have in our very hands, right next to our ears, in front of our eyes, on our skin or even beneath it. In a short span of time, we have transitioned from traditional phones to smartphones, from radios to interactive streaming services, from desktop computers to laptops, tablets, and projectors. We have evolved from clicking, tapping and swiping screens, to conversing with voice assistants and incorporating sensors into our day-to-day tasks. Soon, we will see the emergence of biomedia technologies, creating hybrid connections by integrating directly with organic matter.
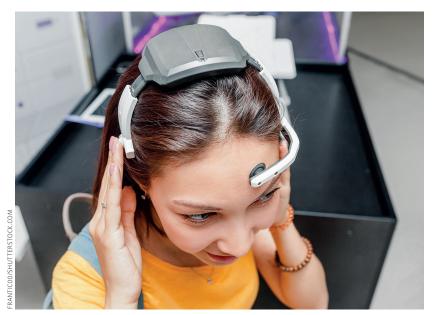
collective imaginations, as well as steering public sentiments. Media formats and the institutions utilizing them have not only conquered nations and communities but also aspired to control social change and determine its scale. The press, radio, cinema, infotainment television, and the interactive Internet have all integrated seamlessly into the fabric of this global village. These media channels, in particular the newer digital media, emerge as highly effective instruments for exerting influence and domination over long distances.

## Proximity and biomedia

We are now witnessing tangible effects of the physical up-closeness of the state-of-the-art, "short-distance" digital media. Biomedia interfaces are starting to nestle onto our very bodies, transforming not just our imagination, but also our sensory perceptions themselves. They are so close to us physically that the symbolic messages we continue to rely on are now just an excuse for engaging in this form of direct interaction. In addition to – and often instead of – the distant and detached perception of older media, we now scroll and click, wear earphones, and sport smartwatch sensors

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on our skin. We communicate through microphones, with instructions and events being triggered by our constant engagement with interfaces through touch, as well as their reciprocal interaction with us. By so doing, we are, quite literally, preparing ourselves for media-driven sensory prosthetic devices and corresponding hybrid cognitive practices that combine mechanics and neural processes. This offers a glimpse into a potential evolution of communication and media where mechanical devices are attached to and interact with our bodies to elicit specific sensory and physical responses, subsequently being translated into the behavior and attitudes of audiences. While the largely corrupted decoding of messages, conscious interaction, and reflection in the age of long-distance media will persist, their importance is expected to diminish in favor of impulses and stimuli in the future. We are merely a step away from crossing that fine line in the world of media, where we define the distinction between what lies outside us and what lies within us, between an object and its environment.

A good illustration of this change is found in headphones. In recent decades, they have evolved from small loudspeakers (sound sources located externally to our bodies) into auditory prosthetics for our ears and sense of hearing. These devices come into direct contact with our ears and auditory organs, effectively blocking out all other sources of sound and thus isolating us from our usual surroundings. The next evolution in headphone technology involved their miniaturization to a size that fits inside the ear canal and the abandonment of traditional wires in favor of Bluetooth wireless technology transmitting audio signals. Wireless implants do not just deliver sound and block out external noise; they are also equipped with a growing array of sensors and applications that

respond to our listening habits and to what is happening in our bodies. They demand interaction from us through touch and voice commands. This is one of the fields where media has essentially integrated with our sensory systems, acting as its primitive prosthetic extension.

## Neural interfaces

By employing neural interfaces, which are essentially an extension of media forms like the aforementioned earbuds, we can create electromagnetic and chemical media connections with biological structures that are inaccessible because they remain concealed within our bodies. This is the type of "communication" that global players in the tech industry are now fervently pursuing. A strategic goal for Neuralink, one of the most important companies in Elon Musk's portfolio, is to create a platform that enables direct communication with the human brain and nervous system, without engaging the senses or awareness. Global capital, governments, and armies are eagerly supporting similar studies and projects, whereas the question to what extent we can discuss the concept of a person without a physical body or with reduced sensory capabilities is seen in such business plans as being of lesser importance. A new stage of the arms race and technological colonization is underway in the field of biomedia – technologies that interact with living matter, exploring its mysteries and potential and blurring the lines between the inner and outer aspects of human existence.

Our interactions with digital media tools and the software rules that organize them serve as a channel through which individuals with power and control ambitions seek to influence us. Could the direct monitoring of people's bodies and the control of their behavior through this method be, in the years ahead, a potential scenario for biopolitical colonization? Although these questions may initially appear to be on the fringe and tinged with a conspiracy-theory mindset, they will nevertheless play a vital role in shaping both our future and the path that media technology will take in its evolution. It is difficult, after all, to envision a more favorable opportunity to gain and secure a political and economic advantage than the ability to colonize human bodies and minds through media. Digital media have shown their potential as preliminary tools of emancipation under conditions of mass culture by turning passive, unwitting consumers of other people's viewpoints and narratives into active content creators and sharers. In the midst of this euphoric regaining of subjectivity, causality, and agency, the ongoing media spectacle may actually be blinding us to the fact that we have nevertheless become ensnared in a new form of dependence and subordination. ■

Further reading:

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