Images of Media: Hidden Ferment—and Harmony—in the Field

by Joshua Meyrowitz, University of New Hampshire

As of now, media scholars have a rather limited shared vocabulary to describe exactly what it is they are studying about media or about a particular medium. This situation is not necessarily a serious problem for the scores of fields and research traditions whose concepts and vocabularies are brought to bear on media research questions, but it is a glaring problem for media studies because, even apart from other differences, we have no common understanding of what the subject matter of the field is.

In comparing and contrasting one work with another, scholars sometimes rely on rather ambiguous dichotomies such as “content vs. structure,” “content vs. form,” or “manifest vs. latent.” Yet as I will describe below, terms such as structure, form, and latent are used so differently in different media studies that many researchers misunderstand or talk past each other, when they bother to speak to and listen to each other at all. More typically, overviews of the field draw on a long laundry list of terms and approaches specific to particular research camps. It is often unclear how the findings of these different camps relate to each other or build into some larger corpus of knowledge about media.

This essay argues that a fair amount of confusion in media studies has resulted from the lack of explicit treatment of the most basic of questions: “What are media?” Such a question has generally appeared too elementary to merit a serious response. Perhaps the widespread use of modern media, such as the telephone, movies, radio, television, computers, and tape and disk technologies—which has been a major stimulant to the rapid growth of media studies in the first place—has fostered the belief that everyone knows what media are and that one can therefore move immediately to other research questions. Yet even when researchers have not confronted the issue of the nature of media explicitly, they have had

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to address it implicitly in order to conduct studies. And an examination of media scholarship with the question “What are media?” in mind reveals that different researchers have answered the question quite differently.

As with all attempts to comprehend complex phenomena and processes, we rely, often subconsciously, on metaphorical thinking to simplify and clarify our conceptions of media. I believe the field of media studies can be strengthened over the coming years by more attention to what is common and different, limiting and liberating, about the various metaphors for media. In this article, I attempt a preliminary meta-metaphorical analysis, by suggesting that the scores of surface metaphors that are used to describe media are manifestations of a handful of even simpler metaphorical constructs.

**Media Metaphors**

One does not need to dig too deeply to see that both popular and scholarly media analysts draw on an abundance of metaphors. Television, for example, has been described in terms of dozens of metaphors, including: companion, new state religion, plug-in drug, Big Brother, window on the world, baby-sitter, teacher, instrument of terror, network of social relations, chief of time, pulpit, shared arena, cultivator, agenda setter, white noise, new language, glass teat, electronic wallpaper, anthology of texts, and nineteen-inch neighborhood. Although media metaphors abound, they are sometimes treated as unproblematic descriptions of aspects of media or, more commonly, they are seen merely as figures of speech that have aesthetic rather than epistemological implications. Yet different metaphors flow from and foster different perceptions of media and lead to different research questions and findings. Metaphors are potent tools for seeing clearly, but they also blind us to other ways of seeing (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

I suggest that virtually all the specific questions and arguments about a particular medium, or media in general, can be linked to one of three underlying metaphors for what a medium is. Although various terms could be used to convey the general sense of these three metaphorical constructs, I summarize them here as media as conduits, media as languages, media as environments.

**Media as Conduits**

By far the most common image of a medium is that it is a sort of conduit that is important insofar as it delivers content. The conduit metaphor leads to such questions as: What is the content? What social, political, economic, organizational, ideological, and other factors influence the development and perception of content? How accurately does media content reflect reality? How do various audiences interpret the content? What effects does the content have? What alternative types of media content are possible?

This metaphor is so common to us that when we use a medium we respond with belief or disbelief. A case in point is the rise of the internet in Africa, uplifted by a new state of the economy. We see our children connected to a program, or we are warned from another. And when we are concerned about “get a life,” Kuwaiti babies from incubator stories were prompted to incite Americans to the various channels through a newspaper, telephone, radio, stand out as the first thing.

Although some researchers use the term “medium,” which include aspect of the metaphors, the study of media is largely medium term. We need to minimize the attention that holds or sends the necessary topics of study, such as TV’s messages. Yet most people deal with behaviors and the existence of disinformation, for example, without medium use of the term to refer to a device, in contrast to the brain, ground, or culture.

Although it sounds strange without paying much attention to our daily lives. (Content researchers miss a favorite television show or an oral dream, for example) do not think of him at least something about the content. We accept at the start that the medium of the telephone yield a “convergent content,” but books (“faithfully”) or “unfaithful” interview or discussion are clear. The original discussion and further experiences and practices suggest that there is some content always changed from medium to medium, or from media.
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This metaphor is so common because content is the first thing we react to when we use a medium. A message appeals to us or repels us. We respond with belief or disbelief. We are moved by a news story on starvation in Africa, uplifted by a heroic rescue, or troubled by the reported state of the economy. We wonder whether to buy an advertised product. We want our children to learn some intellectual skills from one television program, or we are worried about what social behaviors they may learn from another. And when we communicate through a medium, we usually are concerned about “getting our message across.” We all have a sense that there is a difference between one truth claim (“Iraqi invaders pulled Kuwaiti babies from incubators”) and a very different truth claim (“The incubator story was promulgated by a public relations firm hired by Kuwaitis to incite Americans to war”). While there are differences among the various channels through which content can be conveyed—such as newspaper, telephone, radio, television—the differences in messages stand out as the first thing to see, respond to, and study.

Although some researchers draw on more complex definitions of content, which include aspects of media made visible through other metaphors, the study of content that is stimulated by the conduit image of media is largely medium-free. That is, the focus on media content tends to minimize the attention given to the nature of the particular medium that holds or sends the message. Television content is an extremely popular topic of study, for example, simply because so many people attend to TV’s messages. Yet most of the questions asked about television content deal with behaviors and communications that do not necessarily require the existence of television. Violence, sexism, sexuality, and government disinformation, for example, all exist without television; indeed, they exist without the use of any particular medium (at least in the most typical use of the term to refer to an impersonal mechanical communication device, in contrast to considerations of the vocal chords, tongue, ear, brain, ground, air, or culture as media).

Although it sounds strange to say that one can study media content without paying much attention to media, it is something that most people do daily. (Content researchers simply do it more rigorously.) When we miss a favorite television program, we may ask a friend or spouse to tell us orally “what happened.” We accept that a written phone message tells us at least something about an oral telephone call; or to push this further, we accept at the start that the electronically reproduced sounds over a telephone yield a “conversation.” We talk about movies being made from books (“faithfully” or “unfaithfully”). We read a transcript of a recorded interview or discussion and assume that it retains something from the original discussion and from the recording. These and other daily experiences and practices suggest that it is common in our culture to believe that there is some content essence that can be transported relatively unchanged from medium to medium—or from face-to-face interaction to medium, or from medium to face-to-face interaction.
Of course, those who draw on the conduit metaphor generally provide much more sophisticated analyses than a spouse's description of a missed TV program or telephone call. In addition to quantified and statistically analyzed studies of manifest content, scholars look at underlying cultural value systems and gender assumptions; examine the ways in which media narratives are shaped by political, economic, psychological, and organizational factors; probe the ways in which long-term exposure may cultivate certain attitudes among audience members; analyze topically or thematically defined genres; look at the ways in which different audiences engage in different "readings" of media "texts" (in effect, co-creating their own content); and so on. Many of these more sophisticated explorations point to the most common uses for terms such as structure, codes, form, and latent in media studies: structure of the content, content codes, form of the content, and latent content. For even in its most complex forms, research that grows from the conduit metaphor tends to look at some aspect of content and to ignore other latent aspects of the structure of mediated communications.

The conduit metaphor is widely shared in both the popular and scholarly arenas. It underlies broadly held concerns over children's imitation of antisocial behaviors seen on TV. It helps frame debates over news bias, gender portrayal, cultural elites, and family values. It is a stimulus for concerns over the public's susceptibility to propaganda. Ironically, this metaphor is one shared among competing social activists and among research camps that barely speak to each other, such as conservative Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media (AIM) and progressive Jeff Cohen's Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), Feminists for Free Expression (FFE), and the Moral Majority, traditional content analysts and most critical theorists. Thus, many people who claim to share little with each other in terms of media study, actually share a fundamental image of what media are and what one should examine about media. They also often share a neglect of at least two other important conceptions of media.

Media as Languages

Another core metaphor that has generated much media scholarship (especially in film studies) is that media are languages. Unlike the conduit conception, the media-as-languages metaphor, as I am using the image here, has tended to focus attention on the unique grammar of each medium. Those who draw on this metaphor have explored the particular expressive variables, or production techniques, within each medium or each general type of medium (hence, familiar variables). Rather than the conduit, grammar analysis recognizes the presentation and manipulation of content.

The language metaphor emphasizes variables that can be manipulated in terms of such manipulations as the choice of codes for each medium, whether the culturally variable code for early production conventions reflects typical grammar variables, and so on. While the conduit metaphor easily links media to content, the language metaphors are content that function only within the medium. When a singer sings a love song, the meaning of the song can be altered by the lyrics, the choice of music, and the way the singer delivers it. The language metaphor, of course, recognizes the choices of the performer or writer. The language metaphor, of course, recognizes the choices of the performer or writer.

Of course, one cannot separate content from context. In print, for example, the context of the sizes and styles of type, the layout or a closeup of nothing is important. Similarly, context is of great importance in judging the relative distance between the two terms. Nevertheless, although the language metaphor addresses content questions, a content analysis, for example, may be concerned with the roles of men and women (housewives of the past) and the respectability of sex objects, for example, or of the way that some manner of exhibition is used to influence judgment, so on. A grammar analysis would include the medium. In television, for example, the sets would include what is called a "grammar of style."

The images I analyze here are actually my metaphors for what I claim are the implicit conceptions underlying various forms of media inquiry. My three metaphors, therefore, do not necessarily match the explicit usage of similar terms in the literature, which is often very inconsistent. Sometimes, for example, the notion that each medium is a unique language is used to refer to the third conception of media analyzed below (e.g., Carpenter, 1960). (cont.)
each general type of media (film and video, for example, share many similar variables). Rather than viewing the medium as a relatively passive conduit, grammar analysts look at the plasticity of the medium in altering the presentation and meaning of content elements.

The language metaphor leads to questions such as: What are the variables that can be manipulated within each medium? What are the effects of such manipulations in terms of perception, comprehension, emotional reaction, and behavioral response? To what extent are the grammatical codes for each medium shaped by the physical nature of the medium, by the culturally variable codes of face-to-face communication, and/or by early production conventions? What political and ideological factors affect typical grammar variable choices? How do different audiences react differently to similar manipulations of production variables?

While the conduit metaphor leads one to analyze content that crosses easily from medium to medium and from live interaction to medium and back, the language metaphor tends to focus attention on those variables that function only within a specific medium or within a particular type of media. When a singer multitracks a vocal, for example, she is making a decision that cannot be made in real life or in still photography. And no matter how upset we are with a rainy afternoon, in real life we cannot “dissolve to a sunny morning.”

Of course, one cannot discuss grammar choices without also considering content. In print, for example, one needs words before one can vary the sizes and styles of type; in visual media, one cannot have a long shot or a closeup of nothing; in aural media, one must have some sound content to employ equalization filters or to create sound perspective (the sense of relative distance fostered by different microphone placements).

Nevertheless, although grammar studies must include consideration of content, grammar questions are generally quite different from typical content questions. A content analyst exploring women’s images in media, for example, may be concerned with elements such as the roles held by women (housewives or executives, for example), women’s treatment (are they respected as equals by men, worshipped as madonnas, or viewed as sex objects, for example), whether women characters are punished in some manner for exhibiting personal or professional independence, and so on. A grammar analyst, in contrast, might examine the particular structuring of these roles, relationships, and behaviors within the particular medium. In television, for example, grammar concerns over women’s images would include whether the women are framed in intimate, personal,

(continuation)
or social space; whether women are made to look weak through high-angle shots or strong through low-angle shots; whether filters are used in closeups of some female characters to create a soft, ethereal glow; whether shot structure focuses attention on a woman’s body parts; and whether the overall action is viewed from a male or female perspective (such as in the all too common sequence of a woman passing a man, followed by a cut to a shot of her rear end). Thus, even the seemingly clear terms image, portrayal, and genre, tend to have very different meanings within different media metaphors.

The contribution of grammar to the overall message is made most apparent when one actually or hypothetically holds content elements constant as grammar variables are changed. Of course, in naturally occurring media artifacts the specific content generally shifts along with the grammar, but often one can still sort out the different strains of impact. A simple but striking example is offered by Henry Hampton (1989), producer of the award-winning documentary on the American black civil rights movement, “Eyes on the Prize.” Hampton and his staff studied hundreds of hours of TV news footage. They found that one basic grammar element in the coverage changed dramatically over time, and that this element seemed to reflect the degree of identification with the protestors that journalists felt and promoted. Hampton describes how in early demonstrations the cameras take an outside, white perspective, observing the black demonstrators confronted by white racists. But as time passes, the cameras move “behind the march leaders and look outward at the hostile sheriffs and their deputies” (p. 39). With the calls for “black power,” the view again shifts outside. And, finally, with the 1967 riots, the camera’s point of view is from behind the police lines.

These shifts in camera position parallel the manipulations that are used in some fiction films, most blatantly in war movies, to encourage audiences to identify with one "side" as opposed to another. Manipulations of grammar variables also partially explain why in some movies audiences tend to identify with the criminals (a content concept), as in "Bonnie and Clyde" and the Godfather movies, and in others with the police (or more typically, with one or some of the police). In addition to general camera perspective, the vicarious distance established between audience and performer encourages various degrees of emotional involvement. It is easiest to react personally (both positively and negatively) to characters who are seen often in closeup. Indeed, we may feel that a movie has a happy ending, even though hundreds of people are killed, as long as those we have been vicariously “close to” escape largely unharmed.

As the above examples suggest, the examination of media grammar variables involves a second, quite different set of meanings for the terms structure, form, latent, and code. These terms have yet another group of meanings that grows from a third image of media.

Media as Environment
A third answer to the question about the type of environment can be found in the effects that transcend variable settings or fixed variables. This leads to the notion of medium because those medium determines fixed features of each.

Medium features are a key part of the grammar research. After all, the degree of medium or the content of a piece is TV and to print, respectively. In the recording clearly deals with a media or in live interaction, then the media are sometimes explicit in the medium's content or presentation. An image of print is used to just use the medium research goes through extensive understanding of the medium difference.

Broadly speaking, the medium are the characteristics of a medium it physically, psychologically, or from live interaction, functions of a medium? What social and what do development and use of media features? How does the use of media alter the function of new forms of media and functions were dependent on a medially dominant media? It is important with cultural codes and meanings.

Of course, it is impossible in any way recognized that to whatever extent that still needs programs to counter the systematic tendencies that arise of the different content of media. Transcripts of telephone or other examples, may be used to place the nature of the types of the than film producers can be fostered by various a...
Media as Environments

A third answer to the question “What are media?” is that each medium is a type of environment or setting or context that has characteristics and effects that transcend variations in content and manipulations of production variables. This leads to what I call medium analysis. I use the singular medium because those who draw on this metaphor examine the relatively fixed features of each medium.

Medium features are an implicit subject of study in both content and grammar research. After all, when one studies the content of TV images or the content of a paragraph, one is implicitly studying what is unique to TV and to print, respectively. Similarly, an analysis of the effects of microphone pickup patterns on the resulting “landscape of sound” in an audio recording clearly deals with variables that do not exist in many other media or in live interaction. In addition, the special features of a medium are sometimes explicitly used to justify the significance of studying the medium’s content or grammar (as when the basic accessibility of TV images to young, preliterate children in contrast to the relative opaqueness of print is used to justify analyses of the content of TV programs). But medium research goes further: It focuses specifically on advancing our understanding of the ways in which the differences among media make a difference.

Broadly speaking, the environment metaphor leads one to ask: What are the characteristics of each medium (or each type of media) that make it physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media and from live interaction, regardless of content and grammar choices? How do the features of a medium influence content and grammar choices for that medium? What social, political, and economic variables encourage the development and use of media with some features over media with other features? How does the addition of a new medium to the existing matrix of media alter the function and use of older media? How does the rise of new forms of media alter social roles and institutions whose structure and functions were dependent in some way on the characteristics of previously dominant media? How do the characteristics of each medium interact with cultural codes and customs?

Of course, it is impossible to analyze the features of the medium without in some way recognizing the existence of content and grammar choices. To whatever extent there is an “environment of television,” for example, it still needs programs to become visible. Indeed, medium analysts may use systematic tendencies in content and grammar choices as partial evidence of the different contexts for communication fostered by different media. Transcripts of telephone conversations contrasted with letters, for example, may be used to point to the relatively informal, bidirectional, and less linear nature of the telephone; and TV producers’ tendency to rely more than film producers on the closeup may be related to the greater intimacy fostered by various aspects of the current form of the TV medium.
At the same time, typical medium questions are quite distinct from typical content and grammar questions. Analysts of both content and grammar focus on variables that can be manipulated after the medium of communication is chosen. With medium analysis, the focus is on those environmental features of the medium that are largely out of the control of users once the medium is in use. One can give in to the tendencies of the medium (such as the relative informality of the telephone) or one can resist them (by not having a phone, for example) or try to work around them (by buying an answering machine). But they are there, and one must contend with them in some way. With medium analysis, then, the key decision is whether or not to invent, adopt, or employ the medium in the first place.  

Looking at media as contexts is often confused with looking at media in social context. But the larger social context is relevant to all three images of media. Social, economic, political, and organizational variables influence, and are in turn influenced by, (a) the production and perception of media message content, (b) manipulation of media grammar variables and the reaction to such manipulations, and (c) the development and use of different media settings.

One can study media settings on both the micro, single-situation level and the macro, societal level. On the micro level, medium questions explore the implications of choosing one medium over another in a given situation. What, for example, are the medium-related implications of a job applicant choosing to write a letter of introduction as opposed to making an introductory telephone call, or of a child choosing to relax after school by reading a book rather than watching television, or of a business using the radio rather than the newspaper to advertise a new product?

On the macro level, medium analysis deals with the larger social implications of the widespread use of a medium. Thus, macro-level issues would include the impact that the telephone has had on business and social interactions in general, such as its impact on the art and function of letter writing. With regard to TV, school, and children, a macro-level analysis might examine the ways in which TV may undermine print conceptions of education and childhood. As for businesses and advertising, a sample macro-level medium concern might be how a political and economic system that focuses on the production of democracy may change with the advent of television (which allows television to function as a new medium and allow for relatively little support or control over other more interactive forms, and effectively little support or control over educational forms); alter the learning and social role relationship to the new medium; and change the way how people know what comes from different media, whether participatory democracy is a part of it, and whether political leaders; alter the economic function of the medium, so on.

The impact of the medium on variables are actually or hypostatically is contrasted with the effect of media on the user. For example, the medium is often used to tell or not tell young people about the context of print support that young people have, the context of print support that their parents, because most children do not even learn about the environmental context in which something is written, and thousands of children may be influenced by something that are not only not told or not told of print support or context of print support. In effect, the environment is constant, the functional media environment is not.

As the above example indicates, these are leads to a whole other set of considerations. The medium, TV, as a medium, is less able than other media, say that a young person understands the codes of the medium, the structure (grammar).

Like content and grammar, the medium, too, much as it explores. A medium, therefore, requires exploration of the nature of media.

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2 Changes in technology can alter the setting of a medium, even when it goes by the same name. The social context of the telephone, for example, has been altered by advances in switching equipment, tone dialing, voice mail, and most recently by "caller ID," which allows subscribers to see the phone number of the caller before answering the phone. Similarly what we call "television" has been an evolving environment of broadcast, cable, satellite, and, soon, high-definition TV—each with different implications. In effect, then, the medium is also defined by its environment of context. In particular environments, medium characterizations are fixed while grammar variables can be manipulated.
nomic system that focuses on selling products and promoting a single vision of democracy may encourage the development of broadcast radio and television (which are unidirectional, centrally- and mass-distributed, and allow for relatively little local input, feedback, and discussion), while other more interactive and community-based technologies receive relatively little support or encouragement.

Macro-level medium questions address potential large-scale changes, such as the ways in which different medium environments may foster different thinking patterns; alter the dividing line between public and private life; stimulate changes in child-adult, male-female, and leader-follower role relationships by altering who-knows-what-about-whom and who-knows-what-compared-to-whom; increase or decrease opportunities for participatory democracy; change the social significance of physical location and physical barriers; affect the criteria that are used to evaluate political leaders; alter the relative status of various social institutions; and so on.

The impact of the medium's setting is most visible when content variables are actually or hypothetically held relatively constant and when one medium is contrasted with another medium or with live interaction. Consider, for example, the content element of "advice to parents about what to tell or not tell young children about sex." When placed in a book, the context of print supports the content of such advice and the authority of parents, because most young children cannot read an adult book and do not even learn about the existence of this parental concern. When placed in the setting of broadcast TV, however, a paradox arises, because thousands of children may be listening in, hearing about the things parents are advised not to tell children, as well as sensing the anxiety and confusion of parents. In effect, then, even when we try to hold the content constant, the functional message often changes along with the medium.

As the above examples suggest, the image of media as environments leads to a whole other set of meanings for the concepts of media structure, codes, and form. To say, for example, that the basic access code of TV, as a medium, is less complex than the access code of print, is not to say that a young, preliterate child who is able to watch TV necessarily understands the codes of particular thematic genres (content) or of shot structure.

Like content and grammar studies, medium analysis tends to ignore as much as it explores. A full consideration of any media-related issue, therefore, requires exploring questions that grow out of all three images of media.

Re-Imaging Media Studies

When taken together, the three images of media outlined above offer one way of defining the current subject matter of media studies and of com-
paring, contrasting, and synthesizing research findings. If my analysis here is correct, at least some of the confusions and disagreements in the field have stemmed from the fact that functionally there have been three different "media studies," plus various hybrids, based on three different conceptions of media.

These three competing images of media foster hidden ferment and hidden agreement in the field for several reasons. Since the subjects of all three forms of inquiry are referred to by the same general terms—such as media effects, media control, or perception of media—the very different assumptions underlying each are obscured. Further, because content, grammar, and medium elements of the same mediated communication offer their own thrusts of influence—which may or may not be in the same direction—potentially complementary and additive studies are often misconstrued as competing and contradictory.

A scholarly or popular analysis that suggests that a particular TV series contains positive images of blacks or women, for example, may not necessarily contradict another study that argues that blacks or women are negatively portrayed in the series. One needs to look at what aspects of the portrayal are being examined—content and/or grammar.

Just as content thrusts may be in tandem with or opposed to grammar thrusts, medium thrusts may support or undermine content and grammar decisions. A look at traditional television content, for example, may suggest that TV has been oppressive to women, but a medium perspective could argue that TV, regardless of its portrayal of women characters, has exposed women viewers to a wide array of previously all-male arenas and has therefore encouraged greater blending of male and female roles in everyday life. It is not necessary to accept either of these particular content and medium claims to see that they are each addressing a different aspect of mediated communications. Yet they may be incorrectly viewed as simply two contradictory answers to the same question: Does TV support or undermine a feminist world view?

A lack of examination of the metaphorical base of media inquiry may also mask significant disagreements. For example, an analysis that suggests that the medium features of TV weaken adult control over what information children have access to may be confused with popular and scholarly concerns over the content of children's programming, but they are actually very different types of analyses with very different implications for social policy, media regulation, and childrearing practices.

When researchers ignore the range of metaphors, there may simply be confusion over what has been found in a study. Cultural and subcultural variations in perception of a TV show, for example, are usually explained in terms of content elements (roles, narrative, action, etc.). But such variations may also be linked to culture-specific perceptions of grammar variables (such as the spatial zones symbolized by camera shots) or even cultural variations in interaction with the medium of television.

Of course, the separate media variables grows partly out of their separate medium processes: particular medium (content), particular medium's production, each communication event's role. The study of content and grammar of media involves all three.

Nevertheless, in research, we have usually operated in and drawn on more than one of the metaphors of popular and scholarly media. We draw primarily or exclusively on one when we write, but when two of the metaphors are in conflict, we must introduce a third.

This situation has become quite metaphorical—a good measure of the art of the field. Without exposure to conflicting views, one does not begin to show, and the complexity of the field becomes clearer. This is what is meant by the word "metaphor." It is also the problem that researchers face, for one of the issues that have been overlooked in the study of the field is the very issue of the field of media studies. It also follows that the field we have not yet considered may be as central to our understanding of media and media, audit, news, hegemony, and so on. However, there is much time to be spent on the exploration of the discovery that a loved one has a whole set of problems that have not yet been solved. How can we contribute to the field of media studies? How can we contribute to a new synthesis of all these issues?

References
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Conclusion

Of course, the separate consideration of content, grammar, and medium variables grows partly from an analytical fiction. Analytically, one can separate media processes into those elements that transcend any particular medium (content), those elements that involve manipulations of a particular medium's production variables (grammar), and those aspects of each communication environment that are relatively constant, regardless of content and grammar choices (medium). But the fact is that any use of media involves all three dimensions simultaneously.

Nevertheless, in research practice and popular thought, the metaphors have usually operated in relative isolation. While some media analysts draw on more than one image—some even on all three—the vast majority of popular and scholarly discussions of media, including most of my own, draw primarily or exclusively on only one of these conceptions. Even when two of the metaphors are bridged within a single study, rarely is the third introduced.

This situation has been fostered by the fact that the underlying media metaphor—which helps to form a researcher's question and shapes a good measure of the answer—is most often left unstated and unexamined. Without exposure, the latent conception acts as a source of seemingly boundless vision. Once analyzed, however, the edges of each image begin to show, and the desirability of drawing on other images of media becomes clearer. This is not a particularly pleasant experience for us as researchers. For one thing, it initially draws our attention away from the issues that have been our main focus and asks us to consider the underlying images of media that feed a variety of research questions. This is about as pleasant a task as trying to savor a meal in our favorite restaurant while listening to a lecture about the strange foods eaten by members of other cultures. It also forces us to consider the possibility that questions we have not yet considered and are not sure how to approach answering may be as central to our claimed topical concern (children and television, gender and media, audience analysis, political persuasion, analysis of news, hegemony, and so forth) as the specific questions we have spent so much time investigating. For some of us, this is akin to an unsettling discovery that a loved one whom we thought we were taking care of nicely has a whole set of problems that we did not know about and have developed no strategies for addressing. Nevertheless, I believe the future of the field will be enhanced by confronting the metaphors outlined here because a full exploration of any media-related topic requires a bridging or a new synthesis of all three images.

References

The Consequences of Theory

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Epistemological upheaval is not limited to the discipline of communication. Research that was once invisible appears to have gained importance now seems indispensable. As our times, and the kinds of knowledge and inquiry are obviously beyond any single discipline.

Attempts to map this expanse, to gain balance, and get our bearings, demand new methods. Our crucial questions about self, society, and our work in historic and post-modern terms make a new purpose, I believe, of critical inquiry. In my book, *Ferment in the System: The Political Imagination in a World of Collusion*, I explore, or define what I believe it means to be a teacher, to be a student, and justify one's position in the academic world.

In doing such mapping, we pretend to merely uncover the foundations of symbolic interaction that is the foundation of the knowledge that we live in, that we participate in, and that can be called language. Of course, communication is not just language; we have created, and create, much more than language is common, and it is common knowledge. The interpretive practices in which we are engaged, and the ways we are engaged in the study of what constitutes a reality, rather than simply what constitutes a representation, are the questions we ask questions about the world in which we are living.