

pedagogy with/in the postmodern.

nication: A retrospective view.

eywords: *A vocabulary of culture*  
Press.

## 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

---

Joshua Meyrowitz is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of New Hampshire. Portions of this research were supported by summer fellowships from the Graduate School and the Center for the Humanities at the University of New Hampshire. An early version of this article was presented as a paper at the Seventh International Conference on Culture and Communication in Philadelphia in 1989. The author wishes to thank Ed Wachtel, Beverly James, Donna Flayhan, and Michael Pfau for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts.

Copyright © 1993 *Journal of Communication* 43(3), Summer. 0021-9916/93/\$5.00

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 alone, 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, thief 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 when we use a medium to respond with belief or disbelief in Africa, uplifted by the state of the economy. We want our children to watch a program, or we are worried from another. And when we are concerned about "getting that there is a difference between Kuwaiti babies from incubator story was pronounced Kuwaitis to incite America through the various channels through newspaper, telephone, radio stand out as the first thing

Although some research content, which include aspects of metaphors, the study of media is largely *medium* to minimize the attention that holds or sends the message on a particular topic of study, for example TV's messages. Yet most deal with behaviors and the existence of television disinformation, for example exist without the use of a local use of the term to refer to a device, in contrast to content brain, ground, air, or culture

Although it sounds strange without paying much attention to do daily. (Content research miss a favorite television us orally "what happened to us at least something about we accept at the start that a telephone yield a "conviction books ("faithfully" or "uninterview or discussion about original discussion and findings and practices suggest that there is some *content* changed from medium to medium, or from medium

s. And an examination of media?" in mind reveals question quite differently. phenomena and process-al thinking to simplify the field of media studies ore attention to what is out the various preliminary meta-res of surface metaphors s of a handful of even

oth popular and schol-aphors. Television of dozens of metaphors, drug, Big Brother, win-t of terror, network of , cultivator, agenda set-ic wallpaper, anthology gh media metaphors atic descriptions of as-merely as figures of gical implications. Yet perceptions of media gs. Metaphors are po-to other ways of seeing

and arguments about a xed to one of three un-h various terms could metaphorical con-ts, *media as languages*,

it is a sort of *conduit* conduit metaphor leads al, political, economic, nce the development dia content reflect re-at? What effects does ontent are possible?

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,<sup>1</sup> 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 (or similar variables). Rather than the conduit, grammar analysis focuses on the presentation and manner of the content.

The language metaphor identifies variables that can be manipulated to study the effects of such manipulations on audience reaction, and behavior. It identifies *codes* for each medium and the culturally variable elements of the early production conventions of each. It affects typical grammar variables differently to similar media.

While the conduit metaphor moves easily from medium to medium, the language metaphor moves back, the language metaphor focuses on that function only within each medium. When a singer makes a decision that cannot be reversed, no matter how upset we are, we cannot "dissolve to a sunny mood."

Of course, one cannot ignore the content. In print, for example, the sizes and styles of type, or a closeup of nothing, are used to attempt to employ equalization in a sense of relative distance.

Nevertheless, although the conduit metaphor focuses on content, grammar questions content questions. A content analysis, for example, may be conducted on women (housewives or models) who are respected as equal to men, or sex objects, for example, in some manner for exhibition purposes, and so on. A grammar analysis focuses on the structuring of these roles, rather than the medium. In television, for example, the variables would include whether

<sup>1</sup> 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.)

(cont.) p. 162). Similarly, Alvin Toffler sees media for filtering reality, and "presentation" does not refer to the features of a medium, but with content.

metaphor generally provide  
 e's description of a missed  
 antified and statistically  
 ook at underlying cultural  
 e the ways in which media  
 ychological, and organi-  
 erm exposure may culti-  
 ; analyze topically or the-  
 ich different audiences  
 in effect, co-creating their  
 ough sophisticated explorations  
 s *structure, codes, form,*  
 tent, content codes, form  
 s most complex forms, re-  
 nds to look at some as-  
 s of the structure of medi-

n the popular and schol-  
 ver children's imitation of  
 ebates over news bias,  
 es. It is a stimulus for  
 aganda. Ironically, this  
 activists and among re-  
 ch as conservative Reed  
 e Jeff Cohen's Fairness  
 Free Expression (FFE)  
 sts and most critical theo-  
 e with each other in terms  
 ge of what media are  
 y also often share a ne-  
 of media.

media scholarship (es-  
 zes. Unlike the conduit  
 s I am using the image  
 e *grammar* of each  
 : explored the particular  
 within each medium or

t I claim are the implicit con-  
 metaphors, therefore, do not  
 rature, which is often very in-  
 mium is a unique language is  
 r (e.g., Carpenter, 1960, (cont.)

each general type of media (film and video, for example, share many sim-  
 ilar 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 vari-  
 ables 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 af-  
 fect 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 consider-  
 ing 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 con-  
 tent 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 con-  
 tent 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 struc-  
 turing of these roles, relationships, and behaviors within the particular  
 medium. In television, for example, grammar concerns over women's im-  
 ages would include whether the women are framed in intimate, personal,

(cont.) p. 162). Similarly, Altheide (1976, p. 155) suggests that TV news practices are them-  
 selves media for filtering reality, yet his excellent analysis of "emphasis, omission, interpre-  
 tation, and presentation" does not deal with what I discuss below as relatively fixed fea-  
 tures of a medium, but with what in my model here are choices in the structuring of media  
 content.

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 of the type of *environment* created by media artifacts that transcend variables. This leads to the question of *medium* because those are the relatively fixed features of each medium.

Medium features are the focus of much grammar research. After all, it is the form or the content of a particular medium, be it TV and to print, respectively, that determine the phone pickup pattern, the recording clearly dealt with in media or in live interaction. These features are sometimes explicitly defined in a medium's content or grammar. For example, the images to young, preliteracy audiences of print is used to justify the medium research goes beyond an understanding of the difference.

Broadly speaking, the features of a medium are the characteristics that define it physically, psychologically, and socially from live interaction. What are the features of a medium? What social functions does a medium develop and use? What are the features? How does the form of media alter the functions? What new forms of media are possible? What functions were dependent on the dominant media? How do they change with cultural codes and values?

Of course, it is important to recognize that in some way recognition of these features. To whatever extent the medium still needs programs, the medium has systematic tendencies. The features of the different content types. Transcripts of telephone conversations, for example, may be used to point out the linear nature of the text. This is more than film producers could do. This is 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 eco-

<sup>2</sup> 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 names we call various media often refer to a cluster of similar, but not identical, *subcontexts* of communication. Technological evolution also changes the range of grammar variables available within a medium, but grammar and medium variables remain analytically distinct: During particular communications, medium characteristics are fixed while grammar variables can be manipulated.

nomie system that focuses on the dissemination of democracy may be more effective than radio and television (which are more passive) and allow for relatively more interaction than other more interactive media. However, it receives relatively little support or attention.

Macro-level medium analysis includes such things as the ways in which different media affect different thinking patterns, how they affect private life, stimulate change, alter lower role relationships, and how they affect who-knows-what-comes-what for participatory democracy, education and physical behavior, how they affect political leaders; alter the way we think, and so on.

The impact of the medium on these variables are actually or hypothetically. If a medium is contrasted with another, consider, for example, the impact of a medium to tell or not tell young children in the context of print support for parents, because most children do not even learn about the medium in the setting of broadcast. Thousands of children may be affected, but are advised not to tell of the medium to their parents. In effect, the medium is a constant, the functional medium is a variable.

As the above examples show, the medium leads to a whole other set of variables: *structure, codes, and form.* The medium, TV, as a medium, is less about the content, say that a young, preliterate child does not understand the codes of the medium, the structure (grammar).

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

When taken together, the medium is a way of defining the current



quite distinct from typical content and grammar of the medium of communication is on those elements out of the control of the tendencies of (the telephone) or one can try to work around them, and one analysis, then, the employment of the medium in

with looking at media relevant to all three organizational variables (production and perception, media grammar variables) the development

single-situation level medium questions exist for another in a given social implications of a job as opposed to making a job to relax after school or of a business using a new product? the larger social implications of macro-level issues on business and society, the art and function of the medium, a macro-level analysis that undermines print conventions and advertising, and a political and economic

when it goes by the same medium altered by advances in technology by "caller ID," which allows answering the phone. Similar to broadcast, cable, satellite. In effect, then, the medium is not identical, *subconsciously* the range of grammar variables remain analytically fixed while gram-

matic 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 (grammar).

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 variables grows partly separate media processes. A particular medium (content), a particular medium's production, each communication element of content and grammar, media involves all three.

Nevertheless, in research have usually operated to draw on more than one of popular and scholarly draw primarily or exclusively when two of the metaphor third introduced.

This situation has become a metaphor—which helps a good measure of the analyzed. Without exposure, an infinitely boundless vision. begin to show, and the becomes clearer. This is researchers. For one thing, issues that have been ongoing images of media that about as pleasant a task while listening to a lecture other cultures. It also for we have not yet considered may be as central to our gender and media, audience, news, hegemony, and so much time investigating discovery that a loved one has a whole set of problems, opened no strategies for a field will be enhanced because a full exploration a new synthesis of all the

#### References

- Altheide, D. L. (1976). *Creativity*. Sage.

## 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

- Altheide, D. L. (1976). *Creating reality: How TV news distorts events*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Carpenter, E. (1960). The new languages. In E. Carpenter & M. McLuhan (Eds.), *Explorations in communication* (pp. 162-179). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hampton, H. (1989, January 15). The camera lens as two-edged sword. *The New York Times*, Section 2, pp. 29, 39.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## The Consec

by Joli Jensen, Univer

Epistemological uphe  
ed under one system  
was once invisible ap  
portance now seems b  
times, and the kinds o  
quiry are obviously be

Attempts to map thi  
balance, and get our b  
sen methods? Our cru  
students and colleagu  
our work in historic a  
purpose, I believe, of  
cessor, *Ferment in the*  
plore, or define what  
students, and justify o

In doing such mapp  
we pretend to merely  
of symbolic interactio  
the world that we live  
that can be called lang  
tives, communication  
we have created, and  
common, and it is con  
terpretive practices in

If inquiry is inescap  
tory), then we must p  
engage in particular m  
tive worlds? What are  
engage in the study of  
tutes a reality, rather t  
ask questions about th  
ing.

---

Joli Jensen is an associate p  
thor gratefully acknowledge  
those in her theories of com  
James Carey.

Copyright © 1993 *Journal of*