

Editorial

Media Theory: Chasing Ambulances?

The notion that media-theoretical work, similar to desperate lawyering and the paparazzi press, could be driven by less-than-noble imperatives is perhaps not as startling as it might seem. It is almost a throwaway remark in “Looking for the Horizon,” the interview Carleton colleague **Chris Russill** conducted over late winter and summer with media theorist **John D. Peters**, in the midst of the latter’s move from many years at the University of Iowa to Yale University. Against the backdrop of the publication of Peters’ (2015) most-recent book, *The Marvellous Clouds: Toward A Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Russill and Peters often playfully take up questions of changing influences in theory-building, here most broadly post-Heideggerian media-as-environment. They consider such themes as the long American obsession with the influence of Paris, the view of Canadians such as Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis—or Germans such as Friedrich Kittler, in his own way—that Canadian media theory can serve as a counter-environment to American immediacy and a theoretical bridge between Europe and America. In short, the question of what motivates change in media theory construction? Both agree in passing that “chasing ambulances” can be an effective motivator, but then they move on. The question matters nonetheless, especially in the contemporary neo-administrative climate in the knowledge dissemination business. For this issue, then, we leave the question hovering in the background, naggingly.

In complement to the environment-as-media discussed by Russill and Peters, SFU doctoral candidate **Matthew Greaves** turns to the environment as congealed capital, as energy, which he argues has been a lacuna in communication theory. Thus in “Fuel as a Factor in Canadian Transport,” he calls for a return to “foundational theories” on transportation and the circulation of commodities. In two moves, one a theoretical discussion of Harold Innis and Karl Marx, the other a case study of a coal settlement on Vancouver Island in the mid-nineteenth century, Greaves revives the centrality of what he terms “energy capital” to contemporary communication theories.

In “Campaign-Specific Information and Media Effects,” Université de Montréal doctoral candidates **Jean-François Daoust** and **Katherine Sullivan** weigh in on two apparent “truisms” of the political information literature, one that voters are generally uninformed about political systems, and two that digital media are better than traditional media in providing information to voters. By focusing on campaign-specific information in three different electoral democracies (Canada, Spain, and France), they find that both truisms need to be qualified, if not modified. If voters have a moderate level of campaign-specific knowledge from traditional media and that the latter are, at first glance, more useful to acquiring political information, these findings are reversed when analyzed in conjunction with partisanship.

The ex-gay movement is a loose organization of not-for-profit religious ministries and for-profit psychotherapy practices organized around the management and attempted elimination of what many conservative Christians consider sinful, abnormal, and addictive same-sex desires and behaviours. In the 1970s and 1980s, the movement operated in the shadows of conservative Christianity as an embarrassing secret; however, in the 1990s, after realizing a two-decade-long antigay media campaign had backfired for being too hateful, Christian Right leaders changed their strategy to offer an apparently more compassionate “love the sinner, hate the sin” message promising freedom through change. In “The Governmentality of Promoting Ex-Gay ‘Change’ in the Public Sphere,” **Michael Thorn** demonstrates the limitations of Habermasian public sphere theory in the context of neoliberal “earned media” with its focus on the theatre of suffering. But he argues that the debate has nonetheless evolved and changed.

In “Dead Today, Gone Tomorrow,” **Jason Foster** and **Bob Barnetson**, both of Athabasca University conduct a frame analysis of workplace injury accounts covered in Canadian newspapers between 2009 and 2014. In addition to specific frames, e.g., under investigation, they uncover a metaframe that workplace injuries happen to “others” without cause. This finding was confirmed by interviews with journalists. As a result, the reasons for workplace injuries are obfuscated, to the detriment of the public, as employer interests are protected.

In “Understanding Older Canadian Workers’ Perspectives on Aging in the Context of Communication and Knowledge Transfer,” **Sarah de Blois** (PhD candidate, Laurentian University) and **Martine Lagacé** (University of Ottawa) look at intergenerational actors across four generations (builders born between 1925 and 1945, baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X born between 1965 and 1980, and millennials, born between 1981 and 2001). According to the literature, intergenerational interactions are more conflictual than not. In a survey of 167 responses among older workers, the authors found that older workers view their interactions with younger workers more positively than the literature suggests, and tend to draw upon communication accommodation and accumulated knowledge transfer in those interactions.

Finally, **Caroline Caron** (Université du Québec en Outaouais) in “Speaking Up About Bullying on You Tube” looks at vlogs (video blogs) created by French-speaking adolescents as spaces in which to discuss bullying. The literature among North American youth shows the high popularity of school-related topics. French-Canadian vloggers are no exception here, but vlog vigorously on the topic of bullying. For Caron, this space of public debate is an important counter to the generally prevalent view that contemporary youth are politically apathetic. On the contrary, this study in grounded research uncovers a unique semiotic social space where plurivocal actors enact a deliberative form of civic engagement.

Reference

Peters, John Durham. (2015). *The Marvellous Clouds: Toward A Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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