Afterword: Infrastructural Fantasies

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> Desire is neither
> the appetite for satisfaction,
> nor the demand for love,
> but the difference that results
> from the subtraction
> of the first
> from the second.
> —Jacques Lacan, 1977, p. 287

Infrastructure is often viewed as a material substrate that fulfills needs. Pipes circulate water. Transportation systems traffic people. Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems maintain habitable environments. Organizational infrastructures make order out of otherwise unintelligible information. And yet, as scholars of infrastructure have long observed, infrastructure promises much more than basic care. It relays meaning. It sustains attachments. It forms the basis for imaginative worlds. In other words, the demand for infrastructure extends beyond need—it encompasses desire. The desire for capitalism and resistance, for extraction and inclusion, for sovereignty and occupation, among a multitude of other objects and forces.

> The demand for infrastructure is
> a demand for a certain kind of inhabitable ground,
> and its meaning and force derive precisely from that lack.
> —Judith Butler, 2015, p. 34

What does media and communications studies want from infrastructure?

> These approaches might inform a renewed approach
> to phenomena that have otherwise been
> centre stage in media studies

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for a very long time.
—Darin Barney, "Infrastructure and the Form of Politics"

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Media studies' infrastructural turn has asked scholars to attend to material substrates and the geographic and historical sites in which they emerge. Its objects range from "traditional" hardware to systems and assemblages to forms of knowledge. The editors of this issue, among others, point out that infrastructural research has always been part of media studies. Its re-emergence in the current moment evidences a desire to re-mediate infrastructures, to study them differently.

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This is a study
not from below,
nor a view from on high,
but *of* somewhere in the middle.
—Patrick Brodie, "Hosting Cultures: Placing
the Global Data Centre 'Industry'"

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For years, media and communications studies—in this turn—have explored the fantasies invested in infrastructure by publics, states, and corporations; infrastructure's representations and poetics; its political economies and scalar transformations of space and time; its ongoing entanglements with bodies and communities. Here, I write alongside the authors in this issue and ask: What fantasies are invested in infrastructures by its researchers? What desires animate these practices of knowing? I stitch together bits and pieces of the articles in this issue, experimenting with infrastructural meter. My intention is to produce an enmeshment, a thinking-with research on media infrastructure that, in Brodie's words, operates from somewhere in the middle.

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Infrastructure in most cases is demure.
Withdrawal is its modus operandi.
—John Durham Peters, 2015, p. 34

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In media studies' fantasy of infrastructure, it recedes. It withdraws. It is a train just about to vanish over the horizon. A turn toward infrastructure often embodies a desire to move toward the real.

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Material registers as varied as
salmon farming,
mineral exploration,
oil extraction,

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> papermaking,
> emergency test signals,
> and more.
> —Aleksandra Kaminska and Rafico Ruiz,
> "Materials and Media of Infrastructure"

Is seeking out infrastructures driven by a desire to uncover, to penetrate layers not only of the past but of the environment? If media archaeology pointed toward deep time, the study of media infrastructure extends the spatial boundaries of the field from salmon farms and pipelines

> to lives
> "on the ground"
> that can be woven
> into and across
> contentious settler realities
> rather than abstract and disconnected
> technological and communication "bubbles."
> —Aleksandra Kaminska and Rafico Ruiz,
> "Materials and Media of Infrastructure"

The study of media infrastructure is not a unidirectional inquiry, the simple excavation of large-scale technical systems. It is a weaving, a movement back and forth between lives on the ground, global systems of exchange, technical substrates, and forms of knowledge production. Research on media infrastructure evidences a desire for integration, a bringing together of the economic, political, and cultural—a desire not only to bring disparate objects into contact but to fold these into a common language.

> Indigenous critical infrastructures
> as parallel to and as vital as
> the tacit taken-for-granted
> understanding of industrial hardware
> as the backbone of
> what infrastructure *is.*
> —Shirley Roburn, "Infrastructure that Sings: Kwawaka'wakw
> Social Media for Wild Salmon in the Broughton Archipelago"

The infrastructures that are taken-for-granted as such—roads, cables, towers, and other industrial hardware—could be (and have been) described in many other

ways. They are media technologies, sociotechnical forms, large technical systems, telecommunications systems, media environments, networks, platforms, architectures, distribution systems, materialities, and ongoing processes of mediation. Infrastructure's many other "soft" forms, less taken-for-granted as such, could also be described using an array of concepts and languages. But "infrastructure," as it envelopes substrates both hard and soft, foregrounds Roburn's "parallel to and as vital as."

> Fur is rendered into fuel,
> transforming animals
> into energy infrastructures.
> —Rachel Webb Jekanowski, "From Labrador to Leipzig:
> Film and Infrastructures along the Fur Trail"

A weaving back and forth, not only between economics, politics, and culture, or between bodies and towers—these studies offer transductions between nature and culture, non-human and human. Fuel transformed into food into energy through consumption into labour. Infrastructures afford researchers movement: travel to sites, excursions into archives, viewings from afar, and intimate conversations. And they prompt the development of new methods and approaches.

> To approach an infrastructure through and as …
> is to shift analysis inward
> from the architecture that surrounds media signals and
> into the material,
> temporal,
> political
> action of signals themselves.
> —Andy Kelleher Stuhl, "Acoustic Infrastructure: The Sounds and
> Politics of Radio Tests in American Emergency Broadcasting"

Infrastructures offer the possibility of redrawing not only media studies' outward boundaries, but also its inward horizons. Where are the signal's limits? Where are the field's limits? What is the beyond opened up through pushing these limits?

> Infrastructures assert a normalizing force,
> often inscribing hegemonic power into sociotechnical and
> spatially distributed systems,
> where it is reproduced in everyday acts,
> assumptions,

                                                    and forms of forgetting.
                    —Hannah Tollefson, "Staking a Claim: Mineral Mining,
                              Prospecting Logics, and Settler Infrastructures"

It is not simply that infrastructures promise to move into the world beyond
words—they promise to reveal the normative forces, political orientations, and
forms of power that are reproduced in ways that short circuit language and dis-
course. They show how infrastructure does the same old things differently:

                              the potential of a politics of infrastructure
                                    understood as a politics without words.
                    —Darin Barney, "Infrastructure and the Form of Politics"

Exposures, then, are complicated.

                              If unjust energy infrastructures cannot become just
                                                either through intervention
                    or distribution mechanisms outside of capitalism's base impulses,
                              and they continue to deepen social and ecological inequity
                                                at local and global scales
                                    despite progressive regulatory mechanisms
                              within the context of a profit-driven market economy,
                                                      what is to be done?
                    —Jordan B. Kinder, "Gaming Extractivism: Indigenous Resurgence,
                                    Unjust Infrastructures, and the Politics of
                              Play in Elizabeth LaPensée's *Thunderbird Strike*"

This is not a question of an individual's motivation for pursuing infrastructural
research but of collective interests and the sense of possibility distributed among
many. In pursuit of the real, what fantasies are at play? Does this transduction be-
tween fields and forms allow us to move in unexpected directions? What does
this focus on infrastructural re-generation allow us to repair? Do infrastructures
let us ask—perhaps even demand—in new ways, "what is to be done?"

                                    Through the mediation of the demand,
                                          the whole past opens up.
                                    —Jacques Lacan, 1977, p. 254

Acknowledgements

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