Editorial

The Senses of Technology

This special issue of the journal, The Senses of Technology, brings together an international group of communications scholars whose central point of philosophical and theoretical inquiry is the intersection of these two terms.

The term “sense” is a productively ambiguous concept. In The Logic of Sense, Gilles Deleuze (1990) writes, “Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (sens); but paradox is the affirmation of both sense or direction at the same time” (p. 1). The very idea of the senses embodies seemingly oppositional notions that defy one determinable sense or direction. On the one hand, the idea of the senses signifies the processes of meaning-making and reasonableness, which implies the search for meaning semantically, and here sense is often opposed to nonsense, the focus of Deleuze’s philosophical reading of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland in The Logic of Sense. If one says that someone “came to their senses” we are indicating that the capacity for reason, which has been temporarily lost, is restored. In asking ourselves what sense can be made of a “senseless” act of violence, we assume that a collective rationality, or logic, has been absent from the world. In the search for the sense of things, an explanation can and must be found, purpose can be imputed, order may be restored, or understanding can be reached.

On the other hand, the senses also may refer to our capacity to engage with the world through the five senses—sight, touch, smell, sound, taste. To invoke the primordiality of the senses seems to bring us to the very opposite idea of a subject governed by reason, a society dominated by systems of rationality and organization, or the semantic rules of sense-making. In the words of Agnes Heller (1987), this turn also means to go beyond the paradigm of language, “guilty of philosophical imperialism,” even though it offers a legitimate philosophical approach—as paradigms of “work,” “imagination,” and “consciousness” (p. 298). To live through and with the five senses acknowledges that humans not only process their environment through the carefully cultivated rules of order but also through their reactions to touch, smell, light, and sound. There are, of course, differing explanations of the biology of the senses and their relationship to cognition, as well as their psychological, social, cultural, or historical-cultural origins. However, what is critical is that the focus is not merely on the processes of semantic meaning production, semiosis, and analysis, but what is often seen as “extra-discursive.” In this sense, the study of communications is not merely about how we come to make meaning through language: the senses invoke our corporeal, visceral, tactile relations to the world.

Knowing the world through the body has given rise to important works in the sociology and anthropology of the senses. Famous in this regard are the writings of Canadian scholars Constance Classen (1993), Constance Classen, David Howes, and
Anthony Synnott, (1994), and David Howes (2003, 2005), whose ground-breaking research has instigated the important field of “sense studies.” For those writing on the senses from this terrain, the sensory relation to the world is a subject for analysis, as are the many ways different societies and cultures have come to understand and order their worlds. Integral to this perspective is a consideration of the social and political impact of the privileging of one sense, sight, over all others.

Sense studies have led to methodological and epistemological shifts in how qualitative research may be done in the social sciences and humanities. From this perspective, the senses are not the object of an analysis but a way to know the world in a way that values experience. Through the senses, researchers may produce knowledge if they mobilize, and sensitise themselves to, an entire range of perceptions, displacing objectivity and distancing themselves from the definition of “good scholarship.”

Philosophically speaking, sense studies often draw upon the philosophical traditions of classical phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Jean-Paul Sartre, or the post-phenomenological research of Gilles Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz, or Don Ihde. There has been an explosion of sense studies in the Canadian communications context. We see these influences at work in the innovative reworking of cinema as media, in Laura Marks’ *Skin of the Film* (2000). The senses, and the extrasensory, are foregrounded in the haptic curatorial practices of the Canadian scholars, artists, and curators Jennifer Fisher (1997) and Jim Drobnick (2006). In the Deleuzian experiments in the practice of a radically sensual philosophy, writers Brian Massumi (2002) and Erin Manning (2007), of the Sense Lab explore the relationship of the senses to the many modalities of human perception and have revived the philosophical tradition of philosophical pragmatism. In the writings of those who advocate a sensory methodology, the point is not only to write about the senses, but also to open oneself to the senses.

But why the senses of technology? The senses are at the heart of Canadian communications theory. At the core of Marshall McLuhan’s (1994) most famous text on media theory, *Understanding Media*, he explores media technologies as extensions of the human senses. The microphone extends the capacity of the voice beyond its normal range, a microscope the movements of the eye. His reflections on the impacts of the media are likewise expressed in terms that draw out their effects on the entire individual and collective sensory apparatus and his worry about the impact of media overexposure producing new levels of stress, at the same time as the world shrinks to the scale of a village because of the electronic media. His classification of media as “hot” or “cold” invokes a delightfully sensual response to the environment.

As this brief foray into the realm of the senses reveals, there is a long and variegated dialogue already in place on the senses. Many of these conversations inform the authors writing for this special issue.

As scholars the world over celebrate the centenary of McLuhan’s birth with conferences and symposia, two of the articles here delve into the ongoing relevance of McLuhan to communications studies and media theory. Jonathan Sterne’s article is a brilliant foray into the intellectual and theological history of the concept of orality in the Toronto school, with specific reference to the writings of Walter Ong and Marshall
McLuhan. **John Durham Peters** considers the influence of McLuhan’s dissertation on the trivium in relationship to McLuhan’s later research and writing on the media. Sound and deeply affective forms of collaborative research are examined in **Owen Chapman**’s careful reading of Walter Benjamin’s influential concept of the aura for those studying sample-based music practices. **Simone Natale**’s article explores the intersections of wireless technologies, the invention of the X-ray, and spiritualist practices at the turn of the last century. Wireless media and mobile communications are at the locus of two contributions from Brazil. **André Lemos** theorizes on the spatializing practices of locative media, by means of games and playing, and the production of invisible, yet omnipresent, information territories. **Fabio Josgrilberg**’s article, “Between Life-World and Technical Systems: Dialectics in the Digital Locus,” likewise considers the new ways we experience digital media in less than a seamless fashion. A phenomenological consideration of the issue of technology, which draws upon the writings of Brazilian geographer Milton Santos as well as more familiar figures such as Merleau-Ponty and de Certeau, at the heart of Josgrilberg’s article is the desire to reconcile more empirical localized work on the senses of technology to broader philosophical issues in the field. **Leslie Haddon**’s contribution offers a reflection on the “domestication” theory of technology, a theory that has had a profound influence on empirical research in studies of the practices of media reception in communications.

The issue ends with a contribution by Latin-American philosopher and media theorist **Jesús Martín-Barbero**, whose writings on technology, rationality, and the senses inspired this collaboration and theme issue. We present a translation of a speech in which he discusses “the reason of technology” in relation to the ongoing Latin American experience of television. Working from the question of television, a medium still important within Latin-American life, Martín-Barbero’s speech, “Technical Reason and Political Reason: Spaces/Times Not Considered,” returns him to his philosophical roots, while at the same time evoking the connection between a reflection on the medium (and its rationalities or reasons for existing).

To return to Deleuze (1990), these different offerings on the “sense of technology” move in different directions together. A paradox? Yes. “Paradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities” (p. 3). These articles may circle, paratextually, around our senses of technology as we live them in different measures, with different intensities, in distinct “rugosities,” to borrow a term of Milton Santos. When read together, they tease out the manifold meanings of our sensuous individual and collective experiences of the technological present.

**References**


(Original work published 1964)

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