Conference Media Transatlantic IV: Traffic

Veranstalter: Graduate program „Automatisms“, University of Paderborn
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The conference „Media Transatlantic IV: Traffic“ continued a series of symposia beginning in 2007 with „Re-Reading McLuhan. An International Conference on Media and Culture in the 21st Century“ (2007), followed by „Media Theory on the Move. Transatlantic Perspectives on Media and Mediation“ (2009) and „Media Theory in North America and German-Speaking Europe“ (2010).

2012's conference brought together renowned scholars from the United States, Canada, Germany, Israel, New Zealand and Austria. Following Innis' metaphor of media as traffic, the conference set out to explore the different aspects of media sign traffic, such as its flowing quality, its transcendence of space and time and its uneven, yet unstoppable movement. The methodological questions raised by these characteristics – observability and choice of research perspective - were also addressed. As postdocs of the graduate-program, the authors of this report have participated in the organization of this conference.

JOHN PETERS (Iowa) focused on media as human instruments of making nature manageable and thus survivable. In this sense media generally represent infrastructures, that is „agents of traffic“, that condition the world and thereby mediate nature. Their existential relevance is what gives them a logistical meaning that precedes a symbolic one. On these grounds Peters referred to a „return to ontology in science“ and claimed that „media studies need to be biological“. Besides the potential of media to allow human beings to relate to the world, they need to reflect on the specific forms of interaction between nature and culture that media constitute.

GABRIELE SCHABACHER (Siegen) dedicated her talk to the relationship between Harold A. Innis' works on political economy and his later concepts on communication theory with the aim to reconstruct his ideas on transfer and traffic. Innis provides an ethnographic method that he calls „dirt“ research. From 1924 on Innis himself travelled on several (Canadian) trade routes, following indigenous practices. Schabacher argued that Innis offers an understanding of transfer in the sense of both transport and media techniques: Innis traced global infrastructure networks back to localised procedures. Thereby the different and intervening (non)human agents inherent in the process of traffic become visible again.

JANA MANGOLD (Erfurt) offered a close reading of central passages in McLuhan's remarks on „media as a form of traffic“. She demonstrated how I. A. Richard's Philosophy of Rhetoric implicitly influences McLuhan's methodology in that metaphor and paraphrase come to function as central figures of thought in his media theory. Mirroring the way metaphors operate as a transport-medium between contexts, McLuhan's „comprehensive traffic science“ stresses the translative and transformative capacity of media.

MENAHEM BLONDHEIM (Jerusalem) presented a research project of himself and Elihu Katz (Jerusalem) on the different aspects of material and information-traffic in the biblical book of Esther. Adopting an Innis-inspired perspective, he showed that traffic is constructed in two ways: first the hegemonial traffic of the Persian Empire – messages and edicts from the centre to the periphery which can be related to the categories of space, indirectness and ostentation – and second the parallel, marginalized traffic of the Jewish population which Blondheim linked to concepts of time, orality and community, whose counter-flows from the periphery to the centre sometimes undermine imperial traffic.

GRANT DAVID BOLLMER (Chapel Hill, USA) argued that the contemporary understanding of network media as unplanned growing nervous system and data flow is rooted in the discourse of 18th century anatomy. To be aware of the concealing effects of the network metaphor the contempo-

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rary analysis of media, these discourses have to be addressed. Definitions of networks existing at that time and the perception of life as flow of fluids in these networks still play a central role in our thinking about network media.

PETER BEXTE (Köln) used the final phrase of Kafka's „Das Urteil" to explore different notions of the term *Verkehr* and its relation to spaces of traffic. A close reading of particular text passages revealed a wealth of associations that Bexte elegantly connected to Orson Wells' shooting of „The Trial" in the abandoned Gare d'Orsay in the 1960s as well as to Kafka's own travels to Paris together with Max Brod. Suggesting that „writing starts when Verkehr ends", Bexte discussed the intricate and shifting relationships between transfer, transformation and stagnation invoked by the term *Verkehr*.

RICHARD CAVELL (Vancouver) talked about McLuhan, Turing and how the question of determinism was discussed at Cambridge University in the 1930s. Speculating on the influence that the philosophical view on determinism might have had on the scientists' work, Cavell stated that Alan Turing's and Marshall McLuhan's work involves a deterministic perspective that is separated from a potentially nondeterministic outside: A conscious interface in between has to differentiate whether or not a problem can be covered by such a perspective. This calls general laws into question.

GREG ELMER (Toronto) presented a rough sketch of a methodological framework that he developed together with Ganaele Langlois (Oshawa) in order to analyse structures on the internet. He argued that while hyperlink maps might have been an adequate method for analysing Web 1.0, it is now necessary to find new means for studying the highly personalized space of Web 2.0 with its plethora of user-generated tags and automatically produced meta-data. Such tools could help to map the relations between content, actors and platforms.

MARTINA LEEKER (Köln) and MICHAEL STEPPAT (Berlin) discussed the discursive and technological context of a series of performances called „9 evenings. Theatre and Engineering" that took place in NYC in 1966. Here, engineers and artists focused on the interplay between technology and human user by applying methods of converting tones to signals and those of wireless data trafficking between music instruments and screens or speakers. While discussing the technological challenges of data transformation, the lecture argued that the performance aimed at creating the impression of a non-human technical performativity.

WOLF-DIETER ERNST (Bayreuth) conceptualised art as a means for reflecting the ambivalent and inevitable simultaneity of mobility and immobility. In a case study of the performance „Call Cutta" by Rimini Protokoll, in which the participants were guided through Berlin by Indian call-centre employees through their cell phones, he showed how both the pleasure of mobility and the immobility it produces in space and time can be reflected in this open artwork.

PETER KRAPP (Irvine) demonstrated, referring to the medial representations which construct the cultural perception of the polar regions, that they figurate as the unknown or the undifferentiated Other which can serve as projection surface for conspiracy theories and myths, being pictured for example as an utopian/dystopian traffic-portal to other worlds such as the hollow-world. Traffic to the north or south pole can, according to Krapp, be seen as a passage without locatable and imaginable goal which to a certain extent resist attempts of civilizing enclosure.

NORM FRIESEN (Thompson Rivers) explained how John Dewey's ideas of the „commerce of the mind" relate to his considerations about pedagogical conception and educational media. He showed how Dewey's emphasis on commerce and transaction allowed him to conceive of education, practically and communicatively, in terms germane to technological mediation: In this way pedagogy is not a matter of unification in a relationship between student and teacher, but a question of more systemic or „postal" transactions.

SHANNON LOWE (Lancaster, UK) tried to apply Deleuze's method of symptomatology to the contemporary environment of mediatic flow. Following the example of representations of Attention Deficit Disorder in popular media, the paper showed how the method of Deleuze's art-archaeology or symptomatol-

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ogy could be used to track the history of concepts and practices in the course of a process where terms are trafficked between different media.

WOLFGANG SÜTZL (Vienna) discussed locations of traffic, e.g. streets, squares and marketplaces as important sites for (artistic) practices of disobedience and political resistance. He pointed out different qualities of urban spaces and its official regulations to manage traffic. Based on Michel de Certeaus' theory of walking, the paper investigated mass bike events and other examples as critical and political acts. Sützl described these practices of occupying streets as „Techniques of Dislocation".

ANDREAS STRÖHL (Munich) focused on the thought pattern of „Exchange" – defined by Marcel Mauss as a „total social fact" – and its relation to „Media" and „Traffic". Ströhl suggested to consider these as forms of an exchange process. In connecting discourses concerning such processes over a 200-year time frame, Ströhl pointed out that, although our way of thinking about „Exchange" had undergone many changes, the underlying model of thought survived. According to him, it reappeared in different shapes over and over again, until finally having been labelled as „media theory".

The findings of the conference show that media traffic structures space, both through its material correlates, and by the generation of different areas of information thickness and flow, culminating in media traffic crystallization points. Media traffic and its control can, thus, on the one hand, create and maintain power, on the other hand undermine it. Spaces which are devoid of material traffic, but which are conceptualized by a variety of information traffic in the form of cultural concepts are configured as the „Other", as open for imagination and projections. Media traffic cannot replace, but facilitate mobility as practices of appropriation and resistance.

One of the key questions addressed by the conference was the relationship between the logistical and the symbolical dimensions of media. If it is true that transport always involves transformation, as the term *metapherein* suggests, this calls for a stronger focus on the logistics of communication and their consequences for the flow of sign traffic. Beyond the understanding that infrastructure is the material precondition for sign traffic, the discussion also revealed correspondences: Just as infrastructures need to be maintained by a multitude of local procedures, it is the constant circulation of signs through different contexts that facilitates phenomena of stability and condensation.

The research of media and sign traffic under the current technological conditions and discoursal shifts calls for a reflection on methods and approaches, regarding the consciousness for the situatedness of research as well as concepts of measurement and interpretation. How can traffic flows be observed? Given the complex structure of information networks (web 2.0) and the simultaneousness of media sign appearances, how can cause and effect be determined? So far, these questions only have been touched on and have to undergo further consideration.

Conference Overview:

John Peters (Iowa): Keynote: Media as Traffic between Nature and Culture.

Section I: Innis, McLuhan and Co.

Gabriele Schabacher (Siegen): Traffic as 'Dirt Experience'. Harold Innis' Tracing of Media.

Jana Mangold (Erfurt): McLuhan's Comprehensive Traffic Science.

Menahem Blondheim (Jerusalem): Traffic in an Ancient Empire: Time and Space According to the Biblical Book of Esther

Section II: Flows and Counterflows

Grant David Bollmer (Chapel Hill, USA): Vital Networks of Blood and Information: A Media Archaeology of Traffic and Flow.

Peter Bexte (Cologne): Endless Traffic & Drowning Sons.

Richard Cavell (Vancouver, CA): McLuhan, Turing, and the Question of Determinism.

Greg Elmer (Toronto, CA): Networked Campaigns: Traffic Tags and Cross Platform Analysis on the Web

Martina Leeker (Cologne)/Michael Steppat (Berlin): Data Traffic. Transformation as a

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Challenge

Section III: Hold-ups

Wolf-Dieter Ernst (Bayreuth): Mobile Performance

Peter Krapp (Irvine): Polar Media: The Invisible Axis

Section IV: Traffic of Concepts

Norm Friesen (Thompson Rivers): The Academy and the 'Commerce of Mind': Dewey and Educational Media.

Shannon Lowe (Lancaster, UK): Trafficking in Media Methodology: Propositions for an Approach from Literature.

Wolfgang Sützl (Vienna): Street protests, electronic disturbance, smart mobs: dislocations of resistance

Andreas Ströhl (Munich): From Traffic to Exchange to Communication to Media (and Back to Traffic Again): On the Changes of a Modern Model of Thought.

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