

THINKING THEORY



credit: Elizabeth Ellsworth

We live in a time when, arguably, we humans face the most extreme challenges ever to us as a species. Perhaps the most useful skills we can teach each other and ourselves are how to map, navigate, and design for the future as individuals and communities. And to do this within intense relationality and while navigating continuous change.

The promise of extreme media is that, because they provoke deep core change, they offer us powerful tools and environments for mapping and moving through currently unfolding challenges and opportunities.

Extreme media exist at the bleeding edges where forces that compose the world we live in encounter and remodel one another. At these edges, cultural tastes meet historical events, meet technological innovation, meet economic exchanges, meet emergent networks, meet border-blurring bio and political dynamics. Often these forces rub against each other like tectonic plates, creating upheavals, tearing off and recombining bits of one another.

In ExtremeMediaStudies.org, theory is about understanding and making something of media as a force that creates change.

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan said that people in Western cultures were so immersed in new, “electric” media--they couldn’t understand them. Media, he said, formed an all-enveloping environment. There was no place to stand “outside” of

media to look back and understand them. That's why he thought it was important to write a book called *Understanding Media*. In it, he argued that what we didn't understand about media was that they had evolved to become extensions of our central nervous systems. We continued to assume that media were about delivering messages and representations of a world "out there," separate from the media that convey them. But in fact, the key to understanding media, he said, was not in their content or messages—but in what they do with us. The "message" of media—their meaning and importance—is that they are mediums of change. McLuhan said that a medium that extends our senses or bodies (television, computer, radio) is just like the agar in a Petri dish (a medium for growing microorganisms) because a medium is "anything from which a change emerges." Media change or "massage" the ways we see, think and act in the world into new forms, intensities, and directions.

Extreme media studies asks: What happens when media thinkers, users, and designers "understand media" as mediums of change and not simply as carriers of messages or content—and then take that understanding as their starting points?

USING THEORY

Media theory is a powerful tool for mapping, navigating, and creating media not simply to convey messages, but to participate directly in massive processes of change unfolding right under our feet.

We can learn about media by thinking and designing experimentally at the edges of change: technological, social, political, cultural, global, and environmental. Like parkour traceur/esses, we don't have to regard edges of change as obstacles. We can approach them as raw materials. We can ask: what can we make of what is tearing off and recombining here? How can we use what is happening at this edge of change to fashion new media devices, content, and practices?

The wager of ExtremeMediaStudies.org is this: if we make new ideas and new media designs at the edges of change, we will come to deeper and more useful understandings of media. We will discover the potentials and the limits of emerging media. By innovating new concepts about media and then using them in the media we design, we will discover what are media's limits at a particular edge of change. When and where might embodied, face to face, or analogue be more useful than digital, mediatized, and remote? At each particular edge of change, what transformations do media speed up, augment, or divert? How? What do media allow humans to do at each particular edge of change? What are media good for there? Who are media good for there? What new ways of moving through and with the world might media open up there?

In Extreme Media Studies, we use theory to help us map the forces that create extreme media phenomena and that shape how they are unfolding right now. Some of the most celebrated media theorists have gravitated to the unfolding edges of change. Each era's headlong plunge into unforeseeable, media-shaped futures can feel like being swept along by a rushing, uncharted river. It's as if media theorists position themselves along the shore where they shout to be heard above the water's roar. From there, they catch sight of new media landscapes just beyond the rapids. Some theorists sense a giant waterfall ahead and frantically wave signs that warn us of an approaching free fall into dystopia. They signal to us about the need to detour, rethink our course, get a different boat, invent a different map. Others wave us on, cheering. They see the bumpy ride ahead as exhilarating. For them, the cascade is navigable and promises a much needed break from the past as well as opportunities for dazzling innovations. Sensing and announcing a break ... an edge ... a threshold from one plateau of media landscape to another, media theorists then make something new at those breaks: new ideas, arguments, forecasts, ways of seeing.

Each ExtremeMediaStudies.org probe invokes some of the most passionate and insightful voices calling to us from the shores that channel today's extreme media phenomena. Some are voices from history (think of Marx, Benjamin, Dewey, Baudrillard, Adorno). Some are very much alive (Friedman, Helfand, Hooks, Laurel, Massumi, Reingold, Jenkins). Some of the writers whom we like best – and who seem to see most deeply into extreme media forms – come from eclectic backgrounds outside the academy (Johnson, Gibson, Kelly, Pogue, Gates, Kay).

THEORY AS A JUMPING OFF POINT



THEORY

In our parkour-like efforts to navigate extreme media phenomena, our stepping off points will be theories and design practices that make up the field of media studies. Foundational ideas from philosophers, critics, and designers in the field of media studies offer firm footing in the form of deeply considered questions about how media shape:

- meaning and storytelling
- pleasure and entertainment
- human potential and learning
- political power, citizenship and agency
- human connection
- economic exchange
- cultural representations
- what counts as “real”
- knowledge and how it’s different from information
- aesthetic experience & its power to shape culture & social change

There are a number of key “stories” that have grounded media studies for the past 30 years: stories about audiences, what is real vs. what is mediated, media and commerce, media and social change, media and human communication and connection, media and aesthetic experience.

We will not leave these behind. In today’s volatile landscape of ideas about media, there are many crossed paths and much circling back. Some of the best of “today’s” ideas and designs are ones from the past that we are now re-meeting and re-reading anew from here and now.

At the same time, new theories about today’s media landscapes are being constructed out of interdisciplinary conversations with other fields (such as anthropology, new brain research, contemporary art, philosophy, biosciences). Today’s media theorists and designers are inventing concepts—extreme memes—capable of raising new questions relevant to extreme media phenomena.

Questions about:

- speed
- flow
- space and place
- sustainability
- globalization
- embodiment
- sensation
- human-machine assemblages

THEORY

networks
emergence
collective intelligence
participatory culture
transmedia storytelling

Our parkour-like use of well-established media theory will take us to and along edges of emerging extreme media. We will test how well ideas already thought and design principles already established might guide our responses to extreme media. We will ask: at what points do the old signposts continue to lead us in productive directions? And, at what points do they now lead to dead ends, or media landscapes no longer inhabited or inhabitable?

When foundational ideas in media studies fail to navigate emerging media landscapes and instead run us aground, we must shift our tack. We will do that by thinking experimentally and enacting new ideas and media design practices. As we make something of what is in the midst of emerging, we will discover what new concepts, directions, media tools and forms are now necessary for navigating new extremes and redrawn limits.

In Extreme Media Studies, then, thinking is not for arriving once and for all at the right answer that makes any further thinking unnecessary. Rather, it is for exploring what value a particular idea or action might have in the world, to human life and experience. And so, at each fork and bend along extreme media's moving edge of change, we will ask: what might this idea or design be good for? What might it be "for"? How might it enhance, augment, or extend human life on this planet?"

-- Elizabeth Ellsworth