

## KEITAI LECTURE

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Ketai culture and Mobiles in general give us a chance to explore a key area of media studies: the sociology of media, or "media and society."

As a field of research and theory, media studies was born out of deep concerns about "media and society." What are media "doing" to human social interaction, social institutions, social change? How might we understand the power of media to shape social dynamics? How might we study "the sociology of media?" What might we learn about such questions by studying media through methods developed by sociologists: surveys; focus groups; observations and ethnographic studies of people putting media to use; or "readings" of media phenomena that look for patterns of use and effect? What questions about media and society can't be answered through surveys—but require instead study that is more interpretative and draws from critical social theories?

As we saw in our Entry Point, media sociologists today are asking questions such as: What makes people want to decorate their cell phones? What does decorating your cell phone "mean" as a "social act?" What new forms of social organization are emerging because of cell phone culture? How do cell phones contribute to or unsettle established flows of status and power? Mobiles give us an opportunity to experience some of the big ideas that have shaped attempts by sociologists to understand "media and society."

You can extend your explorations of "cell phone culture" while following the methods and logic of two contemporary sociologists (James Katz and Satomi Sugiyama) in "Mobile Phones as Fashion Statements: the Co-creation of Mobile Communication's Public Meaning." Katz is the founder of a [Center for Mobile Communication Studies](#) at Rutgers University, one of the first research centers in the U.S. to take cell phone "culture" seriously. As you read this piece, look for how a *sociologist* goes about looking beneath the surface of the cell phone as tool or device, to uncover all sorts of otherwise hidden meanings, perceptions, and desires. As sociologists, these authors focus on dynamics that contribute to social relationship, social structure and stratification, and social institutions.

In "Mobile Phones as Fashion Statements," for example, Katz and Sugiyama identify a new social phenomenon made possible by mobiles. They call it "perpetual contact." And they trace how mobile phones have become "strongly connected with ingrained human perceptions of distance, power, status, and identity." They explore cell phones' "expressive and symbolic dimensions", concluding that a cell phone is "not merely a tool but as well a miniature aesthetic statement about its owner," a "personal miniature representative." For Katz and Sugiyama, fashion is not only an indicator of status and power, it's also a form of communication ... "involved in our personas senses of 'becoming' as in complementing and enhancing our appearance."

You can learn much in Katz and Sugiyama's study about sociological approaches to media studies when you pay attention to *what* the authors study, *how* they study it, and especially, what they say is the big "so *what?*" of their research. What big conclusions do they seek and arrive at? What big *difference* does their research make in your assumptions and understandings about cell phones? How might the results of their study inform and shape *your* approach to media design?

*Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, by Ito, Okabe, Matsuda, is a perfect companion to Katz and Sugiyama's study. As theorists of social processes and change, the authors of *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian* identify several ways that *keitai* culture in Japan has become "extreme" as a media phenomenon, including the fact that Japanese youth use mobiles to produce a new, tight-knit form of social relationship that the authors call "tele-cocooning." A big reward for a sociological study such as theirs is the discovery of a new social form—a new way that people have begun to relate to each other in social settings. For sociologists, it's like what discovering a new planet is for astronomers.

As you read from this book—consider what you think might be the significance of this study's discovery of a new social form. What might this discovery make possible for you as a media designer/theorist as you imagine scenarios of what social relationships, institutions, and "glue" might emerge out of this fast-unfolding landscape of "mobiles?" Think too, about how a deep understanding of social/cultural difference and context is crucial for media designers and theorists. Comparing and contrasting these two readings—one focusing on Japan and the other on the United States—will give you a sense of what a shift in cultural context can do to your culture-bound assumptions about what mobiles "are" and what humans can make of them. [As we saw in our Entry Point, media](#) sociologists today are asking questions such as: What makes people want to decorate their cell phones? What does decorating your cell phone "mean" as a "social act?" What new forms of social organization are emerging because of cell phone culture? How do cell phones contribute to or unsettle established flows of status and power?

These two studies offer you ideas and strategies to become extreme media sociologists as you create this Probe's cell phone culture related Projects: "Is it a Phone? Is it an Octopus? New Forms of Phone Art" and "Designing in Context."

Our Entry Point through *keitai* culture in Japan introduced you to a sociology-influenced look beneath the surface of cell phone culture. Sociologists of media work to take us behind surface appearances in order to make visible what has been obscured by ideology, complexity, habitual ways of seeing, or what consumer culture leads us to take for granted.

We used a virtual trip to Japan's *keitai* culture as a way to "defamiliarize" cell

phones for those of us who are not Japanese and take our own “cell phone culture” for granted.

Marshall McLuhan, one of the key voices in continuing conversations among theorists about “media and society,” tried to get people in Western societies to see what had become invisible to them in their own media environments. Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 80s, McLuhan stood beside the rushing rivers of media change and shouted out the warning: Western cultures were NOT doing a good job of “understanding media.” They were instead “ostrichlike” when it came to realizing and dealing with the “effects” of media—how they were transforming social environments deeply and extremely.

In *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, (1967), for example, he wrote:

"The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing: you, your family, your education, your neighborhood, your job, your government, your relation to others. And they're changing dramatically."

You could say that McLuhan was one of the first media theorists to focus on how it is that media phenomena could become “extreme” in their power to change daily life.

In a 1969 interview with *Playboy Magazine*, McLuhan enacted his role as a theorist who signals massive change unfolding right under our feet. And he points out directions of study that he believes will help us become more conscious of and curious about the very “water we swim in”—the immersive media environment of our age. He has little hope for our abilities to map, navigate, and forecast the new environments media are creating unless we find ways to see not merely the *content* of media ... but also their less visible but even more powerful forces, effects, and processes. It’s worth listening in on that interview at length:

McLuhan: "Effective study of the media deals not only with the content of the media but with the media themselves and the total cultural environment within which the media function. Only by standing aside from any phenomenon and taking an overview can you discover its operative principles and lines of force. There’s really nothing inherently startling or radical about this study—except that for some reason few have had the vision to undertake it. For the past 3500 years of the Western world, the effects of media—whether it’s speech, writing, printing, photography, radio or television—have been systematically overlooked by social observers. Even in today’s revolutionary electronic age, scholars evidence few signs of modifying this traditional stance of ostrichlike disregard.

Interviewer: Why?

McLuhan: Because all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is an intensification, an amplification of an organ, sense or function, and whenever it takes place, the central nervous system appears to institute a self-protective numbing of the affected area, insulating and anesthetizing it from conscious awareness of what's happening to it. It's a process rather like that which occurs to the body under shock or stress conditions, or to the mind in line with the Freudian concept of repression. I call this peculiar form of self-hypnosis Narcissus narcosis, a syndrome whereby man remains as unaware of the psychic and social effects of his new technology as a fish of the water it swims in. As a result, precisely at the point where a new media-induced environment becomes all pervasive and transmogrifies our sensory parlance, it also becomes invisible.

This problem is doubly acute today because man must, as a simple survival strategy, become aware of what is happening to him, despite the attendant pain of such comprehension. The fact that he has not done so in this age of electronics is what has made this also the age of anxiety, which in turn has been transformed into its Doppelgänger—the therapeutically reactive age of anomie and apathy. But despite our self-protective escape mechanisms, the total-field awareness engendered by electronic media is enabling us—indeed, compelling us—to grope toward a consciousness of the unconscious, toward a realization that technology is an extension of our own bodies. We live in the first age when change occurs sufficiently rapidly to make such pattern recognition possible for society at large. Until the present era, this awareness has always been reflected first by the artist, who has had the power—and courage—of the seer to read the language of the outer world and relate it to the inner world.

Interviewer: Why should it be the artist rather than the scientist who perceives these relationships and foresees these trends?

McLuhan: Because inherent in the artist's creative inspiration is the process of subliminally sniffing out environmental change. It's always been the artist who perceives the alterations in man caused by a new medium, who recognizes that the future is the present, and uses his work to prepare the ground for it. But most people, from truck drivers to the literary Brahmins, are still blissfully ignorant of what the media do to them; unaware that because of their pervasive effects on man, it is the medium itself that is the message, not the content, and unaware that the medium is also the message—that, all puns aside, it literally works over and saturates and molds and transforms every sense ratio. The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb. But the ability to perceive media-induced extensions of man, once the province of the artist, is now being

expanded as the new environment of electric information makes possible a new degree of perception and critical awareness by nonartists.

Interviewer: Is the public, then, at last beginning to perceive the “invisible” contours of these new technological environments

McLuhan: People are beginning to understand the nature of their new technology, but not yet nearly enough of them—and not nearly well enough. Most people, as I indicated, still cling to what I call the rearview-mirror view of their world. By this I mean to say that because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world.”

McLuhan asserted that new media first carry content of old media. Only time reveals the "unique" voice of a new medium. Each new medium has characteristics that engage the viewer in unique ways: different degrees of participation, associated with a different "massage" or "effect" on the human senses; different experiences of consumption that the medium enhances or amplifies:

"Today we are beginning to notice that the new media are not just mechanical gimmicks for creating worlds of illusion, but new languages with new and unique powers of expression." (1957) Eric McLuhan & Frank Zingrone, editors, *Essential McLuhan*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 272.

Let's push McLuhan's idea into consideration here about what kinds of content will prove to be the "native voice" to mobiles.

What might become the "unique" voice of mobiles as a medium—as the so-called “fourth screen?” Might the unique voice of mobiles hinge on:

- Personal media (peer to peer)?
- GPS cell phones that track your children?  
See David Pogue's blog at the New York Times
- SMS language. Someday they might accept SMS language proficiency in place of a reading knowledge of French, Spanish or Japanese? How fast are your thumbs?
- Live Video Broadcast *from* your Mobile to the world? ComVUMobile
- Downloads of paid media?

Like others who study media and society, McLuhan insisted that media devices aren't what they seem. People live with media technologies in ways that need to be theorized because their true significance can be grasped only through

analysis of complex intersections of forces. And these forces aren't visible on the surface of daily life or media devices.

Hence, the need for a sociology of media.

At the heart of studies of “media and society” are continuing debates about just what these deeper, sociological forces might be. How strong are they? How can we sense and track them? Once we find them, how do we understand them in relation to other forces that shape human experience (economic, environmental, aesthetic, global)? Can we base public policy decisions upon sociological studies of media and how they shape social relationships?

Debates continue, because theories are, well, theories. They're not facts. We need theory when so-called “facts” are obscured or when we're unable to observe them directly. Social relationships are facts. They exist. But they're not objects or things that we can weigh or measure. So theorists must figure out how to map, track, and even re-shape something they can't observe directly: *relationship*.

One of the big and continuing debates in media studies about media and society has been about which is the stronger partner in the relationship: media or society? Do media technologies *determine or cause* social effects in direct and maybe even predictable ways? Or are media technologies *already the effects* of even larger and more powerful forces—such as the economy, or the ways that individuals and cultures put media to use? For some media theorists, it's important to get such cause/effect questions right because if we understand what causes what, and how, then we can *act* more confidently in the world. The more we understand the relationship between media and society, the more “we” as individuals and groups can predict, control, and shape what media do to us and what we do with them. Big things are at stake here. Things like social change. Revolution even. If studies of media and society can tell us exactly how media figure into such processes, then we humans can have more control (can be more empowered) over our fate. We can act more effectively as teachers, media designers, social reformers, activists, community organizers, advertisers, etc.

Let's step into the fray and see what it feels like to be in the middle of a decades-long struggle over these issues. The authors of *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2003) have set up a gripping point-counterpoint debate between McLuhan and Williams. In a chapter entitled "New Media: Determining or Determined?" they set McLuhan on one side, representing theorists who think that media are *determining*—in other words, they have powerful social effects and shape human history directly. On the side, they place Raymond Williams—one of the giants in cultural theory whose thoughts were formed by through Marxist approaches to understanding media and society. He argues that media are *determined*—they are the result of human labor and how power structures human labor in society.

Their account of how these two foundational theorists in media studies clash is so useful to us because they show how the debate between Williams and McLuhan continues to generate new questions for contemporary theorists. The authors of this point-counterpoint summary of the tensions between Williams and McLuhan (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly) unfolds through several short essays (Mapping Marshall McLuhan," "Williams and the Social Shaping of Technology," "The Many Virtures of Saint McLuhan," and "Conclusion: The Extent of the 'Extensions of Man"). They bring the debate to an interesting conclusion for today's media theory and design.

McLuhan has been an outsider to mainstream media studies and how it's been taught in colleges and universities. This is because the area of media studies has been dominated by Marxist and Neo-Marxist theories (Raymond Williams' camp) and by Sociological approaches for decades in most English speaking countries. His way of thinking did not conform to the conventions of most academic areas of study. But today, many in the field of media studies are reconsidering McLuhan, and with renewed interest. You can watch presentations from a recent symposium at York University in Toronto, and experience that ways people are turning to McLuhan's ideas for inspiration on how to begin to understand today's extreme media phenomena: <http://www.yorku.ca/topia/etopia1.html#hanke>

To experience Williams' arguments first-hand, read "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." Williams' first words in this key essay are about "determination." He plunges us into the question at the heart of what puts him at odds with McLuhan: does the "economic base" of a society (made up of who owns the means of production, how human labor is bought and sold, how profits are made off the labor of the workers) *determine* that society's "consciousness?" That is, does a society's economic based determine that society's cultural forms and practices (what stories that are told and how; what counts as "education" and "religion"; whose versions of "truth" are made official through television news programs; whose "taste" counts as "art,"etc)? Are the contents of children's imaginations and what parents think is "good" for their children determined by the ways that the Disney corporation creates profit for itself? Or, as McLuhan

argues, might media themselves *cause* or *determine* such things directly—regardless of economic base—because of how they compose the very environment in which we move, feel, and act? In “Base and Superstructure,” Williams tries to give culture a larger role in human agency than other Marxists before him. He opens the door to explorations of how media can be seen, by Marxists, as forces for social change and not simply effects of the political economy. By moving Marxism closer to McLuhan’s position, Williams makes Marxism speak to media studies. He offers media studies tools of analysis drawn from Marxism that has served the field well for years. But he does not go as far as McLuhan does—in the end, it is human labor that determines the meanings and powers media will have in shaping society.

In their attempts to uncover new patterns, dynamics, and forces beneath today's media, contemporary social theorists both challenge and build upon the “camps” of media theory established by McLuhan and Williams. Here are some examples:

In this short online interview with Arjun Appadurai, you can watch Appadurai point out how Marxist theory, as inherited by media studies through Williams, falters under pressure to make sense of new, media-driven social phenomenon. Marxist theories of society simply didn’t foresee today’s global flows of entertainment, culture, identity. Appadurai and others argue that we need new analytical concepts to help us understand global flows of capital, labor, and media.

Henry Jenkins traces his own theoretical bias back to Marxist cultural theory. You can see its influence in what becomes for him a key theoretical concept in his understanding of convergence culture. That concept is *affective economics*. He defines affective economics as:

"a new configuration of marketing theory ... which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions . . . the need to quantify desire, to measure connections, and to commodify commitments--and perhaps more importantly of all, the need to transform all of the above into return on investment (ROI)." (Jenkins, p. 62).

Jenkins sees both positive and negative implications in this new development in how capital and labor operate today. It allows “advertisers to tap the power of collective intelligence and direct it toward their own ends” but it also allows “consumers to form their own kind of collective bargaining structure that they can use to challenge corporate decisions” (Jenkins, p. 63).

Jenkins argues that affective economics has become a powerful force in convergence culture. As you read his chapter: “Buying Into American Idol: How We Are Being Sold on Reality Television,” you’ll see how mobiles played a key

role in shaping media industries' responses to the new economic opportunities offered by convergence culture. You can see and feel "affective economics" at work in this chapter, as Jenkins show how AT&T's economic interest in selling text messaging as a service converged with television industries' interests in exploiting "reality tv."

"AT&T Wireless reported that roughly a third of those who participated in American Idol in the 2003 season through text messaging had never sent a text message before. As an AT&T spokesman explained, 'Our venture with FOX has done more to educate the public and get people texting than any marketing activity in this country to date.'" (Jenkins 59)

You can explore further how cell phones are now functioning as catalysts for convergence culture by watching: MIT Communications Forum 2005: Cell Phone Culture. This forum examines how cell phones have "become a laboratory – some would say an asylum – for testing the limits of technological convergence." The speakers look at "the cell phone as a technological object and as a cultural form whose uses and meaning are increasingly various, an artifact uniquely of our time that is enacting, to borrow the words of a contemporary novelist, 'a ceaseless spectacle of transition'".

But some theorists are looking far outside of traditional approaches to media and society in order to deal with the new social forces unleashed by extreme media phenomena. For example, "Smart Mobs: The Power of the Mobile Many", Howard Rheingold looks outside of media studies, sociology, or Marxist social theory altogether as he seeks ways to explain how people are using mobiles to create "smart mobs." Mobiles are extreme, he says, because they "enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before." Not possible before, perhaps not even thinkable before, the social force of smart mobs isn't "covered" by previous theories of media, society, or social change. Watch as Rheingold looks to the bio-sciences for ideas such as "swarming" and "collective intelligence" to help him understand mobiles through "threshold models of collective action."