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Metadesigning Media Contents

What is “media science”? In this article I invoke what may be termed “metadesign” in an effort to define the role of media research in the field of industrial arts.

The first thing I would like to look at is a definition put forward by Hannu Eerikäinen in 1992 in a report outlining what ultimately became the degree program in audio-visual media culture at the University of Lapland. According to Eerikäinen, “mediatiede” is an academic discipline which has its basis in the scientific traditions of the humanities and cultural research and which studies the media arts, the new media, and the general questions of audiovisual media culture.

Alternative 1: Humanistic Media Art Research

The disciplines within the humanities that concern themselves with art undertake to study, describe and interpret phenomena which already exist and which derive their significance from human culture. For example, film theory examines a particular branch of art – film – and how viewers – perceivers of art – process what they see.

Our model of film theory allows us to postulate a humanistic research of media art which looks at Web or techno art, for example, and the meaning of that art in audio-visual media culture as a whole. This research is reminiscent in structure of not only film theory but also literature, art history, music, and the like; it concerns itself with “everything from the MuuMedia [OtherMedia] Festival to Ars Electronica; from video to virtual reality; from hypernovels to computer music; from Nam June Paik to Piazza Virtuale; from postmodern photography to digital visualization; from performances of Roi Vaara to the video creations and installations of Marikki Hakola; from the home movies of Matias Keskinen to Rea Pihlasviita’s *Mein Kampf in Media*.” (Hannu Eerikäinen)

Alternative 2: Culturally Oriented “Media Studies” and “Mediawissenschaft”

Above, I described media research as a part of the humanities. A second alternative is to underscore the relationship between media research and its relatives – the Anglo-American *Media Studies* and the German *Medienwissenschaft*, disciplines which, rather than focusing on art alone, examine the intersection of art (the languages of media), popular culture and mass media. In this perspective, art and communication are not opposites because they merge in artistic communication. Nor are the sciences of art and communication opposites, because they merge in media research.

Alternative 3: Media Studies as Part of Research in Industrial Arts

The two definitions I have just suggested give an indication of what I mean by “mediatiede.” Yet, in their present form, the definitions fall short of describing media science adequately; they fail to capture the special character of that research, which, in my view, should be incorporated into the research done in universities and faculties of art and in any research in the field of industrial arts. These definitions represent an ideal of science whereby existent media and media art are described and understood. But this is only one side of the humanities.

The universe exists almost wholly irrespective of the human being. An astronomer can only describe the laws of nature and learn to apply them by obeying them. In contrast, media, like other endeavors involving human activity, human culture and human society, is created by human beings. The media researcher is not limited to describing the media that exist at present; he or she can plan the media of tomorrow. In this sense, from the standpoint of art, media science can be the expression of media, content, an “engineering” that designs narrative and dramaturgy.

Media Research as Metadesign

Following Georg Henrik von Wright, the general goal of metadesign can be said to be the specification of technical norms:

If we want to produce computer games that interest girls, we have to use certain methods of expression and production.

In their most general form, technical norms express an objective, A, a belief concerning the state of the world, B, and a means, X:

If you want A and think that you are in situation B, you should do (it would be reasonable for you to do) X.

If we express the above example in terms of this equation, we obtain the following:

If you want A

If we would like to produce computer games that interest girls,

and think you are in situation B

and we think that certain cultural norms, audiovisual forms of understanding and perception, and gender-related values determine whether girls are interested in a certain computer game or not,

you should (it would be reasonable for you to) do X

we should use certain means of expression and production.

A technical norm such as this is true if the carrying out of X is truly a means of achieving A in situation B. Technical norms are contingent in that they are binding only on those people who accept the goal expressed in the conditional statement.

If we think of the structure of “media science,” term A is media philosophy, which explores the goals and values which serve as our starting points in developing media. Term B is research in audiovisual media culture. Actual guidelines (X) are provided by media design (the design of expression) and media education, which rely on terms A and B.

In order to design multimedia which is actualized as a particular mental representation, we must recognize what we can accomplish with regard to multimedia and ascertain the values our target audience ascribes to multimedia and the manner in which they perceive it. Research on situation B is essentially the same as the research on media culture and the science of media art referred to at the beginning of this article.

Thus, media research based on the traditions of humanistic and cultural research is an essential part of, and precondition for, media research in the industrial arts; but it does not encompass the entire discipline.

Media design provides guidelines for how to create a network-based media product which the user will perceive in the desired way and it can thus be seen as a precondition for successful Web-based advertising. We can design two things: the physical media product and the media product as it exists in the user’s mind.

In planning a media product in the user’s mind, we can postulate a certain ideal user with certain culturally determined forms of audiovisual perception. At the same time, however, we must bear in mind that advertising and popular culture are consciously changing these perceptual habits to render them more receptive to new media products. In this connection, one might mention Andy Warhol, who not only created art but also changed the parameters according to which we perceive it.

Media education is the branch of metadesign that specifies the means used in situation B to create the models and schemata that guide our perception of media products. For example, works of art that fail to fit our established patterns of thought might change the way in which we perceive audiovisual material. Media design (the design of such products), guided by the appropriate scientific foundation, might provide media education with a useful tool.

The physical work of the artist is more than a starting point for the mental representation of the perceiver; it has the potential to change the way the perceiver forms such representations.

In this case, our example takes on the following form:

If we want to make computer games that interest girls, we have to use the expressive, productive and technological methods that correspond to the present feminine expectations of what constitutes an interesting computer game; or we have to use the expressive, productive and technological methods which yield a media product that, in being used, will change the norms that govern what girls consider interesting.

Thus, a media product as a mental representation is the outcome of two parallel processes of design.



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