

MEDIA / MEDIUM (of communication)

I. The Magic of Words

Here is Freud in 1890 on “Psychische Behandlung (Seelenbehandlung)” for a medical manual whose title, *Die Gesundheit*, needs no translation:

Wir beginnen nun auch den “Zauber“ des Wortes zu verstehen. Worte sind ja die wichtigsten Vermittler für den Einfluß, den ein Mensch auf den anderen ausüben will; Worte sind gute Mittel, seelische Veränderungen bei dem hervorzurufen, an den sie gerichtet werden, und darum klingt es nicht länger rätselhaft, wenn behauptet wird, daß der Zauber des Wortes Krankheitserscheinungen beseitigen kann, zumal solche, die selbst in seelischen Zuständen begründet sind.

(*Gesammelte Werke*, 5:301–2)

The French edition of this text, translated and edited by Jean Laplanche, renders the paragraph:

A présent, nous commençons également à comprendre la ‘magie’ du mot. Les mots sont bien les instruments les plus importants de l’influence qu’une personne cherche à exercer sur une autre; les mots sont de bons moyens pour provoquer des modifications psychiques chez celui à qui ils s’adressent, et c’est pourquoi il n’y a désormais plus rien d’énigmatique dans l’affirmation selon laquelle la magie du mot peut écarter des phénomènes morbides, en particulier ceux qui ont eux-mêmes leur fondement dans des états psychiques.

(“Traitement psychique [traitement d’âme]”)

Finally, here is Strachey’s translation in the *Standard Edition*:

Now, too, we begin to understand the “magic” of words. Words are the most important media by which one man seeks to bring his influence to bear on another; words are a good method of producing mental changes in the person to whom they are addressed. So that there is no longer anything puzzling in the assertion that the magic of words can remove the symptoms of illness, and especially such as are themselves founded on mental states.

(“Psychical [or Mental] Treatment”)

Even after setting aside the problems of translation in general and of the Freud translation in particular, we are left to wonder over Strachey’s choice of the word “media” where Freud wrote *Vermittler* and the French translators opted for *instrument*—not because “media” works poorly, but because it works so well, perhaps better than the original. A *Vermittler* is a person who acts as a broker or intermediary; to suggest that words are the most important, *Vermittler* is to offer us a metaphor that evokes a person in a well-tailored suit working on commission. The French *instrument* presents still other challenges of interpretation, not metaphorical this time, but metonymic. The claim that words are instrumental in exercising influence is clear enough. But what about the claim that they are the “most important” instruments? Compared to what? The dictionary offers us such examples of the word *instrument* as “compasses” (*un instrument de bord*)

and “tractors” (*un instrument agricole*) but nothing that would make a compelling alternative to “words,” which is what it would take for Freud’s argument to make sense.

By contrast, the English word “medium” raises far fewer difficulties, and the ones it does raise are much more interesting. The RT: *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that a medium is “any intervening substance or agency.” We understand right away that Freud is arguing that of the various substances or agencies through which men and women seek to intervene in one another’s lives—drugs, money, caresses, and so on—words are the most effective when it comes to producing beneficial changes in mental states. It would have been helpful if Freud had specified whether he meant spoken words or written words, or both, but that is a problem of argumentation rather than of language or translation. In short, the term makes it easier to understand Freud’s claim and then to have an argument about it. After centuries of untranslatability, “medium” has been welcomed into French and German and a number of other languages for precisely this reason. It allows authors to join an argument long dominated by Anglo-American philosophy, social science, and industry.

II. A Wonderfully Perfect Kind of Sign-Functioning

The Latin adjective *medius* has roots in the Sanskrit *madhya* and the Greek *mesos*, all three terms meaning something like “in the midst” or “in the middle.” One could be in the midst or middle of any number of things, some quite concrete—the distance from here to there—and others more abstract. Hence Quentin Skinner cites Cicero’s maxim in *De officiis* that “our highest duty must be to act in such a way that *communes utilitates in medium afferre*—in such a way that the ideal of the common good is placed at the heart of our common life.” This idea was taken up by Renaissance civic humanists, who held that classical virtues “ought to be in medio, in our midst; they ought indeed to be actively brought forth in medium, into the center of things” (*Visions of Politics*).

“Medium” approaches a recognizably modern sense when, in addition to being a place where ideas or affects can be brought forth, it becomes a way of bringing them forth. One of the first appearances of this notion is in book 2 of Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* (1605), where Bacon takes up Aristotle’s claim that “words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words.” This may be true, he writes, “yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words.” Bacon mentions the gestures of the deaf and dumb, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Chinese characters. One could even say it with flowers: “Periander, being consulted with how to preserve a tyranny newly usurped, bid the messenger attend and report what he saw him do; and went into his garden and topped all the highest flowers, signifying, that it consisted in the cutting off and keeping low of the nobility and grandees” (in *The Major Works*).

This argument may well have been influenced by Montaigne, who, in one especially beautiful passage in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” (1580), reflected on the many forms of communication available to animals and men: “After all, lovers quarrel, make it up again, beg favors, give thanks, arrange secret meetings and say everything, with

their eyes.” Not only eyes, but heads, eyebrows, shoulders, and hands communicate “with a variety and multiplicity rivalling the tongue.” Montaigne called these *moyens de communication* (John Florio’s 1603 translation of the essay translates this as “meanes of entercommunication”). But there is a crucial difference between Montaigne and Bacon’s theories of media: Montaigne is concerned to show the many ways men and women can communicate with one another; Bacon wants to find the most effective ways. The introduction of “medium” into English-language theories of communication shifted the grounds of philosophical debate toward pragmatic matters.

This shift was helped by the word’s associations with natural philosophy, which classified media according to how they assisted or resisted whatever passed through them (e.g., light, magnetism). “When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language,” James Madison writes in Federalist Paper no. 37 (1788), “his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful, by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated.” Madison’s pun neatly captures this conflation of the two senses of medium in English; such a pun would not have been possible in French or German (the French translation of 1792, usually attributed to Trudaine de la Sablière, misses it entirely by describing His will as “obscurcie par le voile dont elle s’enveloppe”; a translation of 1902 by Gaston Jèze does much better with “le nébuleux moyen par lequel elle est communiquée”).

As chemical and mechanical technologies for reproducing words and images proliferated in the nineteenth century, so too did the sense that these technologies were members of the same conceptual family: the family of media. Thus a treatise on libel from 1812: “Libel in writing may be effected by every mode of submitting to the eye a meaning through the medium of words; whether this be done by manual writing, or printing, or any other method” (George, *A Treatise on the Offence of Libel*). The formula “medium of words” evokes Bacon, but the emphasis is now on the “symbolical devices,” as the author calls them, rather than on the symbols themselves. The word “medium” could expand to include nearly anything that facilitated communication. In his 1864 account of the analytical engine, one of the first general-purpose computers, Charles Babbage explains that it functioned through the “medium of properly-arranged sets of Jacquard cards” (*Passages from the Life*)—the punch cards engineered by Joseph-Marie Jacquard to operate his automatic looms. By the turn of the twentieth century, the concept had expanded yet again to include new electrical means of communication. (On electrification’s contribution to the unification of a concept of media, see Gitelman and Collins, “Medium Light.”)

■ See Box 1.

This proliferation was such that Charles Sanders Peirce attempted to arrive at a formal definition in his 1906 essay “The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences.” What do all these media have common? “A medium of communication is something, A, which being acted upon by something else, N, in its turn acts upon something, I, in a manner involving its determination by N, so that I shall thereby, through

A and only through A, be acted upon by N.” He offered the example of a mosquito, which is acted upon by “zymotic disease,” which it in turn transmits to a new host animal in the form of a fever. It was an odd example, logically and biologically, and Peirce recognized its oddness. “The reason that this example is not perfect is that the active medium is in some measure of the nature of a vehicle, which differs from a medium of communication in acting upon the transported object, where, without further interposition of the vehicle, it acts upon, or is acted upon by, the object to which it is conveyed.” In other words, the mosquito did not simply transmit the zyme unchanged; it transformed the zyme into a fever. This logic of the parasite stood in contrast to a classically logocentric scenario: “After an ordinary conversation, a wonderfully perfect kind of sign-functioning, one knows what information or suggestion has been conveyed, but will be utterly unable to say in what words it was conveyed, and often will think it was conveyed in words, when in fact it was only conveyed in tones or facial expressions” (“The Basis of Pragmatism”).

III. A Somewhat Cumbersome Title

Samuel Weber has argued that the modern era is characterized by a theological stance that attributes to media “the function of creatio ex nihilo.” “The ‘singularization’ and simplification of the complex and plural notion of ‘the media’ would be a symptom of this theology” (*Benjamin’s -abilities*). He credits this sacralization to Hegel, whose notion of mediation (*Vermittlung*) elevates the process to world-historical importance. However, it was not only, or even mainly, speculative philosophy that gave us “the media” as an uncountable noun with innumerable powers. It was Anglo-American social science.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the recognition of a family resemblance between the various “implements of intercommunication” (to take another phrase of Peirce’s) meant that they could be compared and contrasted in profitable new ways (Weber, *ibid.*). “The medium gives a tone of its own to all the advertisements contained in it,” writes Walter Dill Scott, a student of Wilhelm Wundt, who was a professor of applied psychology at Northwestern University, in his *Theory of Advertising* of 1904. Scott made this remark in a section of his book entitled “Mediums,” but this form was soon obsolete. The plural would vacillate in grammatical number before settling into a singular that could be labeled as “mass,” “mainstream,” “new,” and so forth. Indeed, as late as the 1940s, it was still necessary to explain what one meant by “mass media.” Julian Huxley, presiding over the newly formed UNESCO in 1946, announced that “Unesco is expressly instructed to pursue its aims and objects by means of the media of mass communication—the somewhat cumbersome title (commonly abbreviated to ‘Mass Media’) proposed for agencies, such as the radio, the cinema, and the popular press, which are capable of mass dissemination of word or image” (the English text of Article I reads “means of mass communication”; the French text, “organes d’information des masses”).

The term “mass media” found its niche in scholarly articles by such influential American midcentury thinkers as Hadley Cantril, Harold Lasswell, and Paul Lazarsfeld.

1

Ordinateur/Computer/Numérique/Digital

For the advocates of a purity of the French language jeopardized by the multiplication of imports from English, computer science and digital culture have represented an important battleground because of the Anglo-American preeminence that has marked them since their beginnings in the 1940s. In their perspective, the adoption of terms like *ordinateur* and *informatique* to designate computer and computer science appeared as clear victories. These words not only sounded French, they also conveyed a different take on what computing was about. More recently, however, the line of demarcation has become less evident because of the ambiguity that surrounds the definition of *numérique* versus digital.

Ordinateur was proposed in 1955 by the Latin philologist and Sorbonne professor Jacques Perret, who had been asked by one of his former students to suggest French names for the new machines that IBM was about to commercialize in the country. Perret suggested *ordinateur*, which applied to the capacity of someone to arrange and organize. *Ordinateur* used to have strong religious connotations. According to the RT: *Le Littré*, the adjective had been applied to God bringing order to the world. It also designated the person in charge of ordaining a priest. But very few persons would be aware of this religious dimension, argued Perret, so that the name would essentially relate to the notions of ordering and accounting, just like the other French term, *ordonnateur*, which was used in the administration for officials with power to authorize expenditures. *Ordinateur* was from the start a success. It was even transposed in Spanish and Catalan as *ordenador* and *ordinador*. (It is however worth noting that most other Romance languages preferred to translate the word “computer”: *calcolatore* in Italian or *calculator* in Romanian.) This success coincided with a major evolution in the public perception of computers. Whereas the first machines had been generally envisaged as mere computing devices, the accent was shifting toward their capacity to order logical propositions, a capacity that seemed to announce the possibility of an artificial intelligence. Thus, despite its French particularism, *ordinateur* was in profound accordance with a worldwide transformation epitomized by the 1968 science fiction film 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. In charge of every aspect of the mission to Jupiter staged in the film, the HAL 9000, the ship’s computer, was definitely more an *ordinateur* than a computing device.

Informatique was another major success. Coined in 1962 by a former director of the computing center of the French company Bull, Philippe Dreyfus, from the contraction of

information and *automatique*, the term was officially endorsed during a cabinet meeting by President Charles de Gaulle, who preferred it to *ordinateur* to name the science of information processing (see Mounier-Kuhn, *L’informatique en France*). Around the same time, the German *Informatik*, the English “informatics,” and the Italian *informatica* also appeared. But the French term has enjoyed a widespread use without equivalent in other countries. Since its adoption, first by the government, then by the French Academy, the term has evolved in two seemingly discrepant directions. On the one hand, it covers a much broader range of subjects and domains than was envisaged by its creator and early promoters. Beside computer science proper, it applies to information technology as well as to the entire computer industry. On the other hand, it retains a distinctive scientific flavor. In French, *informatique* seems to belong to the same disciplinary family as mathematics, thus putting the emphasis on the abstract dimension of computer science, on its logic and algorithmic content. It is worth noting that until recently, computer science was often associated with mathematics in the programs of study of French higher-education institutions. Such an association bore the mark of the long-standing approach of technology as an “application” of pure science, a conception epitomized by institutions such as the École Polytechnique. At this stage it would be tempting to contrast a French propensity toward abstraction when dealing with computer and digital subjects with a more concretely oriented English vocabulary. Browsing through the various official publications devoted to French alternatives to the use of English words and expressions (the feared *anglicismes*), such as the *Vocabulaire des techniques de l’information et de la communication* published in 2009 by the Commission Générale de Terminologie et de Néologie, the official committee for seeking such alternatives, seems to confirm such an opposition. The contrast between the French *numérique* and the English “digital” could easily pass for a typical instance of this divergent orientation. A closer examination reveals, however, a more confusing set of relations between the two terms, as if the full meaning of what is at stake in their contemporary use could be apprehended only by playing on the interwoven resonances that they evoke. This ambiguous relation might represent an incentive to question the opposition mentioned above between allegedly French and English approaches to computer and digital subjects.

Numérique versus “digital”: both terms derive from a similar reference to numerals.

The French term is directly related to *nombre* and *numération*, whereas the English comes from “digit.” Contrary to its French equivalent, “digit” refers to the concrete operation to count on one’s fingers: *digitus* means “finger” or “toe” in Latin. The term “digital” is thus well adapted to the most recent evolution of computer culture, namely, its more and more concrete, almost tactile, turn. Conceived initially as mere electronic calculators, then as logical machines that could possibly become intelligent in the future, computers have become emblematic of a new cultural condition giving priority to the individual and his/her sensations and emotions. This evolution had been foreseen by Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab—an institution devoted to the exploration of the new possibilities of interface between human and machine. In his 1995 book, *Being Digital*, Negroponte opposed the information age to the digital age about to unfold. According to him, whereas the former was all about anonymity, standardization, and mass consumption, the new cultural era would see the rise of individual experience and preferences.

The French *numérique* definitely misses this individual and sensory dimension. But the full scope of what is at stake in the rise of digital culture is perhaps better understood by playing on the extended resources that a comparison between English and French offer. The lack of direct tactile connotation of *culture numérique* is partly compensated by the fact that the adjective “digital” is more clearly related to fingers in the French language. It applies among other things to fingerprints: *empreintes digitales*. With the new importance given to biometrics in emergent digital culture, this connection matters. It reveals that what is at stake today is not only individual experience but also identification by institutions and corporations. From numbers to fingers and back, it becomes then interesting to work constantly on the border between French and English, on a moving threshold marked by disconcerting exchanges and uncanny inversions of meaning.

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But European philosophers resisted this tendency. Their attitude is summed up by Sartre in a fragment from his notebooks of 1947–48 entitled “The American Way: Technical Civilization, hence Generality”: “This is what mass media, best seller, book of the month, best record, Gallup, Oscar, etc., tend to do,” he wrote, leaving all the important words in English. “It is a matter of presenting to the isolated exemplar the image of the totality” (*Notebooks for an Ethics*). Back in Germany, Adorno also took his distance from a term that he had resorted to repeatedly while in exile. In “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” first delivered as a radio address in 1963, he argued that “the very word mass-media [*Massenmedien*], specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master’s voice.” For Sartre, Adorno, and their contemporaries, “mass media” was less an untranslatable than an untouchable sullied by intellectual and institutional associations with American cultural imperialism. The entry in the current edition of the RT: *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* reflects this sense of its origins: “Média. n. m. XXe siècle. Abréviation de l’anglais des États-Unis mass media, de même sens.”

This resistance was soon exhausted. In the late 1960s, the German publishers of Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* settled on the weirdly operatic title *Die magischen Kanäle*. At the end of the century, a collection of McLuhan’s writings appeared under the title *Medien Verstehen: Der McLuhan-Reader* (1998). In France, in the 1990s, Régis Debray launched the excellent *Cahiers de médiologie*, devoting issues to themes like theatricality and bicycles; more recently he started a review entitled, simply, *Médium*. Cognates like “multimedia,” “remediation,” and “mediality” proliferate globally. This reflects less the dominance of English than the collective urgency of an intellectual project. “For the moment,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “it is less important to respond to the question of the meaning of Being than it is to pay attention to the fact of its exhibition. If ‘communication’ is for us, today, such an affair—in every sense of the word . . . —if its theories are flourishing, if its technologies are being proliferated, if the ‘mediatization’ of the ‘media’ brings along with it an auto-communicational vertigo, if one plays around with the theme of the indistinctness between the ‘message’ and the ‘medium’ out of either a disenchanting or jubilant fascination, then it is because something is exposed or laid bare” (*Being Singular Plural*).

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MELANCHOLY

FRENCH	<i>mélancolie</i>
GERMAN	<i>Melancholie, Schwermut</i>
GREEK	<i>melagcholia</i> [μελαγχολία]
LATIN	<i>melancholia, furor</i>

- ACEDIA, DESENGAÑO, DOR, ES, FEELING, GEMÜT, GENIUS, INGENIUM, I/ME/MYSELF, LEIB, MADNESS, MALAISE, PATHOS, SAUDADE, SEHNSUCHT, SPLEEN, STIMMUNG

Although we can date the origin of what we know as modern psychiatry back to the work of Philippe Pinel—whose *Medico-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation or Mania* (year IX, 1801) signaled both the autonomy of mental illness as a field of study separate from physiology and the application of new clinical and institutional practices to the treatment of patients—the study of mental illness, or of madness, as a discipline has a longer history that goes back to antiquity. The word “melancholy” at that time referred to a state of sadness and anxiety, without a fever, and most often accompanied by an obsession, or near delirium, this state being marked by an excess of black bile, which some authors considered to be the cause of the illness and others as a concomitant symptom.