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# Introduction: Currents in Communication and the Media Archaeological

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## Introduction: Currents in Communication and the Media Archaeological

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Thanks to Jussi Parikka and Florian Sprenger who offered their gracious feedback and time to this introduction as well as the formulation of this collection.

*Arkhe* implies roots, origins and beginnings. It is the place, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, of “*commencement* and *commandment*,”<sup>1</sup> concerned beyond just temporality, but also in regarding to authority, command, and ordering of the perception of the temporal frame.<sup>2</sup> Derrida noted that *Arkhe* implied both of these principles: the historical, ontological principal, as well as the law, the nomological principal, that which names and gives order and authority and command. So, when we think of the *archaeological*, we must start with the consideration of both that which *happens* and also that which *gives order* to what happens, and how what happens emerges from what gives order. Beneath the experience of the world, these roots under everyday reality form a twisted web of contingencies, historical entanglements, and relationships. These roots provide the substrata for a dense soil, an earthy foundation for the ethereal practice of communication. An excavation of these roots reveals dense, tightly packed phenomena of historical and material arrangements that are otherwise concealed, but these hidden foundations are what we walk on every day – they are means by which what is, *is*. They command, as they form the substrata on which our experience of the world lives, moves and has its being. An archaeological approach is one means by which we can question those substructures of being.

Following the notion of archaeology from Michel Foucault, many critical communication scholars have concerned themselves with the “hidden” rules that govern discursive practices, helping to uncover what was hidden within historical analysis to understand larger social relationships. The name most associated with “media archaeology,” Friedrich Kittler, famously criticizes Foucault for not “reflecting on the mediality of the discursive practices he analyzed.”<sup>3</sup> Another prominent media archaeologist, Wolfgang Ernst, notes that we should be concerned about “what has remained from the past in the present like archaeological layers, operatively embedded in technologies.”<sup>4</sup> Media archaeology is concerned with the material, the matter that functions as not just foundational, but that which sits below the foundation. It is what is “under standing [sic] media” as communication

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Knut Ebeling. “The Art of Searching: On “Wild Archaeologies” from Kant to Kittler.” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 25, no. 51 (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Kittler. *Gramophone, film, typewriter*. Stanford University Press, 1999. xx

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Ernst. “Media Archaeography: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media.” In Huhtamo, Erkki, and Jussi Parikka, eds. *Media archaeology: Approaches, applications, and implications*. Univ of California Press, 2011. 241.

theorist and media historian John Durham Peters notes.<sup>5</sup> Lori Emerson, the founder of the Media Archaeology Lab (MAL), makes the connection to communication clear, as media exert a “power over communication,”<sup>6</sup> for which we, as communication scholars, consider to be foundational to the social relationships for which Foucauldian analysis is so keen on exploring.

Despite its historical distancing, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young notes that British cultural studies shares much in common with the practitioners of “media archaeology” as the German focus on *media* as an object garnered similar attention to the equally fuzzy term *culture*.<sup>7</sup> Combining these together in the study of communication just made sense, as Winthrop-Young notes, “it is the self-reflexive twist that really counts: our writing tools are also working on our thoughts about our writing tools. That must be the baseline command of all media studies.”<sup>8</sup> Media archaeology is then is a form of searching out histories of communication (of *communicare*, of sharing) that moves beyond just retracing linear narratives, but instead looking for ideas, implications, and most importantly, hidden preconditions around the components that underpin our communicative practices and culturally creative spaces that figure into present possibilities.

While producing this issue, we noted strong mixed feelings around the term “media archaeology” and its ascendants. We try to address this head on here, as part of an attempt to answer the perennial questions: what is media archaeology, and what is its potential for communication and other multidisciplinary scholars? So instead of ascribing to a strict definition of “media archaeology” (as many have noted, there is not an agreement to which that would be) we instead turned to questions of what is the “media archaeological” or what are the “media archaeologies” and how can these logics inform more robust critical cultural communication scholarship.

When media archaeology asks questions about the world, it performs a function similar to the ideals John Durham Peters holds for media theory.<sup>9</sup> It offers a perspective that emphasizes a philosophical engagement with media and communication, as both earth and ethereal, medial and material. To make the

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<sup>5</sup> John Durham Peters. "Infrastructuralism: Media as Traffic between Nature and Culture." *Traffic: Media as Infrastructures and Cultural Practices* (2015): 29-49.

<sup>6</sup> Lori Emerson. *Reading writing interfaces: From the digital to the bookbound*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.214

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. "Cultural Studies and German Media Theory." In *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory*, 88–103, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> John Durham Peters. *The marvelous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*. University of Chicago Press. 2015.

environmental connection stronger, it is worth remembering Donna Haraway's claims: "it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds."<sup>10</sup> To this, this media archaeologic offers a preface: *it matters what matter matters*. One of the reasons for media archaeology's recent popularity comes from a theoretical timeliness – it engages with a material turn, an environmental significance, and provides a historical application for those concepts. This timeliness is equally important incorporating these media *archaeologies* into the interdisciplinary study of culture through communication, as adjacent conversations with software studies, platform studies, cultural techniques, Actor-Network-Theory, and media historiography are incorporated into fields like political science, women and gender studies, sociology, and other culturally-oriented fields.

Of course, the term "media archaeology" invites (potentially) inadequate metaphors about excavating, uncovering, and unconcealing. But instead of focusing on exhumation we should ask the question of what incorporating these archaeologies can contribute to approaches to contemporary scholarship; the question of media archaeology here is not how to dig, but how can this perspective can enrich scholarship? In communication studies today, we rarely need to make the case for the relevance of technology and media, as we already understand that technology mediates our experience of the world. As technification increasingly becomes entwined in the everyday experience of humans across the globe, media studies and communication have continued to converge on each other and continue to draw from other perspectives and disciplines.<sup>11</sup>

In his book *What is Media Archaeology?*, Jussi Parikka describes several areas in which media archaeology has expressed itself, which might give us a framework for what has been, and a path to what might come to pass within this framework. These include emphases on cinema, imaginary media, aesthetics, and software studies. However, Parikka argues media archaeology's central question is "what are the conditions of existence of this thing, of that statement, of these discourses and the multiple media(ted) practices with which we live?"<sup>12</sup> For communications and media scholars, this should seem a familiar goal, as it enmeshes with the practice of media history, but Parikka notes that media archaeology more specifically emphasizes the epistemological implications of technological changes so that it

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<sup>10</sup>Donna J Haraway. *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chtulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that the human condition has not always been entwined with technics, but instead to note that some areas of academic study are just now starting to recognize this and converge theories and methods to address this reality.

<sup>12</sup> Jussi Parikka. *What is Media Archeology?* Malden: Polity. 2012. 18.

“reads media history and media theory hand in hand.”<sup>13</sup> These are histories of the present, which don’t search for root causes but contingencies, and which lend themselves to a critical insight into why: why these practices, and not others? Why these discourses, and not others?

Despite its recent fame, media archaeology has not been embraced by all that come across it, and understandably so. Friedrich Kittler, one of the foremost names in “media archaeology” states quite simply in the opening sentence of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, that “Media determine our situation.”<sup>14</sup> This has been seen by some as overly technologically deterministic, which has in turn been interpreted as an erasure of the intersectionalist concerns of cultural studies – gender, ethnicity, class, and anything that makes a human a human *being*. Media archaeology, as it is presented by its first generation of (nearly exclusively white German male) authors, seems to suffer from this concern over erasure of culture and politics. However, the sentence containing this seemingly deterministic phrase prompts a slightly different orientation when read in its entirety, “Media determine our situation, which - in spite of it or because of it - deserves a description.”<sup>15</sup> Stopping after the first part of the sentence, as many media scholars seem to have done, negates the probing nature of the full statement. Furthermore, there are some complexities to the translation from German to English, as “*Medien bestimmen unsere Lage*” connotes a military connection as *bestimmen* can mean *intend* or *decide* and *Lage* connotes *location* or *position*. The following paragraphs in Kittler’s introduction make this clear through the recounting of military files and secrets, illuminating the power of the medium of knowledge collection and dissemination. Kittler’s often-deterministically read phrasing might instead be seen as media as an acknowledgement of the power of where we store knowledge, taking stock of the ease of how information can be disappeared or classified or destroyed, as piece in a triangulation of how we find ourselves *here*. If nothing else these mediums help us to *determine position* with and through the medium. It is this - the emphasis of materiality and new materialisms - which welcome a new light in the constellation of media studies that has suffered decades of dominance by instrumentalism and the social construction of technology. But we must be careful - if this emphasis is at the expense of how technology is gendered, enforces racial or class disparity, or has some other relevance to human *being*, in face a critical epistemology, then media archaeology “proper” needs retooling.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, xxxix.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Approaches, Implications, and Differentiations

One of the biggest barriers to introducing a collection that engages with media archaeology are its multifaceted and heterogenous application and approaches. On the one hand, the fact that there is no “one” media archaeology means that we have the ability to produce a collection such as this through discussing logics and interdisciplinary mashups, but on the other hand, it makes it very difficult to define what is *included* in media archaeology and, of course, what is not included and how it differs from other approaches.

This is why we are excited to have multiple contributors who bring perspectives that may be lacking in the perceived or current canon of media archaeology, particularly as it pertains to “Communication Studies” in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Bringing together what is helpful from the heterogenous “field” of media archaeology, or using the “media archaeologies,” as an additive to a growing constellation of approaches, we can see how these modes of inquiry can inform each other to give us a more thorough understanding of communication, of culture, and of humans being. One missing component addressed in this issue is asked by Jorgen Skageby in “What is Feminist Media Archaeology?” This raises the question of how media archaeology and feminism can work in tandem to produce new revelations on the power situated in material-social arrangements.

In the array of things considered media archaeology, things that blend media archaeological deserve some preservation, and this is part of our goal here. Post-Kittler, we gesture towards the promise of Foucauldian genealogy, blending histories of the present with the value of McLuhan’s attentiveness to materiality. According to Bernard Geoghagan, media archaeology after Kittler is morphing from a Germanophone body of media theory into “genealogical approaches to media research and inquiry,” or, as one theorist exclaimed “We’re finally allowed to talk about people!”<sup>17</sup>

But outside of the genealogical and cultural techniques approach, there is still the risk of ignoring the human. An opportunity for exploration in this area is how we think about the *ecology* of media – not merely media ecology ala McLuhan or Postman, but an ecological outlook that puts the anthropocene front and center. How does the promise of the media archeologies allow us to explore the role of media as systems and hidden structures of power in a way that we might otherwise

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<sup>16</sup> Due to the overwhelming response to our original call, this volume is divided into two issues, for which we will introduce authors and works in this introduction for only the first issue.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Dionysius Geoghagan. “After Kittler: on the cultural techniques of recent German media theory.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 6 (2013): 66-82.

miss? It becomes necessary to explicitly declare what is worth salvaging in media archaeology. This is what emerges in Naomie Gramlich's work in this issue on "Sticky Media", looking at oil as the "deep time of media" which underlies nearly all contemporary materialities. By unearthing a "petro-imaginary" Gramlich emphasizes material moments in the arrangements of human/non-human. Likewise with paper, Nicola Rodger's "From Book to Bookish" has us consider the way in which the paper book is repurposed in various ways. The forefront here is not the book itself, but its social and historical significance as a significant focal point of social infrastructure.

If we can consider the social and natural ecologies at work in our histories of the present, we can blend a media archeological historiography with a history of critical theory. We can pull people back into the analysis by considering cultural techniques,<sup>18</sup> as George Vollerath does in this issue, combining Lacanian psychoanalysis with the cultural technique of "mirroring" throughout history. Similarly, Nikita Braguinski's "An (An)Archive of Communication" takes a unique approach to thinking about the logics at play behind the Speak and Spell machine, and how it reflects broader processes of information retrieval.

One of the most overlooked and misunderstood differences in the media archaeological approach remains between historiography and archaeology. While the former traces linear accounts of how social material arrangements were formed, a media archaeology is concerned with the consequences from power systems.<sup>19</sup> This is the spirit behind Ricardo Cedeno Montana and Christina Vagt's "Constructing the Invisible," which provides a media archaeology of early computer graphics to reveal how the techno-imaginaries are prefigured by the technical media which made modern graphic rendering possible. The invisibility of a medium is again brought to light in Emily Doucet's "In History the Future" which analyzes the early history of photography in France. Linear narratives of progress, success and adoption are undone as alternative genealogies are presented where the medium is successful through its discreteness – in short, it succeeds by making itself invisible. Revealing the other invisible is a key goal of media archaeology. Questions as to method can be revealed by examining the approach the authors in this volume take towards their individual subjects, (re)constructing an alternative telling of an otherwise forgotten history, a silenced lineage.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernhard Siegert. *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> John Nerone. "Mapping the Field of Media History" In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, edited by Valdivia A. N. Wiley Blackwell, 2013; Packer, Jeremy. "The Conditions of Media's Possibility: A Foucauldian Approach to Media History." In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, edited by Valdivia A. N. Wiley Blackwell, 2013.



Media archaeology also finds itself in similar company to differentiate itself from a phenomenological approach. Heidegger's influence on Foucault and then on Kittler is visible in way that media have the potential to affect the lived experience, although it differentiates itself through its focus. Phenomenology is concerned with intentionality, that consciousness is always consciousness of others. It reserves much of its inquiry for human actors (with the exception of some trends in post-phenomenology which explore non-human intentionality). Media archaeology differs from phenomenology, according to Kjetil Jakobsen, in that it analyzes the "non-discursive practices of a techno-cultural archive,"<sup>20</sup> whereas the phenomenologists focus on the appearance of media phenomena to the human cognitive apparatus. What emerges then is a tension in the way that signs are preserved within a technical apparatus where they have no meaning towards one another. Without the interface and the human actor, these things have an occult quality of hidden meaningfulness within the archive. But we shouldn't lose sight of the end result, that the significance of the thing rests in its impact on the social imaginary of humanity.

The role of the media archaeologist is then to unconceal those mundane, ubiquitous and mediatic things so that their exceptional role is highlighted, with a particular attentiveness to how they distribute power and meaning to their constituents. The authors in this special volume provide us with several examples of that approach. It is our hope that they provide a means for which communication scholars can see themselves as making similar excavations, digging past the human actor and into history to see how those contingencies, entanglements and roots are compacted together. This unearthing of the past and media makes it possible for us to understand the conceptual or imaginary of the archaeosphere – the strata of earth which is man-made. This is not just a physical entity, but a conceptual space in which nature and humanity are entwined and meet, where Peters claims media operates as "traffic" between the two.<sup>21</sup>

## Towards a Framework

Jussi Parikka's "beta definitions" of media archaeology might help us circle back around to our goal of laying out a framework of media archaeologies to assist scholars address these complicated questions of communication, culture, and being. Parikka notes that media "are always articulated in material, also in non-narrative

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<sup>20</sup> Kjetil Jakobsen. "Anarchival Society", in *The Archive in Motion. New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices*, 127-154, edited by Røssaak, R. Oslo: Novus, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> John Durham Peters. "Infrastructuralism: Media as Traffic between Nature and Culture."

frameworks” but “the work of assembling temporal mediations takes place in an increasingly varied and distributed network of institutions, practices and technological platforms.”<sup>22</sup> Media archaeology focuses on the *thingness* of the media, without an over-emphasis on just the materiality (as in material culture studies and archaeology proper) or the thing as an actant (as in actor network theory), but jointly interrogates the two. The *thingness* is here referent to its material *effects* not its physical presence and its concern with temporality reflects the relationship between nature and humanity, and things as mediating interactions between the two.<sup>23</sup>

Consider the example of Heidegger’s jar and its thing-ness.<sup>24</sup> What is the essence of an earthen jug? It has to do with the void within the jug. Just as his claim “the essence of technology is nothing technological,”<sup>25</sup> we miss the point when we focus exclusively on media as container, vessel, or channel. Even if we were to explicate all that was possible about the materiality of the jug, we would still miss the social significance of “pouring out,” the relevance of what the void (normally thought of as *within* the jug) makes possible.

This is not to say there is no such thing as non-human media – Peters has already decimated the anthropocentric viewpoint of traditional communication scholars by providing an “elemental” account of the media and bringing the significance of the anthropocene to the forefront.<sup>26</sup> But whereas phenomenologists begin with the human subject, media archaeologists often start their study from the opposite member of this dyad. Nature being mediated by material or “medianatures” as Parikka argues involves a kind of new materialism related to speculative realism and object-oriented ontology.<sup>27</sup> Media archaeology opens communication to the study of non-discursive phenomena by putting the centrality of a study on material entities and actions, rather than the human actor. Yet there may still be bridges to make between phenomenological approaches and the media archaeologies if we think of Dylan Trigg’s “unhuman phenomenology,” as described in the *Dialogues* section of this issue. Putting the centrality of our focus on things dislodges the human grasp on exclusive agency, paving the way to a “vibrancy” of media ecologies,

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://jussiparikka.net/2012/12/16/what-is-media-archaeology-beta-definition-ver-0-9/>

<sup>23</sup> John Durham Peters. “Infrastructuralism: Media as Traffic between Nature and Culture.”

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger. “What is a Thing?” In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Harper Perennial. 1971.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1977.

<sup>26</sup> John Durham Peters. *The marvelous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*.

<sup>27</sup> Parikka, Jussi. “New materialism as media theory: Medianatures and dirty matter.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012): 95-100.

as Jane Bennett describes them.<sup>28</sup> These are ecologies unlike the McLuhanesque relationship of various media eras and the values they engender but instead one in which we take the significance of non-human materiality and its social implications seriously.

The significance and importance of the non-human on communication and the construction of the social inevitably circles back to questions of technological determinism, an often-lobbed accusation for communication scholars who focus on the means of communication rather than just its discursive acts. To this we say media has *always been determinative* in that it *sets the conditions for social possibility*. Anyone with less than stellar vision typically makes use of aids like eyeglasses or contact lenses. We do not think of this as assistive technology, since it has become naturalized to our social experience in a way other assistive technologies have not. But without contact lenses or glasses, many would be unable to discern these words in front of them. The mediatic nature of assistive technology, or its “thingness” arises not merely from the shape or form it takes, but from what it enables. The contact lens is a means which enables a reading, a transformation of vision or possibility. It is determinative in that it has an effect on the perception of the environment. The flow of experience, for example as light flows from the things around us to our vision, is made possible by the materiality and the thing, without which the world is perceived as a blur.

Through these lenses we see that a social construction of the world is incomplete until we acknowledge the material forces at play. These include the various interfaces that we coordinate and cooperate with, from the graphics systems, mirrors, oil and paper. These are some of the examples here in this volume, but we live in an abundance of interfaces that are concealed to a point where they appear as mundane. Peters argues that civilization is a complicated web of infrastructures so ubiquitous that we barely take note of in our everyday experience.<sup>29</sup>

If we are to understand our continued future in the anthropocene as an invariably twisted tale of human/non-human relationships, then we need approaches like media archaeology which reveal these “histories of the present.” They undertake the effort to answer not just “how did we get here” (a historical inquiry) but “why are *things this way?*” This helps us ask questions about a particular arrangement that notes the power dynamics at work, with certain actors privileged over others, with certain embedded intentionalities or politics written into the media, in its history, its design, and its function. These are not just questions of the physical environment,

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

but the social function of media and how it enables or discourages certain arrangements. The media archaeological should then be an expressly critical exercise at heart, one which seeks to question rather than continue the status quo. There is no such thing as the apolitical archive, or the neutral technology. It is important to remember that all (Heidegger's) hammers are political ("to a hammer, everything looks like a nail"), in ways that affect the human and the non-human. By interrogating the history of those things or exploring alternative imaginaries, the media archaeological is able to also provide critical analyses of how the world could be different, from our experience to the very substrata that structures it.

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