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Disciplining Media Studies: An Expanding Field and its (Self-) Definition¹

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This chapter is a modified translation of the foreword to the Handbuch Medienwissenschaft (Handbook of Media Studies, Schröter ed.) published in Germany in 2014. The purpose of this handbook is to provide an overview of the vibrant and heterogeneous field of kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft – media studies as oriented toward humanities and cultural studies interests and approaches rather than those of communication studies and the social sciences, subsequently referred to simply as “media studies.” Some of the categories used to structure the handbook have been generated from the historical discussions in the field; and inevitably, these same historical discussions have shown the difficulties of defining the external boundaries of the field of media studies, its internal differentiations and the way they re-connect to traditional disciplines. It gives an overview of the history of the disciplinary constitution of ‘media studies’ with a special focus on different approaches to disciplinary self-reflection that have accompanied the field from the very beginning.² In this way, it introduces the reader to a variety of sources not very well known in the Anglophone world. Therefore, the penultimate section of this chapter, originally titled “The structure of this handbook” might on the one hand appear to some to be too specific for the current volume. On the other hand, however, it serves as a concrete example of how the field may be configured.

In recent years the field of media studies in German-speaking Europe has broadened and diversified considerably. New institutes, new study programs, high student demand for courses and degrees all show media studies to be a popular field. This is in many ways a reflection of the increasingly important role of media in society: not just television, but first and foremost the omnipresent Internet and newer mobile media. Society describes itself as an information society, a knowledge society, or a media society, and an endless succession of new media developments continue to fire the imagination or fuel anxieties. The media industries are (or at least appear to be) booming, and this is one of the main reasons that so

¹ Thanks to Till A. Heilmann.

² Some references to titles and texts only available in German have been removed from this version of the article. Readers interested in tracing these references can find them in the original version of the article which is also available online at <https://www.metzlerverlag.de/buecher/leseproben/978-3-476-02412-1.pdf>.

many young people choose media studies. In view of this situation, the purpose of a handbook for the field would be to provide orientation by presenting the state of the debate, the different positions, and the differentiations within the subject. On the one hand, the vigor and diversity of media studies makes this an interesting and stimulating undertaking; on the other hand, the frequently noted ‘dynamism’ of the subject makes it very difficult. For some time, this dynamism has also been referred to as a ‘crisis of the discipline’ (e.g. Jungen’s 2013 article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). Such talk, however, is not without precedent. Since its earliest days, *Medienwissenschaft* has subjected itself to a constant process of critical self-examination that has resulted in intense debates about its status and its coherence or heterogeneity. Consequently, this chapter begins by going back into the history of the discipline, in search of ideas about how a ‘Handbook of Media Studies’ might be structured.

On the history of *Medienwissenschaft* and its self-description

Right from the start, the field of media studies has been subjected to debate about whether it is or should be considered a separate discipline, or whether it is an interdisciplinary and therefore heterogeneous ‘meeting place’ for a wide variety of objects, theories and methods. Of course, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive history of ‘media studies’ here. To some extent, this has been done elsewhere (cf. Leschke 2003; Malmberg 2005; Paech 2011; Pias 2011; see also Pias’ contribution to this volume). These reconstructions, however, show—*firstly*—that media studies has differentiated points of origin. These include, on the one hand, the philological disciplines (i.e. literary criticism) that gave rise to many of the aesthetic, historical and hermeneutic lines of inquiry that are important today. On the other hand, they include journalism and communication studies, which contributed methods based on the social sciences. Particularly in Germany, however, journalism and/or communication studies is still a separate subject, one from which *kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft* seeks to set itself apart.

Secondly, as emphasized in particular by Claus Pias (2011, 16f.), media studies can be concentrated into a single question, that of the medial conditions of knowledge—a question relevant to, and already (partially) addressed by, various disciplines. This, however, raises the question as to why there is and should continue to be a separate, institutionalized discipline of ‘media studies.’ Perhaps the discipline has developed in order to constitute a meeting place, one in which “scholars from a wide range of disciplines [...] can talk to one another” (2011, 19) and respond to Pias’ basic question of the media. If so, however, the individual disciplines could in future take back this interdisciplinary territory and, as it were, continue the debate about the question of the media on their own terrain.

Speaking of the future: In 1988, the edited collection *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft (Prospects for a Future Media Studies)* (Bohn et al. 1988a)—a founding document of the discipline, as underscored by Joachim Paech (2011, 52)—offered a seminal

and detailed discussion of the role of media studies and its potential. While the above-mentioned article from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (cf. Jungen 2013), appearing almost exactly 25 years later, sees media studies as being on its way out, the texts in the 1988 collection proclaim it as an ‘emerging discipline’ (even while institutes of media studies were being closed in the 1980s; rumors of its disappearance seem to be a constantly accompany this area of study). The many questions raised by these contradictions merit a more detailed exploration.

The foreword to *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft* also emphasizes the fact that the development process for the discipline had, up to 1988, “not yet led to any widely accepted epistemology of media studies” (Bohn et al. 1988b, 7). So the lack of disciplinary unity is identified very early on. The words ‘not yet,’ however, betray the hope that a unified epistemology may still be achieved. There is a certain tension between this and the following remark in the same text: “In any case there is no denying that we are in the midst of a process of diversification” (1988b, 7). On the one hand, then, there is hope of a “consolidated discipline with an established canon of objects and methods” (ibid., 9), one which might arise from a “debate within media studies aimed at self-understanding [Selbstverständigung]” (1988b, 8). On the other hand, the foreword also describes a diversification of the field, or—and this is not the same thing—it refers to media studies as an “eclectic collective term for [... scholarly] work related in various ways to media” (Kübler, quoted in Bohn et al. 1988b, 9). Already in 1988, the rapid development of the media and the constant succession of new questions seemed to be preventing media studies from stabilizing into a single coherent field (cf. 1988b, 19). The text draws the following conclusion:

Even if some people see it as desirable, for epistemic reasons, to be able to define the boundaries of the discipline [...] in clearer terms and with a firmer material basis, we believe that the ‘open borders’ of media studies, the status quo, offer a great opportunity: the opportunity to actually be a place of interdisciplinarity (1988b, 21).

It remains to be hoped, they continue, that such “interdisciplinary connections can be preserved and expanded” (1988b, 22).

The “excited cycles of self-invention” subsequently observed in media studies (Leschke 2003, 67) can therefore be seen as the nexus of three processes:

- *Firstly*, there is the epistemic (theoretical, methodological) and institutional *development* of ‘media studies’ as an independent subject—and the question of the feasibility or even desirability of this.
- *Secondly*, there is the internal *diversification* of media studies, and whether this diversification will at some point dissolve ‘media studies’ into new sub-disciplines.
- *Thirdly*, there is the *changing relationship* between ‘media studies’ and its neighboring disciplines. Is media studies a ‘site of interdisciplinarity’? If so, how does this fit with its tendencies towards increasing disciplinary autonomy? Is it not the case that other disciplines are each developing their own branch of media research? (This idea, succinctly expressed by Pias [2011], had appeared as early as 1988.) If so, what is the point of media studies (especially if it is rife with internal differentiation)?

In another text from *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft*, Hans-Dieter Kübler also stresses that “media studies, which is gradually becoming more clearly defined and consolidated” (1988, p. 31), should aim for *Verständigung* (agreement or understanding) about its objects, theories and models. He emphasizes that the “most important and urgent task” is *Selbstverständigung* (self-understanding) about its “methodology and methods” (Kübler, p. 35). He continues by warning that:

Such theoretical and methodological clarifications are likely to be more necessary in the future; they would be especially vital if media studies wanted to establish and assert itself as an independent, clearly defined and respected discipline in the densely populated arena of academia—*though opinions may certainly diverge about this, i.e. about the point, the necessity, and the benefit of such assertion*. In its current research and teaching practices, media studies tends to operate, as far as one can discern, as a non-specific, eclectic collective term for all those media-related efforts that cannot be or refuse to be allocated or subordinated to the established academic disciplines, in particular literary studies on the one hand and journalism on the other. The choice of methods applied is correspondingly aleatory; there is no tradition or canon, either with regard to specific objects or within subdisciplines, however these might be demarcated. *And this is not just a good thing; it is also necessary* (Kübler, 32; emphasis added).

The end of this quote suggests (like the foreword quoted above) that the interdisciplinary openness and the sometimes ‘eclectic’ heterogeneity of media studies is by no means just an *Entstehungsherd* or site of emergence (Foucault 1977, p. 150) that needs to be overcome, or a final stage in which the discipline is unraveling, but could be the entirely rational norm for the *interdiscipline* of media studies (for the concept of the ‘interdiscipline’ with reference to visual culture see also Mitchell 1995; and for general remarks on interdisciplinarity cf. Lamont 2009, 202ff.). For it may be an “unjustified assumption that paradigmatic integration is a sign of maturity and is desirable for every discipline” (Luhmann 1992, 453). Perhaps the (transdisciplinary) question of the media could only emerge from an interdisciplinary “shadow discipline,” as Chandler has once described media studies (2009, 737).

One might also wonder how a unification of the discipline is actually supposed to succeed without “attempts at outmaneuvering and outvoting” by its members (Leschke 2003, 84; cf. Klein 1993, 206). Who would or should attempt such a unification? One candidate is the *Wissenschaftsrat*, the German Council of Science and Humanities. Founded in 1957, it is the most important advisory body to the German federal and state governments concerning the development of academic science and research. And in fact this council did present, in 2007, the controversial and much-discussed paper “*Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung der Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaften*” (“Recommendations for the further development of communication and media studies”). The paper, intended mainly as an impetus for debate, nonetheless conceded in regard to the boundary between communication and media studies: “The fact that the edges remain blurred [between these disciplines] does not have to be a shortcoming; on the contrary, it matches the dynamic process of change within the field” (Wissenschaftsrat 2007, 7).

Knut Hickethier's text from the 1988 *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft*, with the programmatic title "*Das 'Medium,' die 'Medien' und die Medienwissenschaft*" ("The 'medium,' the 'media,' and media studies"), also deals with the tension between disciplinary stabilization, *intradisciplinary* internal differentiation, and *interdisciplinary* openness or interaction:

The diversity of the particular, mostly individual beginnings of media studies motivates [...] the consolidation of a subject which is not yet sure of its objects and methods. Nonetheless, something that would call itself or at least consider itself to be media studies has been evolving for nearly twenty years [!] (Hickethier, pp. 51, 52).

Particularly important is Hickethier's remark (cf. p. 55) that any attempt to deduce the systematic coherence of media studies from pre-defined relations between media is condemned to failure, both epistemically and institutionally (here Hickethier is criticizing Werner Faulstich's approach, cf. as a later example Faulstich 2004). The reason for this is the highly dynamic character of the object in question. Because the field of the media is constantly shifting and changing, any attempts to contain the academic discipline tend to obstruct research: "The formation of a system with distinct, non-intersecting subsystems, a system that creates a widely acceptable structure for the academic discipline and simultaneously give stimuli for research, does not seem [...] possible" (Hickethier 1988, 56).

Hickethier then goes on to hypothesize: "The growing breadth of the subject will lead to the development of autonomous subdisciplines within media studies" (p. 57). In the end, however, he also stresses: "Besides an increasingly autonomous discipline of media studies, there will nonetheless continue to be, as a matter of necessity, media research in other disciplines as well" (p. 65). On the one hand, media research in the neighboring disciplines can function as a point of intersection with media studies, but on the other hand it can also threaten to make media studies superfluous. Hickethier therefore proposes a solution that mediates between autonomy and interdisciplinary connection: "Research on the media must always be up to date with the latest scholarly methods and findings. Moves towards autonomy and integration into existing academic disciplines are therefore necessary" (p. 66).

***Medienwissenschaft*, its internal structure, its institutionality and its mediality**

The "increasing autonomy of sub-disciplines" seems to have become a reality, though this has come about in different ways for different sub-disciplines of media studies: While older disciplines such as film studies retain their relative autonomy within media studies (despite ongoing debate about whether film studies is actually a separate discipline outside of media studies), new fields are also emerging. For example, a considerable amount of research focused on sound (often in dialogue with musicology) has been designated as 'sound studies.' These two examples are not chosen at random; they are based on the working groups that have formed within the *Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft* (GfM, Society for Media

Studies), the umbrella organization for *kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft*. At present (early 2014) there are 17 of these working groups, with names such as “Film Studies” or “Auditory Culture and Sound Studies”. The GfM website states:

The GfM’s working groups are the actual center of the society: This is where the subject areas that make up the society are defined, this is where debates about content take place—e.g. in the panels set up by the working groups during the annual conferences—this is also where essential processes of differentiation from other professional societies are undertaken. (GfM 1)

On the one hand, these groups make it possible to discern the much-discussed (and sometimes undesired) internal differentiation of media studies; on the other hand, they also serve to mark the boundaries between media studies and neighboring disciplines dealing with similar problems. The main way to access a discipline is via its institutional framework, and such a framework is available in the form of the GfM’s Website and its publically available documentation

For example, the listing it provides of its 18 working groups suggest both the internal differentiation of the field and its mechanisms of external demarcation. At the same time this listing (for more on lists, see below) shows a certain heterogeneity. Thus working groups referring to a technical medium (e.g. ‘film studies’ and ‘photography research’—here there is already an interesting distinction between the designation of ‘studies’ on the one hand and ‘research’ on the other) are listed alongside those that reference economic aspects (‘media industries’), cultural aspects (‘popular culture and media,’ ‘gender/queer studies and media studies’), or disciplinary aspects (‘media philosophy’). This does not indicate a deficiency, but makes it clear that the development of an academic discipline—and media studies is, after all, no longer *such* a young discipline—takes place through bifurcations and multifarious advances.

The tabular presentation in the strategy paper “*Kernbereiche der Medienwissenschaft*” (“Core areas of media studies,” Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft 2008), which outlines the fields of media studies, brings together a heterogeneous variety of concepts. Making this observation is by no means the same as “celebrating the heterogeneity of research,” as Geert Lovink (2012, 82) comments in a text criticizing ‘media studies.’ Instead it is simply a statement of the obvious.

	Media theories and their methods	Theories and methods of media history	Theories and methods of media aesthetics
Society	Actor Network Theory Deconstruction Discourse Analysis Gender-Theories Communication theories Constructivism Critical theory Media-Economy Media Psychology Media Politics Media Law Semiotics Systems theory	History of media systems and the public sphere Functional and structural history of media Institutional history of media History of media “programming”	Aesthetic forms and social structures: Pop culture, mass culture, etc. visual communication Theory of form and genre, esp. for film and radio
Technology	Network theory Media Archaeology and Tech-nogenesis Universals of media Technology	History of media of storage, transmission, and broadcast-, as well as well as separate mediatechnologies: print, photography, film, radio, television, computer, Internet; History of information technology	Aesthetics of production and reception (conditions of perception), Formal aesthetics of media technologies, research into intermediality und interactivity
Culture	Cultural studies Media anthropology Media philosophy Psychoanalytic cultural theory Theories of individual media General media theories	Histories of the form and content of individual media: print, images, film, television, radio, computer, Internet; history of trans-medial and/or intermedial genres, forms and discourses	Media-arts, media philologies, aesthetics of individual media forms: photography, sound, film, text, visual culture, ,aesthetically-based theories of general and individual media; Game studies, visual communication, in-termedial forms

The role of institutions such as the GfM and its working groups, or its media presentation and infrastructures draws attention to what might be called the *material culture of discipline formation and stabilization* itself. Thus Hickethier’s demand (2003, 134)—that “media

studies has to develop a stronger voice in relation to organizational politics”—is by no means external or secondary to the discipline. In this sense the GfM has been greatly successful in that it has been able to admit so many members in recent years, and that these numbers clearly exceed the membership of the professional organization for communication studies, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikation*. Again, this is hardly a sign of the imminent disappearance of media studies (cf. Jungen 2013).

Another example of the institutionality of the discipline is provided by the institutes (or departments, ‘teams,’ and in the case of Weimar, faculty) of media studies at German-speaking universities. Particular aspects of the diversification and also stabilization of the discipline are reflected in the designations that different institutes of media studies give to their professorships. It can also be observed, however, that shrinking budgets, coupled with a simultaneously ‘increasing breadth of subject matter’ (Hickethier), mean that the professorships announced have ever more general job descriptions (‘The person appointed shall represent the subject in all its breadth in research and teaching’), simply because there are often insufficient funds available for internal differentiation within institutions.

Another important way in which a discipline exists institutionally, of course, is in terms of its programs of study. Not surprisingly, there is a section corresponding to this on the website of the GfM. There again, the tension between disciplinary unity and internal differentiation is being negotiated. On the one hand a general ‘profile’ of what a study program in media studies should be is given; on the other hand, it is made clear that the various programs of study at different universities have different emphases. A ‘database of media studies programs’ gives a detailed overview over the numerous programs on offer in Germany today. In its 2007 document on the future of media studies in Germany, the *Wissenschaftsrat* (2007, 8; see also pp. 89-90) recommended that there should be no bachelor programs, only master programs, in *kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft*. The central argument was that on the level of bachelor, a ‘basic’ education in a traditional discipline (literary studies or art history, for example) should be offered. Only with these traditional objects and methods firmly in place, can the obviously more abstruse questions of media and mediality be addressed. This suggestion, in itself another interesting example of how the ‘interdiscipline’ of media studies might relate to more traditional disciplines, both conceptually and practically, was harshly criticized by nearly all representatives of German media studies. It was not put into practice, and currently, there are various bachelor programs in media studies in Germany.

It is important to mention the relation of these programs of study specifically to ‘practice’. This is another aspect of the self-definition of a discipline, but of course it is also an example of external pressures exerted by politics on the universities. Especially after the Bologna Process (“harmonising the architecture of the European Higher Education system” largely through reforms implemented the first decade of the 21st century) there was increasing pressure for universities to develop programs of study that directly qualified students for jobs. For media studies, this meant the preparation of students for jobs in media industries, and not first and foremost for university positions in research and teaching. The priority thus shifted from an effort to reproduce the discipline of media studies to the qualification of students for

work in media and related industries. (The task of the self-reproduction of the discipline of course remained, but it stayed in the background, and was gradually transferred to externally funded research in the form of research centers and graduate schools, as described below.) The teaching of practical skills was demanded by students themselves, who were applying in ever greater numbers for media studies programs, and thus placed new expectations on departments of media studies. People who were able to teach these curricula had to be hired, potentially reducing the money available for research. Additional costs arose for technological equipment, for example cameras and film studios. Still, an isolation from “practice” is often bemoaned by students who mistake media studies programs for those of film schools and art academies. Here another fundamental problem for the self-definition of the discipline of media studies becomes visible – but now not in relation to traditional humanities, but in relation to practical teaching. How much ‘practice’ can be admitted without disrupting the disciplinary identity of *kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft*, whose discursive norms are ultimately derived from the humanities?

Lastly, large externally-funded research facilities, such as the collaborative research centers (*Sonderforschungsbereiche*) and research training groups of the German Research Foundation, are important for the development of a discipline. They highlight particular questions and concepts, foster interdisciplinary meetings, and recruit young researchers. Last but not least, their publishing output, which is at times astounding in its sheer quantity, but often also in its quality, plays a large part in determining what could be called the “medial performance” of the discipline. By “medial performance” we understand the discipline in terms of an ongoing series of media products: articles, books, presentations, websites etc. It is therefore no coincidence that the success of media studies since the mid-1990s has been accompanied by various research centers (‘Screen Media’ and ‘Media Upheavals’ in Siegen; ‘Media and Cultural Communication’ in Cologne), graduate schools (‘Intermediality’ and ‘Locating Media’ in Siegen; ‘Automatisms’ in Paderborn; ‘Media Historiographies’ in Weimar) or other types of research centers (‘Media Cultures of Computer Simulation’ in Lüneburg or the ‘International Research Center for Cultural Techniques and Media Philosophy’ in Weimar).

Dynamism (*Dynamik*) is one of the most frequently used words on the GfM website; there is talk of the “dynamism and polymorphism of present-day media studies,” and of the “dynamic development of the discipline.” We read: “At the same time, both the media themselves and media studies have developed extremely dynamically within the last two decades. Even just a few short keywords related to the genesis of the discipline of media studies can show this dynamism.” (GfM 2). And yet it seems that the dynamic relationship between disciplinary stabilization, intradisciplinary internal differentiation, and interdisciplinary openness or interaction (possibly resulting in transdisciplinary lines of inquiry) is by no means specific to media studies. While the extensive debate on the theory of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity cannot be elaborated here, reference may be made to a noteworthy essay by Robert Post (2009), which not only gives a helpful overview of the topic, but also emphasizes two points that are particularly relevant here.

Firstly, the debate about media studies outlined above expresses a very obvious desire for disciplinary homogeneity, for a pre-formed template (*Zuschnitt*; Jungen 2013), for a “widely accepted epistemology” (Bohn et al. 1988b, 7), for an “integral media studies” (Tholen 2003, 38f.), for a “media studies as a separate discipline with clear-cut content, methods and tasks” (Rusch 2002a, 7), for an “integrative form” (Rusch 2002b, 71). There are also calls for “media studies [...] as a unified discipline” (Viehoff 2002, 13), for the “centering of a terminology that comprehensibly describes its field in the circle of academic disciplines” (Schanze 2002a, v), and for a “unified epistemology” (Schanze 2002b, 260). In a different context, Post (2009, 751) emphasizes that this is characteristic of *all* disciplines, and that it can be understood in terms of a regulative idea (even if there may be disciplines in which uniformity seems easier to achieve than in others, cf. Leschke 2003, 75). The desired disciplinary unity is an ideal to aspire to, a spur that motivates debates on *Selbstverständigung*—but it remains ultimately unattainable. For in reality, the situation is different:

And yet, of course, most of us realize that the ‘notion of disciplinary unity is triply false: minimizing or denying differences that exist across the plurality of specialties grouped loosely under a single disciplinary label, undervaluing connections across specialties of separate disciplines, and discounting the frequency and impact of cross-disciplinary influences’ (Post 2009, 751, quoting Klein 1993, 190).

It remains to be seen whether or not the attempt to resolve the tension between disciplinary ‘centering’ (Schanze) and intradisciplinary/interdisciplinary divisions through the concept of the regulative idea will be successful. In any case, this tension does not seem to only affect media studies. It is constitutive of the disciplinarity of disciplines in general (for the concept of ‘disciplinarity’ cf. Messer-Davidow et al. 1993).

Secondly, Post underlines the materiality of disciplines that has been hinted at above, both in a (broader) institutional sense—“Questions of disciplinarity are [...] frequently entangled with questions of departmental politics”—and in a (narrower) medial sense: “Disciplinary publications are important gatekeepers of disciplinary norms” (Post 2009, 753). Though this cannot be discussed in detail here, the above reference to the GfM website shows the pre-eminent role of such media and their organizational and institutional integration for the performance of a discipline. This has to be crucial, particularly from the point of view of media studies, and particularly if “the only battle cry that can be agreed on is *The Medium is the Message*” (Grampp 2011a, 184; emphasis in original; see also Leschke and Friesen in this volume). Media studies obviously has to somehow organize itself as a discipline around the ‘medium’ and therefore McLuhan’s early approach of ‘understanding media’ remains central for the self-definition of the discipline – this can be seen in recurring re-readings McLuhan (see De Kerckhove et al. 2008 and also Grampp 2011b, 205-211). But even if the strategy of McLuhan to put ‘the media’ at the center of discourse seems unavoidable for media studies, this does not mean that his specific conception of media as “extensions of man” is followed in the different currents and schools. Early on, McLuhan’s notion was criticized by Hickethier (1988, 52) and from a different vantage point by Kittler (cf. Grampp 2011b, 206/207). But however one positions oneself in relation to McLuhan, the obvious centrality

of media for media studies leads inevitably to the question of the mediality of media studies itself. Or as Pias (2011, 23) notes, in general terms, that “any thinking about media is itself part of a contingent media history.” This brings with it a range of implications:

- Even the emergence of media studies can be described as an effect of media development. First and foremost, the university disciplines must at some point react to media discourses, which have become increasingly difficult to ignore, and to the public problematization of the media. The advent of the mass press led to the emergence, around 1916, of newspaper studies (as an offshoot of economics). The first wave of media studies—which was actually referred to as such—is linked with the increasingly important role of film and especially television since the 1960s (e.g., Hickethier 1988, 59). The second major development that pushed media studies into the foreground is almost certainly the spread of the computer and digital media since the early 1990s. Thus the different ‘generational advances’ (cf. Pias 2011, 7–11; see also his contribution in this volume) of media studies correspond to major changes in the media.
- Also, media studies use technical media to constitute its objects. For example, Paech’s historical presentation (2011) repeatedly underlines the role played by the video recorder (but also the photocopier, cf. Paech, 38f., and Mort 1989) as a condition of possibility for theatre studies and film and television studies—an idea that goes back at least to Schanze (1972).
- Finally, media studies needs particular media in order to exist as an (inter-)discipline. Journals such as the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* (Journal for Media Studies) are in themselves media performances (and serial performances) of media studies. Seen in this light, the often-problematized internal differentiations of media studies appear also an effect of its previous institutional stabilization. This stabilization led to the creation of new jobs, new dissertations, conferences, and a large volume of publications, e.g. monographs, new journals, or edited volumes. The resulting expansion and diversification of knowledge, in turn, destabilizes the unity of the discipline (until, perhaps, new processes of institutionalization take effect, and so on): “Unidisciplinary competence is a myth, because the degree of specialization and the volume of information that fall within the boundaries of a named academic discipline are larger than any individual can master” (Klein 1993, 188). This is a ‘problem’ that is exacerbated rather than diminished by the further accumulation of information by means of an endless succession of new media performances (based on technologies with ever greater capacity for storage and distribution), e.g. in *Digital Humanities* or *E-Humanities*. Thus the crisis of media studies asserted by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (cf. Jungen 2013) and others is actually a “crisis of success” (Pias 2011, 15; for disciplinary crises cf. also Klein 1993, 198f.)—but in many ways, it is a case of the ‘success’ of media technology in general, a development which fundamentally affects *all* disciplines.

After these reflections, the question to be answered becomes clearer: What part does a ‘Handbook of Media Studies’ play in all this?

The ‘handbook’ as medium

“Whereas classics remind us of our origins and may not be immediately relevant, handbooks are there to orient research here and now. It is the *Weltanschauung* of handbooks that, in this sense, seems to reflect more directly what is considered of prime importance in the field at the present” (Malmberg 2005, 28). Handbooks, alongside both ‘classics’ and introductory texts (cf. Pias 2011, 21), are all media performances that participate in the production of the discipline, its self-descriptions and genealogies. They are part of *processes of canonization*. Malmberg stresses the fact that handbooks have a connection to the present; he argues that they attempt, as it were, to pause the state of play at a particular point in time in order to orient research. Following the above reflections on disciplinarity, the constantly invoked turbulence and ‘dynamism’ of media studies virtually *demands* a temporary pause, and one that lasts for more than just a moment, in order to present its heterogeneous and fissured texture. An orientation of this kind promises to be helpful for introductory courses at the bachelor’s level, but also as an entry point for more in-depth seminars at master’s level. A handbook is, in this sense, a sort of simplified map for an otherwise confusing terrain. One attempt at this was undertaken previously in the *Metzler Lexikon Medientheorie / Medienwissenschaft*, edited by Helmut Schanze and published in 2002. Since then, twelve years full of dizzying ‘dynamism’ have passed, making the publication of this quite differently conceived handbook seem almost inevitable.

So how should a handbook be structured internally—especially when it is concerned with media studies, that “scarcely definable conglomerate” (Jungen 2013)? As a response, one can quote Hackett’s early warning:

Seeking to make a taxonomy of the media serve as the basis for the constitution of an academic discipline contradicts [...] the principle of a dynamic of scholarship, because it inevitably leads to the establishment of a canon of objects, which then only needs to be filled out on the basis of a previously determined system. [...] This kind of order would be contrary to [...] the rapid changes to which the media themselves are subjected, and also to the changes in the epistemic interests of the academic disciplines (1988, 56).

A structure based on a previously established taxonomy deduced from ‘first’ principles therefore seems most inappropriate, because—instead of reflecting the situation—it can have a highly exclusionary effect. In extreme cases, particular positions may be excluded as “irrational, ‘nonsensical,’ abnormal, or just hot air,” as Faulstich comments (2004, 14f.), paraphrasing other authors’ judgments and condemnations. In keeping with this, Faulstich distinguishes between ‘media theories’ and ‘pseudo media theories’—a demarcation which may be legitimate for introductions and overviews, but which of course is also exclusionary. Friedrich Kittler’s media archaeology is one of the theories Faulstich refers to as a ‘pseudo media theory’. Whatever one might think about Kittler’s work, it is questionable at the very least to exclude, in 2004, a highly influential approach, which has generated a large number of important studies, many of them arguing against it.

It is equally untenable to claim to be presenting an unprejudiced description simply of the way things are. Even if one does not wish to impose a pre-existing system or pattern on the situation at hand, the publication of a handbook is of necessity a situated undertaking, which inevitably leads to blind spots and omissions. Even back in 1988, the foreword to *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft* stated: “Herein lies a ‘credo’ of this collection of essays: it is good for the development of the discipline if we *cease* to assume, with reference to the dynamism [!] and instability of the discipline, that everything is, for the time being, equally right, equally productive and equally justified” (Bohn et al. 1988b, 8, emphasis added). But this brings us back to the question: What criteria can be used to exclude what is ‘not right’? What should one focus on? What committee decides this? Clearly some people regard certain approaches (perhaps simply because of the quantity of texts referring to them) as very ‘productive,’ while others classify them as irrelevant.

There seems, therefore, to be no alternative to a *slightly* systematized, unavoidably situated overview (cf. also Leschke 2003, 69). This may be unsatisfying, but is, in the editor’s view, the most acceptable way to deal with a problem that is ultimately insoluble. In keeping with this, the present handbook follows a suggestion from Bruno Latour. He attempts to circumvent the apparently unavoidable “choice [...] between certainty and confusion, between the arbitrariness of some a priori decision and the morass of endless differences” (2005, 34) by instead compiling a list of controversies (cf. Latour., 21-25). “[T]o regain some sense of order, the best solution is to trace connections *between* the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy” (Latour 2005, 23; emphasis in original).

Structure of the handbook

Following Latour’s suggestion, the structure of the handbook in question is based on a list of ‘dynamic’ controversies. These can be classified as controversies about theoretical modeling, i.e. “Media Theories” (Part II), controversies about specific objects, i.e. “Individual Media” (Part III), and controversies about the boundaries of the discipline itself, i.e. “Intersections” (Part IV). These sections, and the topics included within them, are indicated in the table below.

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Part I contains two articles arising almost inevitably from the discussion of the theory of the discipline explored above: one on professional organizations, and one providing an overview of some (not all) introductions to media studies, examining how these works segment and format the field. To give some preliminary orientation, Part I also includes two articles offering a historical overview of the concept of the medium on the one hand, and of media studies on the other.

Part II is concerned with a number of sub-fields, some overlapping, some mutually indifferent, and others engaged in open conflict. These intradisciplinary interrelationships are structured by specific theoretical languages and conceptual frameworks, which cannot be

unified by any meta-taxonomy. The only thing they have in common is that they revolve around the concept of the media, revealed in all its heterogeneity. It could be said that this is about different variations on general theories of the media, each of which propose different methods for media analysis. The heterogeneity of the concept of the media is repeatedly bemoaned, e.g. by Schmidt (2002, 56), who ascribes the heterogeneity of media research precisely to differing concepts of media. Even his synthesis, though, has not led to any consensus on this matter (for the heterogeneity of the subject area of media studies in comparison to literary studies cf. Leschke 2003, 75). *Firstly*, however, it is unclear how a homogenization of the concept could be achieved without—to borrow loosely from Foucault—a kind of disciplinary “discursive police.” *Secondly*, it is entirely possible that this much-lamented heterogeneity, and the regulative idea of eventually eliminating it in favor of consensual unity, might be the reason for the productivity of this discussion, and one of the driving forces behind media studies research.

After all, similar structures are found in other disciplines. Communication studies, for example, seems to have “severe problems of identity,” and is described as being “a long way from [...] having a ‘clear, unanimously accepted definition’ [...] of its key concept, ‘communication’” (Gerhard Maletzke, quoted in Schmidt 2002, 60). Perhaps a ‘medium,’ to borrow loosely from Star and Griesemer (1989), serves as a kind of ‘boundary object,’ i.e. a discursive element that takes on meanings ascribed to it from various directions, while nonetheless possessing a basic homogeneous core (‘being in the middle’ in the most general sense). For this very reason, it can both hold together a field of research and also differentiate it: “[W]e find that scientific work neither loses its internal diversity nor is consequently retarded by lack of consensus. Consensus is not necessary for cooperation nor for the successful conduct of work” (Star and Griesemer, 388; see also 393 for the definition of ‘boundary object’; cf. also Galison 1997, 781, who stresses that it is precisely its “disunity” that can give an academic discipline its strength; cf. also *Wissenschaftsrat* 2007, 11).

Nonetheless, some of the ‘general media theories’ presented seem to be closer to the core of media studies, and in this limited sense ‘genuine’ media theories. Others are obviously borrowed from ‘external’ disciplines. The handbook works with both types of theory (and their intersecting sub-types). On the GfM website we read that media studies seeks to develop “theory of the media” “which attempts to define the characteristics of the media or of mediality in general with reference to research in other disciplines” (GfM 3; though it seems that the plural, ‘theories of the media,’ would be more appropriate). For this reason, the theories covered in the handbook are not artificially hierarchized; instead, the connections *between* the controversies are repeatedly highlighted (connections are also established across Parts I–IV in the handbook).

Part III comprises a list (no doubt controversial in itself) of ‘individual media,’ without subjecting this list to any pre-existing taxonomy (a procedure rightly rejected by Hickethier back in 1988). Brief historical outlines of the development of each medium are given (with references to the corresponding literature), as well as presentations of the specific theories of individual media related to them, and the methods of media analysis following from these theories. Some media are established or central, and, thus, more important; others are more

marginal or divergent. Here too, the aim is to reduce pre-judgment in the selection process, and here too, connections between the individual media or theories of individual media play an important part. In light of their recent and dramatic increase in importance, special attention is paid to digital media (in their various forms). Particularly in view of ongoing international scandals concerning digital surveillance, and questions of data security, a look into the future of quantum computers and quantum cryptography is important for such an overview.

While Parts II and III can be related to internal differentiation within the discipline (in constant tension with attempts to homogenize it), Part IV lists a series of *Schnittstellen*, or “intersections/interfaces with neighboring disciplines,” the language used in the GfM paper “Core Areas of Media Studies.” The paper continues:

Interdisciplinary collaboration has also given rise to specific theoretical developments and descriptive models, such as those in the fields of media informatics, media law, media economics, media ethics, media education, and media psychology. These theoretical approaches have in some cases led to the development an independent interdisciplinary methodology, which has opened up productive research perspectives (GfM, 2008).

Part IV takes up this interdisciplinary emphasis, and covers a number of these intersections with neighboring disciplines. Like media studies with its “integral transdisciplinarity” (Leschke 2003, 71), other disciplines have developed comparable questions about media and/or mediality. This is also true for “shadow disciplines” (Chandler 2009, 737) or ‘indisciplines’ (cf. Mitchell 1995, 541), such as visual culture, gender studies, or postcolonial studies. Sometimes, in the German context, they have been inspired to develop questions about media by media studies itself, or they have actively collaborated with this discipline. Sometimes new sub-fields arise from these contacts. The difficulties presented by the classification of the heterogeneous field of ‘media studies’ are clearly revealed in the decision to discuss theatre studies among the intersections, while film studies appears in Part III in the chapter on the individual medium of film. This decision was based on the fact that there is a separate society for theatre studies (Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft, <http://www.theaterwissenschaft.de/>), while film studies is represented as a working group within the GfM.

A final point to be mentioned is that the handbook is clearly focused on the German-language debate, but still pays some attention to neighboring European countries, to the US, and in some cases, to other parts of the world (for this problem, cf. Malmberg 2005). This is not intended to reflect, yet again, the idea of a special German path (*Sonderweg*) in media studies (cf. Pias 2011, 14f.; cf. Hickethier 2003, 134, who emphasizes the fundamental internationality of media studies), although *kulturwissen-schaftliche Medienwissenschaft* and the peculiar division into media studies and communication studies tend to be phenomena specific to German-speaking regions. Instead, this is once again due to the medial fact that a printed publication can contain only a limited amount of information. Here reference to the numerous overviews of the American, British, French etc. debates must suffice (cf. inter alia Downing 2004; Durham and Kellner 2009; Kolker 2008; Nerone 2013). In recent years, however, the widespread reception of certain German positions (such as those of Friedrich Kittler), e.g. in the US (cf. Winthrop-Young 2011), has in turn ensured that there is a greater

awareness of the relative independence and importance of *kulturwissenschaftliche Medienwissenschaft*.

Conclusion

For all the difficulties of defining and categorizing ‘media studies,’ an overwhelming number of publications—including the handbook—clearly advocate for an independent discipline of media studies. The paper produced by the *Wissenschaftsrat* stresses “the universality of the medial: the fact that there can be no communication without media, and that without communication there can be no society, no culture, no economy” (2007, 11). *The medium is the message*. As long as society is strongly oriented towards media (whether it is explicitly recognized or not), as long as media constitute an important ‘problem’ (including the possible future introduction of media as a school subject in Germany), media studies will remain indispensable. And their heterogeneity is, in the first instance, “simply the form in which academic disciplines react to real-world complexity” (*Wissenschaftsrat*, 11). Insofar as the mediality of the world is constantly changing, expanding, and becoming more complex, it is hardly to be expected that “media studies [...] [will understand] itself as historically relativized and [...] [will] at a given time deliberately [...] work towards its own dissolution” (Faulstich 1979, 18, who feared already in 1979 that a development of this kind was foreseeable). Instead, media studies is “obviously a milieu in which inventions thrive” (Leschke 2003, 76)—a pleasingly optimistic note on which to conclude.

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