Editorial

Media Arts Revisited: MARs

Media Arts Revisited, or MARs as we have come to think of this issue, pays homage to the creative, practice-based, materialist legacy of experimental media production in Canadian Communication Studies. It is arguable that the materiality of the media has mattered to Canadian communication scholarship, a materiality that manifests itself in many forms, including a concern with policy and political economy, with social and political practices, with the formal properties of media forms and formats, and finally with the embodied aspects of communications. There is also, in this context, a strong and vibrant strand of inquiry into media that draws upon this legacy to explore its aesthetic, poetic potential. As scholars in our field, such as Michael Darroch, Janine Marchessault, Paul Heyer, and the late Donald Theall have indicated, Edmund Carpenter, and Jaqueline Tyrwhitt and Marshall McLuhan were concerned with the media poetics and played with them on the pages of their famous journal, Explorations.

There is also an historic connection between the media and the arts in terms of government initiatives. In the 1970s, then Minister of Communications, Francis Fox, launched the Telidon project, the Canadian precursor to the Internet and kin to France’s Minitel system. To better understand how Telidon might serve the public, Fox invited media artists to use the Telidon system and to create original media works. Nell Tenhaaf, included in this issue, was one of the artists who took part in these legendary, yet understudied, Telidon field trials. Artist-run centres, including A-space (Toronto), Western Front (Vancouver), Powerhouse (Montreal), Plug-In (Winnipeg), and the Banff New Media Centre (Banff), all conducted early experiments with electronic, networked communications. Now many more artist-run centres, such as Interaccess (Toronto), Oboro, Studio XX, and La société des arts et technologies (Montréal), have been implicated in a burgeoning media arts scene across the country.

Canadian universities have produced a productive cross-fertilization of ideas between scholars and those with training in the arts, but also quite often computer software programming. Simon Fraser University holds the Centre for Digital Media and the School of Interactive Art and Technology; the Ontario College of Art and Design has committed to its Digital Futures Initiative; Ryerson University boasts The Rogers Communications Centre; and the University of Western Ontario continues with the expansion of programs in digital media. More and more communications scholars not only partake in such research but also run “labs” where they are responsible for maintaining equipment, training students, and conducting research. More recently, there has been a turn towards questions of “knowledge mobilization,” digital humanities, and sponsored programs in “research-creation” with which academics who work from a cross-disciplinary basis are encouraged to “get on board” and try out the potential...
of the new media for the dissemination of research. We do not view this as the death of the book or the journal, as we know it, but rather part of the on-going transformations that have always been a part of the experimental mandate of the university.

The articles included in this special issue grapple with the tensions and challenges of working in this terrain of media aesthetics where the form and format, and the process of production may not lead to the traditional article, but equally may result in an exhibition, an artwork, a piece of software, an interactive object, or a new way of presenting scholarship in electronic form. The issue includes both articles and long and short reports by academics and researchers working in the field who were invited to both describe their work and to reflect on it. Few of the contributions are written as critical reflection on someone else’s work; instead, they are written by the practitioners themselves, many in the first person.

What one has then, in this issue, is a snapshot of media arts practices as they actually exist. It is our hope that the issue will stand as a testament to the potential for communications to accommodate not only academic forms of scholarship, which are vital, but also these experiments in media forms and formats. This is not a complete list, of course, of all the activity that is happening across the country. But it is a preliminary archive of some of the ways that media theory is being brought into dialogue with media practice. Many of these articles contain extensive online documentation, which we invite you to peruse.

We thank all of the participants in this project for their support, as well as all of the anonymous reviewers who have offered engaging and insightful comments about the articles. Last, but certainly not least, we thank the staff at the Canadian Journal of Communication, most significantly Michael Dorland, Editor.

Note
1. For more on Telidon, see David C. Coll (2004) and Robert E. Babe (1990).

References


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