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# Building a more Infrastructural Media Studies

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This inaugural issue of *MAST* provides new opportunities to shape what media studies does and what it includes. The editorial board consists of an amazing group of artists and academics who work on everything from urban media to haptic media. What I will be arguing here is that we should not forget the infrastructures. As Susan Leigh Star pointed out more than two decades ago, infrastructures are often the boring things of everyday life (Star). They are the cables, the electricity, the policy documents, and so on that hold everything together. Media technologies are not impactful without that glue, and I hope future research in this journal can examine and theorize how our infrastructures of communication play a major role in everything from artistic practice to social justice to relationship maintenance.

My own approach to media studies has shifted over the years to reflect this new consideration. Back in the early 2010s, when I was finishing my dissertation about the mobile application *Foursquare*, I focused on what was clearly a form of media: a mobile social media application. I looked at media as artifacts that people use to build ties in relationships, and social media were particularly interesting because they broke down the mass media/personal media dichotomy that had been so influential in media studies (Baym). Traditionally, media

studies often separated media into one-to-many forms (i.e. mass media like newspaper) or one-to-one forms (i.e. personal media like letter writing or face-to-face communication). Social media did not fit that model. Social media like *Facebook*, *Foursquare*, *Twitter* and so forth were not mass in the traditional sense, but neither were they one-to-one because they let people share with much larger networks.

My more recent work in media studies, however, has departed significantly from the traditional focus of media studies. I still study mobile media in a sense, but I often do so by focusing on the infrastructures that enable mediated experiences rather than the media themselves. My second book combined the two approaches by looking at traditional media (e.g. mobile apps) but also the infrastructures (e.g. cellular networks, Wifi, and GPS) that enabled those media forms to work as they did (Frith, *Smartphone as Locative Media*). My third book was even more of a departure and examined Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technologies as what I argued was a core infrastructure of identification for the Internet of Things (Frith, *A Billion Little Pieces: RFID and Infrastructures of Identification*). That book examined what I called object communication, but it did so by specifically analyzing infrastructures. And here is where I want to make my contribution to this important first issue of *MAST*: I want to argue that the study of infrastructure should be a key part of media art and theory going forward.

Media studies has fairly recently begun to look more and more at the technical infrastructures that make media possible (Starosielski, Parks and Starosielski). Possibly the leader in pushing in that direction has been Lisa Parks, whose populist approach to infrastructure “emphasizes how people come to access, imagine, and understand infrastructures, not only by demystifying their seamless operation in everyday life, but also by

understanding them as material forms—sites, nodes, parts, pieces, objects to be seen, engaged with, handled, felt, and investigated” (Parks 64). In other words, an infrastructural approach to media involves researching the hardware and software that make media possible. Drawing from the transdisciplinary field of infrastructure studies, it involves studying the mundane and making the invisible visible. Doing that work can push us outside our comfort zones as humanists and social scientists, but I argue it is necessary work for media studies going forward.

An infrastructural approach to media involves looking beneath the interfaces that are the more typical focus in the humanities and social sciences. It involves asking how things work and what types of communication or artworks are enabled or constrained by everything from hardware to software to cultural economics. Additionally, an infrastructural approach complicates what we even mean by media. It requires looking at larger networks and viewing the interfaces and information we interact with as the tip of a very large iceberg that involves everything from software to internet cables all the way down to electricity and radio waves. And beyond the “hard” infrastructures of materiality, an infrastructural approach to media can also involve diving into how companies license APIs to grant access to data, how startups are purchased to strengthen data infrastructures, and so forth (Wilken).

Infrastructures are built not to be noticed, to fade into the background of our everyday life, but they constrain and enable in consequential ways; they contain biases that influence who can communicate and move freely and who cannot (Graham and Marvin). As John Durham Peters said, “Whatever else modernity is, it is a proliferation of infrastructures” (Peters 31). This new journal has an opportunity to both theorize and expose through practice

the importance of uncovering how those infrastructures shape the media that are so essential to how people live their lives.

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