

David Gunkel / Paul A. Taylor: *Heidegger and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity 2014.

Taylor and Gunkel's *Heidegger and the Media* provides a platform for the authors to critique their own field of media studies. Heidegger is ordinarily not thought of among the philosophers most pertinent to media studies. And even so, with such a title, one's natural assumption might be that this book focuses on Heidegger's later work engaging with technology. However, Taylor and Gunkel follow the arc of Heidegger's career to discern the impact of his thought on media. In their view, Heidegger gives us a framework for thinking about the media that exceeds conventional approaches in the field and gives us a glimpse into the essence of mediated being.

At the core of the authors' Heideggerian perspective on media is the belief that to understand how media mediate, we have to understand the relationship of the medium and its context. They take up an aspect of that context in each chapter. The first chapter is about Heidegger's thinking on language, which is, after all, the original form of mediation. Language, and the analysis of the first chapter come up throughout the rest of the book as the authors examine the apparent tendency to mediate everything. Chapter 2 turns to Heidegger's distinctive opinion on truth as contrasting correctness. This is perhaps the most philosophically challenging part of the book but is key to understanding what Heidegger has to tell us about media. The third chapter deals with Heidegger's ontology. Here the authors make the clearest application of Heidegger's thinking to our media saturated society. In the final chapter, the authors unite the themes from earlier and examine what Heidegger's ideas mean for the contemporary state of media technology.

In writing the book, the authors adopt Heidegger's strategy of intensely questioning our most basic assumptions about media. It is important to note, though, the definition of media used through the book is generalized: it is not just newspapers, radio, TV, the Internet etc. Since our contact with the world is increasingly through representations, the authors consider media in a very broad sense. Two themes result from their questioning that stand apart. First, that like so many other fields, media studies takes the correspondence theory of truth as an unquestioned assumption, and second, that the field routinely approaches media in such a way as to miss its essence.

The first theme mimics a position Heidegger is well known for – his objection to the correspondence theory of truth. Unsurprisingly, in media studies the correspondence theory boils down to: *such and such a statement is true if and only if it accurately represents the facts of the matter*. The speeches George W. Bush delivered leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 are a good example. The statements about stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction did not represent the fact of the matter and so, by the correspondence theory, they proved false. Heidegger accepts the correspondence theory is very useful, but objects to its unquestioned status. For Heidegger, the correspondence theory is simply not sufficient by itself because it assumes something prior - the existence to which assertions must correspond.

The process of revealing being is at the heart of Heidegger's theory of truth. For Heidegger, it cannot be the case that a statement is true so long as it accurately reflects an object because a statement pulls the object's being to the fore from the environment in which it is entangled. For example, think of modern recording techniques in pop music. Recordings are typically done piecemeal and then mixed together so that the musicians do not necessarily have to perform at the same time or even in the same place. The recordings, then, correspond to an idealized performance which never actually occurred. Heidegger argues that correspondence depends on the availability – or “openness” - of the original thing. It is the original access to being which judgment presupposes in determining correct representation. Hence telling the truth

is not correctly representing but is rather revealing being. And so media stops being a mode of communication via representation and takes an active part in revealing being which we then see media as representing. This facet of media, the authors argue, is largely ignored by media studies.

The authors smoothly transition from the highly theoretical distinction between truth and correctness to the application to media that comes from that distinction: that a philosophically informed understanding of media reveals a media landscape that media scholars – and the public – typically ignore. Media studies, the authors argue, begins with an emphasis on the particular in one way or another. How people interact with tablets, how people interact with smart phones etc. But the proliferation of media is beyond saturation; media is so pervasive, there is simply no way to isolate it. While our lives are becoming more and more mediated, the diversity of mediums grows as well. Whatever the object of these highly focused media studies projects, it is only ever a small part of the media landscape and the hyperfocused approach is bound to miss important facets of large-scale mediation. Media scholars have not missed that fact either - and addresses it as a collapse of distance. Telecommunications appears to overcome spatial barriers and allows us to connect to people across the world creating a “global village”, to borrow McLuhan’s term. The authors, following Heidegger’s own assessment of global telecommunication, argue that the reduction of distance does not bring us the same familiarity with objects that we might hold in hand. For Heidegger, nearness has little to do with the shortness of distance. Rather nearness is a type of familiarity with things that are fully available to us. Both of these approaches, the authors argue, miss the essence of media. That is where, in the authors’ view, Heidegger’s ontology comes in handy.

Heidegger’s ontology emphasizes examining the things that are closest to us – the things we typically encounter while going about an average day – which Heidegger calls ready-to-hand. As the authors point out in their explanation of Heidegger’s ontology, the ready-to-hand is difficult to understand in the wild because everything ready-to-hand is invisible in a way – we think of our projects and the work to be done rather than the tools. The classic example is a carpenter’s use for a hammer. The material makeup of the hammer hardly occurs to the carpenter so long as the hammer is available for driving in nails. Similarly, when we watch television, the physical television disappears, in a way, while we are watching the program. Generalizing, we make use of equipment and pay no attention to it otherwise. The authors argue the very same for media. Media only works so long as it is eclipsed by the content it delivers. But the usefulness, or instrumentality, of the ready-to-hand object depends on other equipment. Returning to the example, a carpenter’s hammer is not so useful without nails and boards also; the television is useless without power and a source for channels. A Heideggerian analysis of instrumentality in general, argue the authors, has the advantages of both media studies approaches – addressing the particular media and the interdependence of media – and might actually approach the essence of media.

Supposing the authors are correct in their evaluation of the current state of media studies, the authors bring up several interesting problems for the field. The Heideggerian approach to media might not be problem free though. After all, Heidegger said little about the media explicitly so the authors are relying on implication from his work in others areas. However, the possibilities the authors point out are fascinating. The authors do a good job of introducing the applicable parts of Heidegger’s thought and point to where they best apply in the study of media. This book’s most serious weakness is actually a result of these strengths and the limited space of the volume. But then, this book does not read as if it is an exhaustive study in the convergence of Heidegger’s philosophy and the study of media. Rather it is an exciting crash course in both fields with an eye on the possibilities at their intersection.

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