

## 2 On the Problematics of Building a Formal Media System, or, Why Media Drive Me Crazy

*Marie-Laure Ryan*

I remember the very nice times I spent in Växjö for intermedial conferences and I remember the exciting discussions we had. But during these discussions, I always asked myself the question, what are media? And I think that everybody had a different idea of what media are, but we were still able to come together and discuss intermediality. So here I've decided to put down on paper, or maybe explain, why I have so many problems with the concept of media. I think it's no coincidence that Lars Elleström worked at Linnaeus University. I think of his work as an attempt to do for media studies what Linnaeus did for botany and zoology, or maybe what Mendeleev's periodic table of elements did for chemistry. It was to give a solid theoretical basis to media studies, a basis that functions as a taxonomy. Most taxonomies take the form of a tree and this is the case for Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*.

Figure 2.1 is a taxonomy of all the things in nature that show you the classification of the red fox, the dog, and the wolf. A tree, as you probably know, is a hierarchical system with distinct levels. Here you have nine different levels on the right side, and at the bottom, you have the types of things that are actually found in the world. Further up you have more and more abstract categories, and these abstract categories should show what the items listed below have in common. The categories are mutually exclusive. If an animal is a bird, it cannot be a carnivore. If it is a carnivore, it cannot be a primate, even though some primates do like meat. The difficulty of designing a taxonomy is finding elements that belong on the same level thanks to a significant shared feature. For instance, you cannot have a level that has birds, carnivores, plants, red foxes, and mammals. This would lead to the kind of Chinese taxonomy that Jorge Luis Borges has made fun of. I'm going to recount it here because it's so funny.

In its remote pages, it is written that animals are divided into (a), those that belong to the Emperor, (b), embalmed ones, (c), those that are trained, (d), suckling pigs, (e), mermaids, (f), fabulous ones, (g), stray

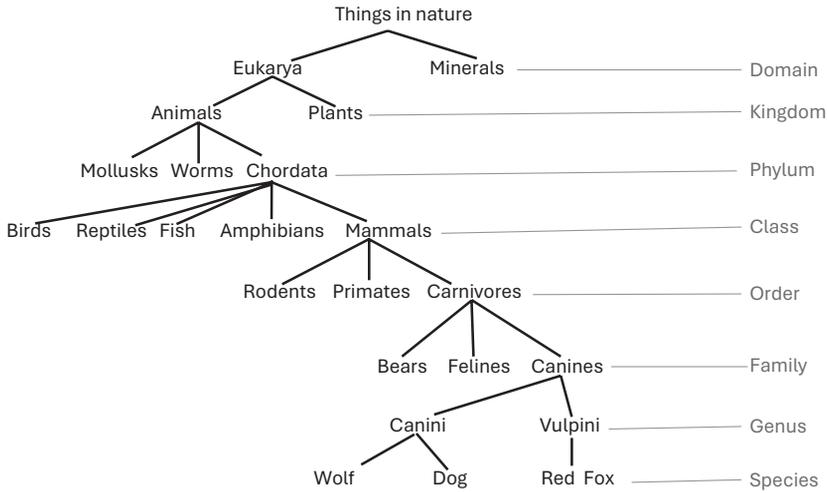


Figure 2.1 A classification system of things in nature, based on the tree-shaped taxonomy used by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae*.

dogs, (h), those that are included in this classification, (i), those that tremble as if they were mad, (j), innumerable ones, (k), those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l), et cetera, (m), those that have just broken the flower vase and (n), those that from a distance resemble flies. (Borges, 1942)

This is exactly what you don't want to do. (Note that through the etcetera category, all the items that are not in the classification are in this classification.)

When you deal with the system of nature, your terminal categories are things that are actually found in the world. This does not mean that classification is a simple straightforward affair. For instance, when a plant is found that seems to be new, botanists may debate whether it really is a different species or maybe a variant of a known species that is a little bit different because of soil conditions or climate. On the next level up, some families may be merged or new families may be created. For instance, I've been interested in botany for many years and when I first started looking at flowers, there was a family called Liliaceae. But nowadays it has been split into two, so there are the Liliaceae and the Amarillydaceae. Taxonomies are constantly revised, but it doesn't change anything to their basic shape. Tree-shaped taxonomies like this one have survived since the 18th century and they have proved very useful.

The same cannot be said of media. To this day, there is no widely accepted taxonomic model of media. In fact, there is no consensus as to

what a medium is and what phenomena qualify as media. The main problem with designing a media system is that your basic categories are not things in the world, they are concepts designated by the words of language. The words of language are ambiguous, polysemic, and used in many different ways, especially the word medium, which etymologically designates what is in the middle between two things. There are lots of phenomena that can be described as being in the middle between two things. The concept of media has been popularised by Marshall McLuhan, but his definition was far too broad. He called media an “extension of man”. This may be true of media, but it is also true of every tool that was ever devised by man, for instance, hammers, wheels, scarves, hair dryers, and computers. There is a laboratory at MIT called the Media Lab, but according to Wershler, Emerson, and Parikka (Werschler et al., 2022), its founders had no clear idea of what media are. They just selected the name because it sounded cool and they admit that. The purpose of the Media Lab is to invent the future by designing technological innovations, but these innovations do not necessarily have anything to do with communication. I think a minimal requirement for defining media is that it *must serve the purpose of communication*. This eliminates hair dryers, scarves, hammers, and lots of other things, but it retains as media such technologies as television, radio, film, photo, the printing press, and computers.

But are media exclusively technologies? Not according to the definition in Webster’s dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition covers two items. First, a medium can be a channel or system of information, communication, or entertainment, and second, it can be a material or technical means of artistic expression. The first definition supports two approaches to media, one social and cultural and the other technological. The second definition, by foregrounding expression, inspires an artistic and semiotic approach to media as art forms. The social or cultural approach deals with the role of media in society, the behaviour of the consumers, and the institutions that guarantee their existence. The focus of this approach will be media of mass communication such as the press, television, radio, and the internet. We refer to this conception of media when we speak of “the media” either as guardians of freedom of expression or as hopeless propagators of fake news. The technological approach, which is also known as media archaeology, is a mostly German movement inspired by Friedrich Kittler, who himself was inspired by Michel Foucault, and it is represented by such scholars as Wolfgang Ernst, Siegfried Zielinski, and Finnish scholars such as Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka. Media archaeology embraces an evolutionary view of media, by which technologies are replaced by other technologies. But media archaeology refuses to regard this evolution as a narrative of progress. On the contrary, these scholars show a marked preference for “dead ends, losers, and inventions that

never made it as an important material product” (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011, p. 3). Among these losers are things like the camera obscura of the Renaissance, the View-Master, which was a device from the 1950s that showed three-dimensional images, or maybe the circular panoramas of the 19th century, which can be viewed as the precursor of virtual reality.

Media archaeology has inspired the creation of laboratories, where obsolete technologies are kept and studied. For instance, there is the Media Archaeological Fundus at Humboldt University in Berlin, where they keep tape recorders, typewriters, radio instruments, and computers. But they also keep scientific instruments of more dubious media status, such as oscilloscopes and Geiger counters. The Media Lab at the University of Colorado in Boulder focuses on a single technological medium, the computer, and all of its applications. They keep old computers and their programs, for instance, games or texts of digital literature, that no longer work on current computers. While media archaeologists are interested in the social impact of technologies, they tend to ignore the meaning of the messages that are sent through these technologies. In so doing, they continue the tradition of Claude Shannon, the pioneer of informatics, who defines information independently of any semantic consideration.

The approach that relates to the second definition restores the consideration of meaning by regarding media as means of expression. The phenomena considered to be media will be primarily art forms such as music, dance, visual arts, and literature. The inspiration for this approach is Lessing’s book *Laocoon* (1766/1887), in which Lessing contrasts the expressive potential of the spatial arts, such as painting or sculpture, with the temporal art of a poet. But if media are equated to art forms, is a concept of *medium* still necessary? Why not just ditch the concept and just speak of different kinds of art? Lessing, after all, never speaks of media.

A comprehensive media theory should not be limited to artistic forms of communication. It should instead incorporate all three conceptions of media, the social-communicative, the technological, and the expressive. But is such an integration possible? Wolfgang Ernst, the media archaeologist, thinks it is not. He writes, “media taken as physical channels of communication and as technical artifacts must be analyzed differently from cultural texts, art historical images, classical music, and works of art” (2011, p. 251). Even though Ernst comes from the humanities, he was only too glad to sacrifice artistic media and their meaning and to concentrate instead on technologies and their mode of operation.

The work of Elleström was an attempt to prove him wrong. He also came from the humanities. His concept of media was primarily an artistic and semiotic one. He wanted to give a theoretical basis to interart studies, the studies of the relation between artistic media. But he also wanted to take into consideration the material and technological support that allows

individual media objects to exist. In other words, he did not want to limit media theory to a theory of the kinds of art. The comprehensive nature of his view of media is expressed in this quote:

A medium should be understood in a broad way as the intermediate stage of communication; thus the term *medium* here refers not only to mass media, but also media used in more intimate communication; not only media based on external technological devices, but also media based on corporality; not only premeditated media, but also casual media; not only media used for practical purposes, but also artistic media.

(Elleström, 2018, p. 270)

### Towards a Media Taxonomy

The first task in building a media taxonomy is to decide what will be the basic units of the system. With natural species, the basic units are the kinds of animals or plants in the world. But media taxonomy deals with abstractions, and these abstractions are not necessarily the lowest level of classification because below media there could be submedia, genres, and individual artefacts. The way to proceed is to start with a concept that is widely recognised as being a medium because the system must to some extent respect common usage. Once one or a few obvious candidates for medium status have been identified, the next step is to decide what the other categories that belong to the same level are.

To see what belongs to the same level and what does not, let's look at a list proposed by Roland Barthes of the various manifestations of narrative. He writes:

Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated *languages*, whether **oral** or **written**, *pictures*, **still** or **moving**, *gestures*, and an ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, **short stories**, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, **pantomime**, **painting**, stained glass windows, **movies**, local news, conversation.

(Barthes, 1975, p. 237 [emphasis added])

Here I have marked in the same way elements that seem to me to belong to the same level, even though you may disagree with my choices. Italics indicate the substance out of which media are made, like gesture for pantomime, picture for paintings, or language for legends and fables. Bold is the level below; it indicates basic media. Underlined are genres rather than media, so they occupy the lowest level. Clearly, we cannot base media taxonomy on all the elements of the list; this would result in something like Borges' Chinese taxonomy. Now let's look at what Elleström considered

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to be media. In his article, “The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations” (2010b), and in his book, *Transmedial Narration* (2019), he proposes several loose, informal lists of media. Here are some of these lists, together with their descriptors.

- [A]: “loosely demarcated media conceptions: literature, text, image, music, visual art, comics, television news, film, speech and so forth” (Elleström, 2019, p. 47).
- [B]: “media types”: “comics, written texts, computer games, literature, music, images, speech and gestures” (2019, p. 53).
- [C] “basic media types”: “speech, written text, still images, movies, and sound recordings” (2019, p. 107).
- [D]: “media types: paintings, instrumental music, mathematical equations, and guided tours” (2010b, p. 15).

These lists try to capture our intuitive sense of what media are, but they do not illustrate a single homogeneous analytical level. List A has both literature and text, but literature is a sub-species of written text, mentioned in B. The items of C are very basic. The items of D are very specialised, and many other items are situated in between. These elements can be arranged higher hierarchically into a tree diagram:

In regular font (Figure 2.2) are the categories listed by Elleström as media, and in italics are my own additions. I added these concepts in order to hold the tree together, so as to have no dangling branches. On the first line, we have the substances of media – what they are made of: language, sound, image, and gestures. These substances are more diversified on line two. For instance, language is divided into written text and speech, image is divided into still images and moving images. Line three has mostly

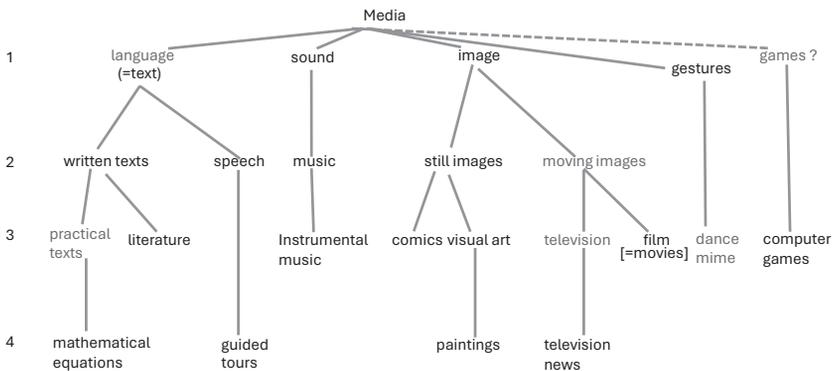


Figure 2.2 Elleström’s examples of particular media arranged as a tree.

different kinds of arts, as well as practical texts and a couple of technological categories. Line four has more specialised forms of communication, we could call them genres. However, the tree is not symmetrical like botanical or zoological trees. For instance, there is no level 2 item for gestures and games, and no level 3 item for guided tours. In the case of literature, instrumental music, film, or computer games, there are no items on level 4, but this is because I have chosen not to show them. In fact, there are many genres of these items.

I also have a problem with computer games. While they may be regarded as a kind of art, I am not happy at all with placing “games” on level 1; it is a type of human activity and does not belong with language, sound, image, and gestures, which are semiotic substances. Arranging media on a tree-shaped diagram requires some arbitrary moves because you need to have separate levels and you need to have something on every level. Let’s call this the tyranny of the diagram.

### Comparison with Elleström’s Model

The tree in Figure 2.2 is my own attempt to organise the items that Elleström lists as examples of media. It is by no means his own model. Rather, his model looks like this (Figure 2.3).

As I have argued, establishing a list of *basic media* is a tricky process, but let us imagine that it can be done. Basic media occupy the top left of the diagram; the items are taken from Elleström’s lists of basic media, and they do not distinguish substances, like gestures or speech, from art forms

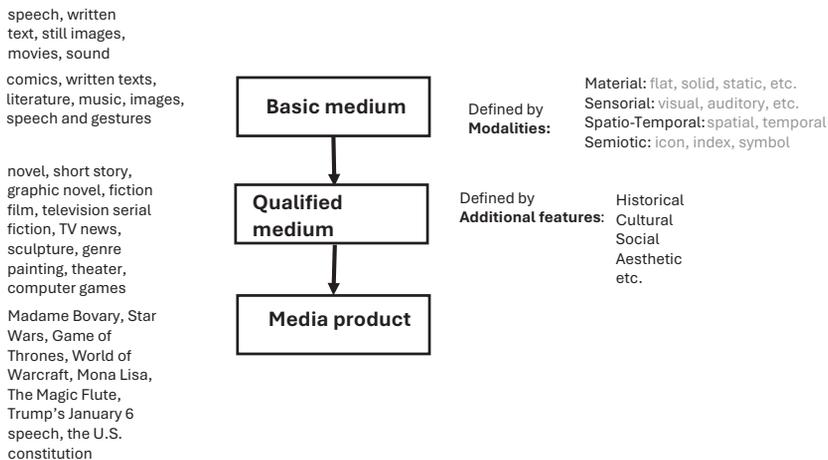


Figure 2.3 A diagram of Elleström’s system of media concepts.

like comics and literature. These basic media are defined by what Elleström calls *modalities*. Modalities are distinctive features that can be shared by media, but each basic medium is defined by a unique matrix of modalities. There are four types of modalities: material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic. The list of material modalities is open-ended, but the other three are limited: the sensorial by the human senses, the spatiotemporal has two categories, space and time; and the semiotic corresponds to the three kinds of signs distinguished by Charles Sanders Peirce. Every basic medium must be defined in terms of the four kinds of modalities. For instance, still images are solid, flat, and static on the material component; visual on the sensorial component; spatial on the spatiotemporal component; and iconic on the semiotic component. Moving images are solid and flat; visual; temporal; and iconic. These are Elleström's suggestions; I have problems with some of them. He describes moving images as solid. Certainly, film reels consist of distinct frames made of solid matter, but projected images are fluid. Elleström describes written language as spatial, but Lessing considers poetry to be a temporal art. I think that written language is both spatial and temporal. It is spatial because it's printed on a page and you can see it all at the same time, but you have to process it one word at a time, and if you process it in the wrong order, you get different meanings. And finally, I have a problem with ascribing a semiotic modality to all media. There are media such as dance and music which are certainly forms of communication, but they cannot really be said to consist of signs (though they may occasionally contain signs), and I would have a hard time classifying them as iconic, symbolic, or indexical. Elleström thinks that music is iconic, but I believe it is only iconic in very rare cases (such as imitating a cuckoo). A case could be made for its indexicality (it causes emotions), but most of the time music signifies in ways that do not belong to the three categories of Peirce.

One level below basic media is what Elleström calls *qualified media*. They are further distinguished from each other not only through the basic media they represent but also through additional criteria: historical, cultural, social, aesthetic, etc. If we look at the list of examples proposed by Elleström of qualified media, namely novel, short story, graphic novel, fiction film, television series, TV news, sculpture, genre painting, theatre, and computer games, they look a lot like genres. Elleström says it explicitly: "Genre may appropriately be called submedia" (2019, p. 117). This assimilation of submedia to genres reveals the difficult problem of distinguishing media from genre. In many cases, we have indeed a hard time deciding if a specific type of communication is a genre or a medium. Take the case of email: some scholars will call it a genre of digital technology and other scholars will call it a submedium. But I still think that by erasing the distinction between media and genre, Elleström gets away too easily. Certainly, genres must be realised by media, so they constitute a subcategory

of media. But there is an important distinction between media and genres. Genres are defined by conventions and they are largely culture-specific. Media are sets of expressive devices determined by their material, semiotic, and spatiotemporal nature, and they transcend cultures. Genres are restrictions on communication, while media offer affordances and possibilities. Genres can easily hybridise, especially literary ones; think of tragi-comedy or auto-fiction. But media combine rather than hybridise. So if there is a sharp theoretical distinction between media and genres, genres cannot be reduced to the status of submedia.

On the lowest level are what Elleström calls *media products*. They are not types of communication but actual tokens – for instance, a specific novel, an actual speech, or a certain game. If we restrict ourselves to basic media, qualified media, and media products, then we have a classic tree-shaped taxonomy.

However, this tree (Figure 2.4) is missing an additional component that Elleström regards as necessary to the definition of any basic and qualified media. This component is *technical media*. Technical media are “any objects or bodies that realize, mediate or display basic and qualified media” (Elleström, 2010a, p. 5). So how do we put the technical media on this chart? And what is the role of technical media in the whole model? Is every basic or qualified medium associated with a technical medium, so that there are no simple media, but only pairs of media? For instance, we could say that the medium of literature is associated with the technical medium of the book, the medium of music with technical media corresponding to musical instruments, the medium of computer games with the technical medium of the computer, etc. This view solves the problem of reconciling media as channels of transmission with media as means of expression. Each means

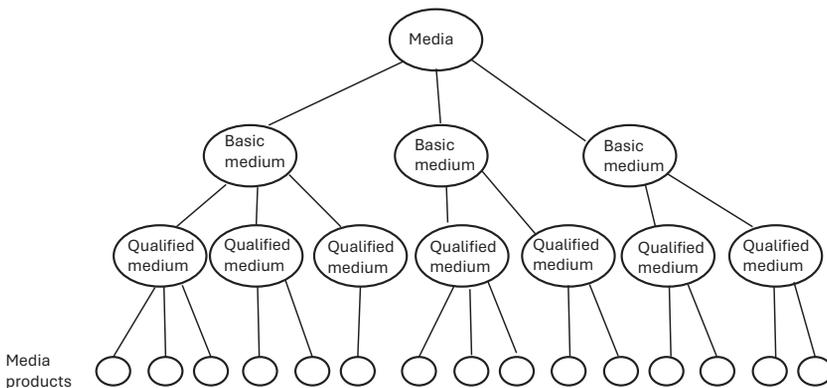


Figure 2.4 Elleström’s system of media concepts arranged as a tree.

of expression comes together with a technical channel of transmission. But there is no one-to-one connection between the two. A given mean of expression can have several channels of transmission. Take a written text. It can be disseminated through books, through the internet, through audiobooks, or through Kindle. Moreover, technology plays a role not only in the transmission of media products but also in their production.

Take the medium of text (Figure 2.5). In order to produce it, you have a choice between using computer authoring software, pen and paper, or a typewriter. These are the means of production. With the means of transmission, you have a choice between a printing press or digital technology, which results in a book, Kindle, or text on the web. But if these materials are recognised as media, this leads to an infinite regression. It takes trees to produce the paper that allows writing. So are trees a medium? Or should we recognise as media only complex technologies, such as the typewriter, the film, or the gramophone, but not the materials they are made of?

Another problem with adding technical media to basic and qualified ones as the means of production or transmission is that some of the basic media are inherently technological. This is true of film, photography, television, and computer games. Take the case of photography. It is produced by a technology that consists of an automatic capture of light patterns. The medium cannot be separated from the technology because the technology *is* the medium. By contrast, if we regard man-made images as a medium, this characterisation is independent of technology. You can use technologies as varied as oil painting, ink drawing, or computer software. With film, another inherently technological medium, we have a technology of production, the recording camera, and a technology of transmission, the screen and the system of projection. However, some media need technology for production, but not for transmission. One example is live music which you just listen to or paintings which you can look at directly. But

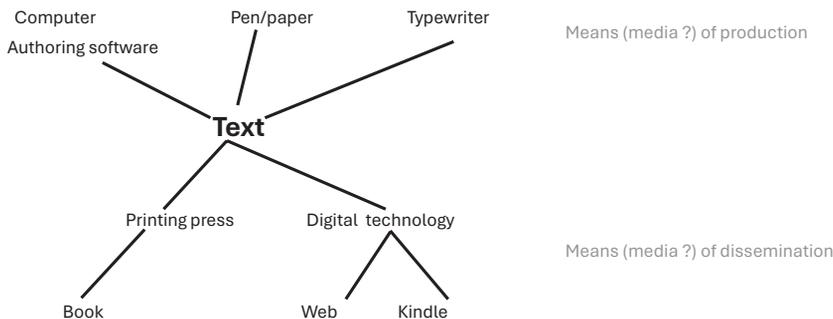
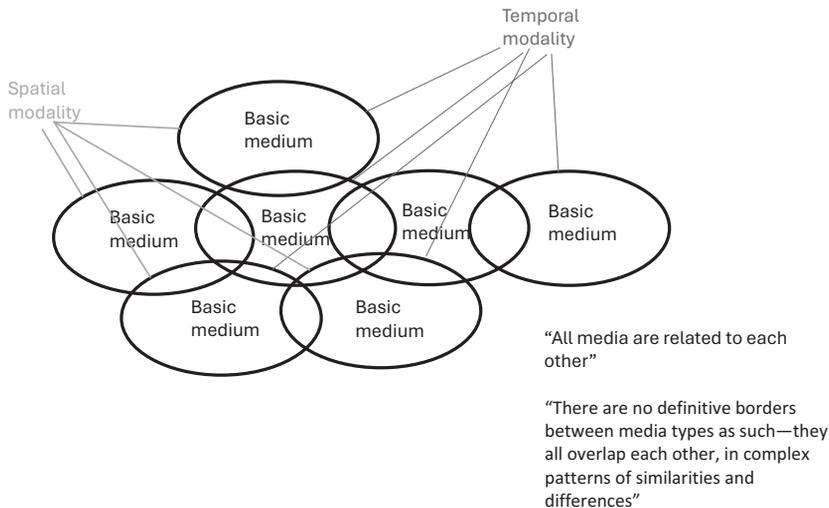


Figure 2.5 Means of production and dissemination for the medium “text”.

paintings can also be mediated by technology, for instance by photos in an art book. In this case, the content of a medium is another medium, to paraphrase McLuhan. Elleström handles the problem of inherently technological media, such as film and photography, by distinguishing them as art, which is regarded as a qualified medium, and as technology. So, film can be an art, or it can be a technology and, therefore, a technical medium. But the application that Elleström proposes for cinema does not work for media such as comics, dance, or literature, whose definition is not technological, but rather a matter of substance. Media must be treated individually rather than being fitted into the same mould, in contrast to natural species in a Linnean taxonomy. This means that they cannot be neatly arranged on a tree diagram, because trees presuppose symmetrical and uniform relations between their elements.

### From Tree to Forest Network

Another reason why a tree diagram is an unsatisfactory representation of media relations is that trees present their elements as discrete categories, and they cannot show overlap between these categories. They are therefore not a very good basis for the study of intermedia or interart relations. But this was the principal interest of Elleström, and explaining the possibility of such relations is the main purpose of his media system. As he writes, “all media are related to each other” (2010a, p. 5), and “there are



*Figure 2.6* Elleström’s conception of media overlap.

no definitive borders between media types as such – they all overlap each other, in complex patterns of similarities and differences” (2019, p. 4).

This relation can be represented like this (Figure 2.6). What makes media overlap each other is the fact that the modalities that describe them are not medium-specific, but rather general properties that can apply to many different media. For instance, all media that have spatial modalities overlap each other on spatiality, and all media with a temporal modality overlap each other on temporality. Some media are both spatial and temporal, so they overlap in both modalities. Media not only share individual modalities, but they can also share the whole matrix of modalities that define other media. This explains the phenomenon of multimedial media or multimodal media. For instance, comics consist of both still images and written texts. So they overlap with the more basic media of still image and written text. The most complex media are those that encompass the largest number of basic media, for instance, the theatre, film, or computer games.

Here (Figure 2.7) is another way to represent the relationship between media. Because of the multiple arrows that connect levels, this diagram is no longer a tree.

In this model, the top row consists of some of the modalities, and the second row displays basic media. The tangle of lines between these two rows shows how modalities define basic media. For instance, to use Ellerström’s system of modalities, written language is spatial, temporal, visual, symbolic, flat, and solid. On the third level are categories that correspond to art forms. The solid arrows between levels two and three show mandatory relations, and the dotted arrows represent optional ones. For instance, literature *must* consist of written language, but it can have still

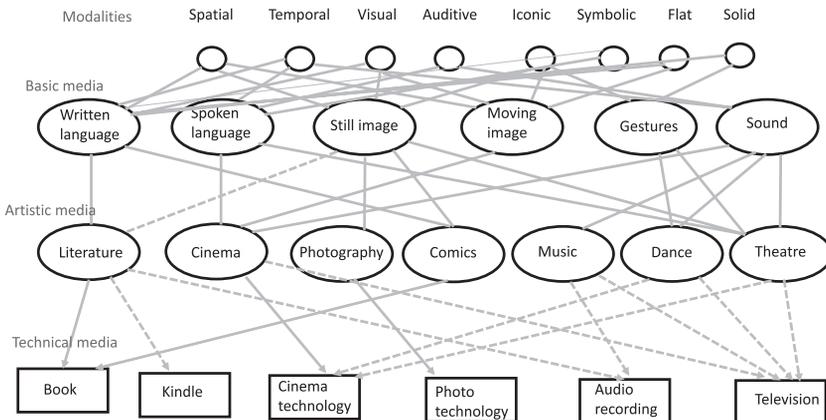


Figure 2.7 A non-tree diagram of Ellerström’s system of media.

images as illustrations. On the bottom (level four) are the technologies of transmission. When the technology is the same as the name of the art form, this means that the art form is technologically defined. For instance, I have cinema and cinema technology or photography and photography technology, just as Elleström distinguishes these media as art and as technology.

An art form may have a primary technology, for instance, the book for literature. But it can also have secondary technologies. Literature can be transmitted through a Kindle, through an audio recording, or through the internet. Television is a secondary mode of transmission for most of the artistic media of the third line. The internet would play the same role. You may notice that in the diagram some art forms like music, dance, and theatre, do not have a solid line that links them to a technology because they are not technologically defined. This means that they can be experienced live rather than in a mediated form.

### **Beyond, or Within, Media Borders**

One issue on which I do not agree with Elleström is when he claims that media do not have definitive borders. The phenomenon of intermedia relations is often described as a transgression of media boundaries. But in most cases, I think that this metaphor is inadequate. Consider the following list of intermedial phenomena that I have borrowed from Irina Rajewsky, who has written a great article on the issue of media borders. Here follow some examples of what she regards as intermedial phenomena: filmic writing, ekphrasis (the description of a medium in another medium), the musicalisation of literature, film adaptations, novelisation, visual poetry, illuminated manuscripts, sound art, opera, comics, multimedia shows, multimedia computer texts or installations, and so forth (Rajewski, 2010, p. 55). According to Rajewsky, intermediality illustrates three distinct processes:

- 1 Adaptations; the content of one medium represented in another one.
- 2 Media combinations (=multimodal media: opera, film, theatre, comics).
- 3 Intermedial reference: literary writing that imitates film or musical structures, painting that imitates photos, ekphrasis, embedding of a medium in another one.

I would like to add a fourth type of intermediality:

- 4 Complementarity: the phenomenon, described by Henry Jenkins (2006) as transmedia storytelling, telling a story through multiple media.

Do these categories involve the dissolution of media boundaries? I don't think so. Categories one and four involve a connection between very

well-defined media. In category one, you have a novel and use the plot to become a film, but you don't have a blurring of novel and film. Category two is a combination of resources and not a blurring of boundaries. There is a distinction between combination and blurring. Category three is the imitation of a medium by another medium. For intermedial reference to be recognised as such, the user must have a clear idea of what the imitating and the imitated media are. Blurring of boundaries requires a continuum, but media are defined by distinct features, such as modalities and technologies. I agree with Rajewsky when she writes that blurring of boundaries occurs on the level of genres, rather than on the level of media. This is because genres are made of conventions, and it is easy for a genre to adopt the conventions of another, as you have in tragi-comedy, auto-fiction, or visual poetry. But media are made of resources that derive from their material, semiotic, sensorial, and spatiotemporal substance. There cannot be a blurring of boundaries between time and space, between vision and hearing, between iconic and symbolic signs, or between all these categories together. As Rajewski writes, "Due to its material and medial conditions, dance theatre cannot truly become painting – just as painting itself can never become truly photographic" (2010, 62). The only situation where one can speak of the blurring of boundaries is when two media present the same components, but they differ from each other through the prominence of one component. For instance, you could say that both the theatre and musicals involve spoken language, gestures, and images. In addition, musicals have singing. While singing can also occur in the theatre, it is mandatory in musicals and optional in the theatre. So the two media are part of a continuum. When there is mostly singing, the medium is musical, for instance, *West Side Story*. When there is mostly spoken dialogue with only an occasional song, the medium is theatre, as in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. But you could have a production with half singing and half-spoken language, and people would disagree whether the media product is a play or a musical. There you would have a blurring of boundaries, but I think that such cases are very rare.

It is now time to conclude. While I'm saying that Elleström is trying to devise a model that will be to media studies what Linnean taxonomies are to botany or zoology, I am not saying that he is proposing a tree-shaped taxonomy and that it does not work. On the contrary, Elleström's work is notorious for its avoidance of diagrams. Why is that? I think he realised that no diagram can capture the relations between media, submedia, modalities, and genres in their totality. But this does not mean that diagrams, whether tree-shaped or not, are useless. I am personally a great fan of diagrams, and many diagrams can capture certain meaningful relations. Media theory is not a tree. Rather, it is a forest that contains many trees, as well as diagrams of other shapes.

## Questions and Answers

- Liviu Lutas:* You talked about narrativity. Where would you place that in relation to media in general?
- Marie-Laure Ryan:* Well, it's not a medium, because it can occur in a variety of media. I think it's a type of semantic structure. Narrative is defined by what the text is about. It needs to have characters, events, causal relations, and all these are semantic categories. But of course, as Roland Barthes and later Elleström also have shown, the semantic structure that makes a narrative a narrative is independent of media and it is also independent of the kind of signs that are used, even though some signs have better affordances to tell stories. You have symbolic narratives expressed through language, you have visual narratives, and I don't think you can have narrative expressed exclusively through indexical signs, but you certainly have lots of indexical signs in movies. So that's my point, that media is one problem and narrative is another problem. Of course, they interact, and it's very interesting to compare the narrative potential of different media. I think that in order to understand what media can do, narrative is a very useful point of comparison.
- Jarkko Toikkanen:* Something that I got to talking about with Lars before his passing is that if we consider the intermediality of experience instead of the intermediality of communication (or phenomenology instead of semiotics), the senses are fundamental media too. Not just communicative modalities. I've done research where I defined a fundamental difference between phenomenology and semiotics, which is then something that cuts right through the heart of how to make the distinction between media and modalities in the first place. And it's obviously too big a question to lay out there in the open today. But if there is anything that you'd be interested in talking more about, the disciplinary difference between phenomenology and semiotics, for instance, then I'm always open and ready for that kind of discussion.
- Marie-Laure Ryan:* So you are asking me how I envision the relation between semiotics and phenomenology?

*Jarkko Toikkanen:* In a way, yes.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Well, I don't think I'm really prepared to answer this question. I'm sure media have a semiotic dimension, I mean, what kind of signs they are made of. The phenomenological dimension would be a part of what I call the social, the cultural aspect of media, what role they play in our lives. But is that really phenomenology? Or what, in your view, is a phenomenological approach to media? What does it do?

*Jarkko Toikkanen:* Well, the phenomenological approach would be about how media are experienced or what kind of experience media give rise to, instead of what kind of communication they are about. What kind of information do media transmit? That is semiotics. Semiotics is about transmitting information and communication whereas phenomenology is about experience.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* So in a purely semiotic approach, you would describe the cinema by saying that it's made of iconic signs and symbolic signs and movement. But in a phenomenological approach, you would say that it leads to a greater emotional involvement of the spectator than a novel or maybe that it's more difficult to follow the plot of a movie than that of a novel because there is so much that is not expressed. Is that what you regard as phenomenological?

*Jarkko Toikkanen:* Well, that's kind of like the traditional view of phenomenology, that it might be more about the affective or the emotional potential, this kind of intensity and embodiment as well, than about semiotics. But that is perhaps too crude a distinction between phenomenology and semiotics and something that would need to be revised by way of case studies. On that, I would very much agree with Lars and all the people in Växjö who are very practical about the approach and sort of always engage with case studies to see how exactly a case study takes place and what kind of communication takes place in there. So I'm very much for that as well, but we need to do a comparative analysis by way of these tools that we each might have, to see where the differences exactly might lie.

*Beate Schirrmacher:* Thank you, Marie-Laure Ryan, for this talk and for discussing the difficulties of trying to map the complexities of media which do not only consist of a tree but of a whole forest, I couldn't agree more. By pointing out the system or the different categories that Lars Elleström has presented, you see that they do not really fit into a taxonomy or create a tree, which is why I wouldn't describe it as a taxonomy. I usually explain it to the students as a kind of grammar that can be applied to explain how actual sentences that are spoken work or connect different kinds of information. These basic media types, the qualifying aspects, and the technical devices help us place the complexity or place the different levels of media in each individual media product to keep track of the different levels. One aspect that I didn't agree with in your presentation is that, from how I understand the framework of Lars, the individual media product is centred. What you showed is how difficult it becomes to trace what media are when we think from the concepts and try to map everything that is there, every kind of mediated communication. But I understand the model of Lars' as starting with the individual media products, which have the aspects of the technical device and one or several basic media types, which can be described with the modalities, and then these qualifying aspects of specific uses, conventions, contexts, which helps me to understand why I recognize this specific text and image combination that I see on my screen as, for instance, news or a graphic novel. I see these categories as much more flexible when we try to apply them to specific media products, instead of trying to create one tree.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Yeah, I can see your problem, we can describe a certain instance of a media product and then work our way up, saying that if it belongs to such medium, then it has such modalities, but the problem is to arrange everything into one encompassing model. And I have problems with the notion of grammar, it comes from linguistics, and there was a time in the 1950s when everything was considered a....

*Beate Schirrmacher:* ...was a grammar, yes.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Yeah, linguistics was the universal model for everything in the humanities and everything was signs, and you had to have these procedures to see what your distinct phonemes and words and sentences were, and you had to apply this to other media such as the cinema where you don't have discrete signs. The notion of grammar is fine with me, but it should not be strictly modelled on linguistic grammar because it's a different problem. There are media that are based on language, but there are also media that are based on images, and so it doesn't translate from one domain to another that well.

*Beate Schirrmacher:* Yes, thank you. I have certain colleagues who don't agree with the metaphor of grammar as well. It works for me, but as you pointed out, the history of this word might make it a bit more difficult. Let me just wind out another question because with this model of Lars Elleström, I think about the problem that you discussed with the boundaries and the borders of media that sometimes dissolve, but then again, sometimes are quite clear. With the different levels of technical devices, basic media, and qualified media types, we of course perceive specific conventional borders between what Lars would describe as qualified media types – we understand the prototype of literature as something else than music, that there is a clear difference – but in an individual media product and on the levels of how different basic media can be integrated in the specific media types, the boundaries are not always clear. I mean, where is the boundary between the prosody when I talk or between the intonation and the melody of a song? On this level, the boundaries are blurring. On another level, between conventions, the borders are clear. To me at least, these distinctions by Lars helped me solve this problem of whether media borders exist or not.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Well, I didn't say that blurring of boundaries does not exist, but I said that the vast majority of intermedial phenomena do not involve the blurring of boundaries because the categories are easily recognizable, and I think combination is an operation that does not blur boundaries. And for instance,

in a theatre, if we use film projection for the stage setting, it does not blur the boundaries between film and theatre, it just uses its subordinate film technology for the medium of theatre. The spectators will recognize that there is film technology that is being used, but the medium remains theatre. So that's what I mean when I criticize the metaphor of blurring. But it's a very common metaphor and I hear it all the time. That's why I decided to make it a target of my critique.

*Beate Schirrmacher:* I do not quite agree there, but we can discuss this another time because there are other questions. Thank you so much.

*Jørgen Bruhn:* Thank you very much, Marie-Laure, for the talk. I want to get back to the question from Jarkko concerning the relation between semiotics and phenomenology. I think the way I understand Lars's model is close to Beate's, of course. If we start with a media product, in the sense of the specific text, for example, this version of the *Star Wars* film or this specific version of a novel, then we start phenomenologically with the kind of experience of that media product. And then we can build the modalities and the technology, we can describe the experience of this text as best we can. But I think Lars, more and more through the years, being a kind of pragmatist, I guess it's called, in the Peircean tradition, was very much interested in the fact that things were actually *happening* around him all the time. And he wanted to try to follow it, systematize it as best he could, but all the time knowing that things *worked*, that communication *worked*, that was one of the things he said very often, at seminars and in discussions that, for instance, transmediation work much better than we should suspect because we cross media borders, we translate from a novel to a film, which is a complex project, but most of us would immediately recognize it. He would very often stress the fact that conversations, even thousands of kilometres apart now via technical media and sound systems, work (or not) – we do communicate. I also liked your last Figure 2.7 very much, it is totally chaotic in a sense, but also systematic and that gave an image of how

complex things are, while still working. And what I think Lars did was to start with the media product, the actual communicative entity, and then try to describe stuff from there. And I think that's actually a kind of combination of phenomenology and semiotics.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Yeah, I don't have a very clear idea of what the borders are of semiotics and phenomenology. So I think you are the specialists at Linnaeus University, you have been dealing with these concepts a lot while I haven't that much.

*Jørgen Bruhn:* I think I'm saying that this version of semiotics is actually a kind of phenomenology. I think the concepts are not so widely differentiated in this tradition that Lars studied more and more through the years. Thank you.

*Liviu Lutas:* I have a general question, since we talk about grammar in relation to a model like Lars's, I was thinking of the risk, as I see it, in my own work as well, of disregarding the artistic value when applying a model which is rather mathematical, I would say. What's your view on that?

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* Yeah, I think that many approaches to media disregard meaning and taxonomy also disregard the question of artistic values – that would need an extra component. The taxonomy cannot tell you if an individual media product is artistic or not, but on the middle line, you have all these art types and it is assumed that they are produced for the sake of aesthetic gratification because they are not really practically useful. The question is whether the middle line also involves technical concepts, for instance, do games belong there, and are games artistic products? I don't know. No, the study of aesthetics is a very important one, but I don't think it's the role of taxonomy to tell what makes media products artistic. It just takes it for granted that some media are artistic, and others are not. And there are also members of artistic media that are bad. I mean, in literature, there are some bad novels, so do you consider them aesthetic or not?

*Heidi Hart:* Thank you for the really interesting talk. I was wondering about the point you made early on about

the difficulty of parsing media and genre, which is always a challenge, of course. And thinking about an opera I attended a few years ago that was reframed as a graphic novel, although, of course, no one was holding a graphic novel in their hands, but the stage set was imitating a graphic novel of the imagination. I was trying to analyze this at the time and thinking, how does this work as a media product that's imagining another genre or medium? What might you say about these sorts of almost imaginary forms of remediation?

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* I think that this could be described by Rajewsky as an intermedial quotation. You have your medium of the opera, but in its stage setting, it quoted another medium, which was the graphic novel. To me, it would be the same phenomenon as writing that tries to imitate musical structure. It tries to be a fugue or it tries to be.... I don't know what else. So yeah, this is a clear case of intermedial quotation. But I don't think it blurs the boundaries because you know what the graphic novel is, what it looks like, and what its visual appearance is, and you know what the opera is.

*Heidi Hart:* Thank you. It's always interesting when it's something that doesn't exist yet. You just have to make this leap of your imagination. But yeah, that makes sense.

*Liviu Lutas:* I have another question, which is quite related to this. I was thinking of a case because I was wondering about this question of blurring boundaries. How about the so-called tableau vivant, where there's not only a quotation, but the new media product is in a way trying to replace the old one. It's not only a quotation, is it? Where's the relation there? And is that a case of blurring boundaries? I mean the tableau vivant being a staging, like a theatre of a painting.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* So it's when you have actual people who pose as like *The Last Supper* of Da Vinci?

*Liviu Lutas:* Exactly, yeah.

*Marie-Laure Ryan:* So how would I characterize that?

*Liviu Lutas:* Especially if that is a case of blurring boundaries between media?

- Marie-Laure Ryan:* I would say it's a combination of... I have to think about this.
- Liviu Lutas:* Yeah, of course, you don't have to answer because I can't answer it myself. I just reacted when you talked about blurring because that might be a case of blurring. After all, it might confuse the receiver in some way.
- Marie-Laure Ryan:* I'm not saying that there is no such blurring of boundaries. I'm saying that most intermedial relations are not a matter of blurring, but I left an opening.
- Liviu Lutas:* There are some, of course. Thank you.

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