

David Morley

COMMUNICATIONS AND MOBILITY

*The Migrant, the Mobile Phone,
and the Container Box*

WILEY Blackwell

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and the Container Box*

Communications and Mobility is a unique, interdisciplinary look at mobility, territory, communication, and transport in the 21st century with extended case studies of three icons of this era: the migrant, the mobile phone, and the container box. It urges scholars in media and communication to return to broader conceptions of the field that include mobility of all kinds, including information, people, and commodities.

Drawing together the North American and European traditions of materialist communications studies, this book embraces a wide range of perspectives from media studies, science and technology studies, sociology, transport studies, media anthropology, and cultural geography. The book's first two sections outline the author's theoretical and conceptual agenda and reframe key concepts within media and communication in light of new mobilities and contemporary geographies. In the final section, the author uses migrants, mobile phones, and shipping containers as case studies which illustrate his expanded definition of communication in the world today. Transcending traditional boundaries of discipline, technology, and location, *Communications and Mobility* provides readers with a revitalized understanding of contemporary communication studies.

David Morley is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK. His work has been translated into 22 languages, and his publications include *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (1992), *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (2000), and *Media, Modernity and Technology: The Geography of the New* (2006). He serves on the editorial/advisory boards of a number of journals, including *Cultural Studies*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, and *Television and New Media*.

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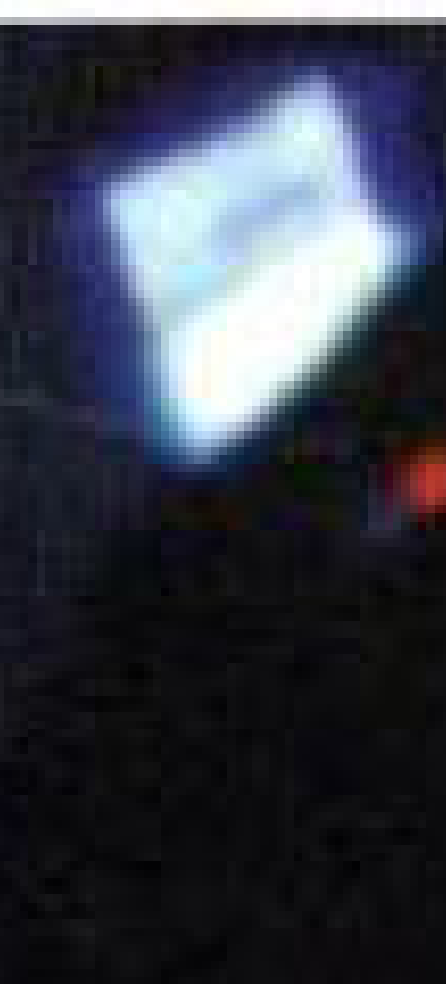
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Communications and Mobility

In celebration of the indefatigable spirit of Flaubert's multidisciplinary encyclopedists Bouvard and Pécuchet, in whose footsteps I seem to have been trudging for many years now.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments are due to the many people who helped me in different ways over the long period of this project's gestation. In the first instance, I must thank Jayne Fagnoli both for her initial enthusiasm in commissioning the project and for keeping the faith through my long delays in delivering what I had promised. I thank the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths for a valuable term's sabbatical along the way. I also thank the many people who made helpful comments and suggestions on this material at the various institutions where I have presented talks on this project including, in the United Kingdom: Lancaster University, Manchester University, and the University of Surrey. Elsewhere: New York University; Fordham University, New York; University of California Santa Barbara; University of Southern California; Northwestern University, Chicago; University of Wisconsin, Madison; American University in Cairo; University of Western Sydney; Melbourne University; National Chengchi and Hsinchu Universities, Taipei; University of Paris II; University of Rennes; Toulouse University; Burgos University; University of Lisbon; University of Bremen; University of Erfurt; University of Tuebingen; Charles University, Prague; University of Krakow; University of Vienna; University of Helsinki; Tampere University; Sofia University; Kadir Has and Bahcesehir Universities, Istanbul; Zagreb University; and the University of Rijeka.

The intellectual influences that shaped this book were various and included, notably, the work of the late John Urry and his colleagues in the *Mobilities* journal, based at Lancaster University. In my conception of migrancy, I was much influenced originally by the work of John Berger and, more recently, by that of Ursula Biemann. In relation both to the need for contextual study of technological infrastructures and to the symbolic importance of technologies, I was greatly helped by the insights of Brian Larkin's anthropological work. In that connection, I also owe the journalist Michael Bywater a debt of gratitude for the inspiration provided by his early conception of the mobile phone as "The Ultimately Desirable Object." My friend Dave Mason kindly provided me with the photograph of the Greek priest communicating with the virtual world

at the beginning of Chapter 8. The late Alan Sekula was one of those who first brought my attention to the world of containerized transport and was also the person who arranged the tour of the port of Los Angeles that allowed me to take the photographs accompanying Chapter 9. I owe Dick Hebdige gratitude for inviting me to UCSB's path-breaking conference on "The Travelling Box" in 2007, and I thank Jeremy Hillman for kindly agreeing to be interviewed about his work on the BBC's "Box" project.

I should also like to thank my daughter Alice for her ingenuity and resourcefulness in finding my cover image for me when I could not locate it myself. Lastly, though very far from least, I am grateful to CB, not only for her (eternally observant) detective work, which first alerted me to the existence of the BBC "Box" but also for her patience in chewing these matters over with me so frequently, often on the way both to and from Old Milverton.

Beyond all that, I am also grateful to the designers of the computer software that enabled the book to be produced (as it was) by dictation, once I could no longer easily use a computer keyboard. But this is a double-edged sword, and in this connection, I must also offer a "Reader Alert": this type of software inevitably introduces a certain level of unpredictable error in transcription, which (lacking any "QWERTY"-style logic) no amount of proofreading can guarantee to eliminate. Thus, alongside any conceptual errors and factual inaccuracies that still remain in the text, the reader may also find instances of pure nonsense. I would of course, prefer to attribute them entirely to the technology, were that not to fall into technological determinism.

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Introduction

Redefining Communications

The book before you covers a wide range of topics only some of which will be familiar to media and communications scholars. It is a synthetic text that aims to bring together perspectives from media studies, science and technology studies, transport studies, sociology, and cultural geography on questions of mobility, territory, communication, and transport in the contemporary world. It is, by intention, programmatic and often takes an exhortatory tone: my objective is to persuade the reader that a number of critical issues in the field of contemporary culture and politics will be better understood if this broader interdisciplinary perspective is brought to bear on the questions at stake. To this end, the text is replete with indicative examples from a variety of fields, by means of which I hope to demonstrate the kind of benefits to be had from the perspective on offer here.

As is explained at more length in Chapter 1, my ambition is to redefine the agenda of media and communications studies and, in particular, to (re)expand the definition of communications so as to once again include within it (as was historically the case) the realms of material mobility, transport, and geography. Thus, in many places, I invoke the phraseology of geopolitics, power, and territory – although of course, the territories of concern are now both material and virtual, online and off. Against the utopian futurism of much research in the field, which focuses primarily on the virtual, I am concerned to restore the material dimension to the analysis by considering how these two dimensions of geography are now articulated with each other in increasingly complex modes of symbiosis.

By way of establishing a broader theoretical framework within which the book's particular arguments can be understood, I spell out below some of the presumptions, commitments and perspectives which have guided its writing.

To some extent, my approach can be defined negatively in terms of the critiques of Mediacentrism, Eurocentrism, and Cultural Presentism, which I have articulated elsewhere.¹ More positively, I am concerned to bring together the European and North American materialist traditions of communications

theory represented by Armand Mattelart, Yves de la Haye, Harold Innis, James Carey, and John Durham Peters² in combination with perspectives offered by the “new mobilities” paradigm,³ alongside work in transnational studies,⁴ cultural geography,⁵ and transport studies.⁶ To put it polemically, my approach represents the opposite of what I regard as the technologically determinist forms of “new media” theory as represented by the work of scholars such as Freidrich Kittler, Scott Lash, and Lev Manovich.⁷ Let me now explicate that set of perspectives a little more fully before proceeding to the more particular agenda of the book’s later chapters.

Technological Determinism and Contextualism

We are often told that, under the impact of the new technologies of our globalized age, we live in an increasingly borderless world characterized by unprecedented rates of technological change and mobility, and new modes of time–space compression. In many versions of the story of globalization, we are offered an abstracted sociology of the postmodern, inhabited by an uninterrogated “we,” who “nowadays” live in an undifferentiated global world, whose lives are increasingly determined by the (seemingly automatic) effects of the new media. However, the technologically determinist nature of these claims flies in the face of a great deal of audience research since the mid-1980s, which has demonstrated the complex and variable ways in which media technologies are interpreted and mobilized by their users. My own view is that, rather than accepting these generalizing and abstracted approaches, we need to understand how a variety of media technologies, both new and old, are fitted into, and come to function within, different cultural contexts.

That kind of “contextualist” approach to questions of technological change is defined by Jennifer Bryce as one in which, rather than starting with the internal “essence” of a technology and then attempting to deduce its “effects” from its technical specifications, one begins with an analysis of the interactional system in a particular context and then investigates how any particular technology is fitted into it.⁸ Clearly, while particular technologies do each have their own specific capacities and affordances, no technology has straightforward impacts – not least because one has to begin with the question of which people (differentially) see the potential relevance of any given technology and how they might use it in the specific cultural context of their own lives. This is to argue that context is no “optional extra,” which we might study at the end of the analytic process, but rather, is best seen a “starting point” – which has determining effects on both production and consumption.⁹ Thus, rather than focusing on digitalization or cyberspace in the abstract, we might better examine the particular types of cyberspaces that are instituted in specific localities under particular cultural, economic, and political circumstances. In saying

this, evidently, I follow the lead originally given by Raymond Williams in his study of how the development of television technology was influenced by the contexts in which it operated.¹⁰ In arguing thus, I also follow the example set by Danny Miller and Don Slater's study of the Internet in Trinidad – as a way of understanding how the worlds of the virtual and the actual are differently integrated in a specific context.¹¹

None of this is to argue that the specific capacities and affordances of a given technology or infrastructure are either unimportant or inconsequential. Much of what follows – whether in the discussion of transport infrastructures in Part One or of the various technologies of containment in Part Two or in relation to the mobile phone and the container box in Part Three – is precisely concerned to develop a more nuanced analysis of their respective and particular powers. The question, for me, is how to understand the operation (and limits) of these powers as they are instantiated in particular circumstances. Following de Certeau, I take the view that the most illuminating moment is often that at which the strategies of powerful agents, institutions, and their technologies are in tension with the tactics of those whom they hope to control, who have to “make do” by choosing from the particular menu of technologies on offer to them and mobilizing these resources to their own purposes as best they can.¹² The outcome in each case has to be considered in the particular as the balance of power varies between different instances – and thus the result of the encounter is by no means always predictable.

Techno-Globalization: Nations and Regions

Coming from a cultural studies tradition which prioritizes grounded theory and emphasizes specificity, I am unsympathetic to abstracted “One-Size-Fits-All” analyses of globalization-through-technology, which reduce the whole of history to one Big Story of deterritorialization and cultural homogenization. Here, we may perhaps be better served by some differentiations between the perspectives of a variety of different regions, nations, and periods. Nonetheless, the discourses of techno-globalism continue to repeat the claim that nations are (somehow) about to disappear as a result of the advance of new technologies. However, Kai Hafez rightly warns of the dangers of exaggerating the degree to which media globalization has, in fact, taken place and questions the idea that there is any simple, linear process of transnationalization in the media.¹³ He also insists that we attend to the continuing significance of national or regional boundaries in the effective constitution of media markets – both old and new. Thus, not only television (especially in its news-based modalities) but also a great deal of Internet traffic still flows within, rather than across, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Such boundaries, and their political manifestations, continue to be of great significance, globalization notwithstanding.

Similarly, if you consult the Facebook app on “Facebook Stories” you can readily see how the structure and patterning of Internet “friending” runs along the very predictably restricted paths laid down by national, cultural, linguistic, and political boundaries.¹⁴

Anthropologizing Media Studies: Against EurAm-centrism

These issues also have to be considered alongside the problem of media and communications studies’ continuing EurAm-centrism.¹⁵ Here, the difficulties are several. As authors such as John Downing and Brian Larkin have argued, most of these theories have drawn their template from the particular techno-cultural conditions of the white, middle-class, Euro-American world – what has also been called the “WEIRD” word – not just statistically abnormal but more specifically White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and (more or less) Democratic. The problem is that they have often been imported wholesale and applied elsewhere without being appropriately tailored to the local situation.¹⁶ From a perspective beyond the North Atlantic this means that media studies increasingly appears parochial because of its failure to recognize the specificity of its own history.¹⁷

We thus need to develop a more internationally comparative perspective, but if the benchmark from which we start is always that of a Western perspective (to which all other instances are merely treated as supplementary, or even exotic) then the problem of ethnocentricity remains unresolved. The simple addition of “deviations” from a Western norm cannot satisfactorily remedy this fundamental epistemological problem. In this context, some anthropological perspectives may be of assistance. The new millenium has seen a welcome increase in work which brings specifically anthropological perspectives on culture into discussions of media, and what unites this work is its insistent relativization of all cultural certainties.¹⁸

Decentering Mediated Modernities

The necessary scale of the relativization at stake here is daunting – not least because discussions of media and communications inevitably presume as their backdrop a variety of strong (and again usually EurAmcentric) presumptions about the nature of modernity – and of its central institutions, such as the city. In the world’s rich Northwest, we tend to think of cities in terms of their size and wealth, and of them necessarily having particular facilities and infrastructures (such as municipal transport and sewage systems). However, empirically speaking, most of the world’s fastest growing cities, all of which are relatively