Book Review: Heidegger and the Media by David Gunkel and Paul A. Taylor

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/07/29/book-review-heidegger-and-the-media-by-david-gunkel-and-paul-a-taylor/

Martin Heidegger has been largely ignored within communications studies, but this book aims to show the relevance of his work for the field. **David Gunkel and Paul A. Taylor** *analyse Heidegger's theory of language and its relevance to communications studies, and assess Heidegger's legacy for future developments in media theory.* **Niall Flynn** *finds this a clear and thought-provoking read, though a touch more detail in places would have been welcome.*

Heidegger and the Media. David Gunkel and Paul A. Taylor. Polity. June 2014.

Find this book: amazon

This book is published as part of [Polity's series *Theory and Media*](), which considers 'instances in which theorists have directly discussed media and communication'. Some of the philosophers addressed in the series, including Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Kittler, and Slavoj Žižek, readily spring to mind for their sustained critiques of media in multiple varying senses of the term. With Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher addressed in this new entry to the series by [David J. Gunkel]() and [Paul A. Taylor](), this is not the case.
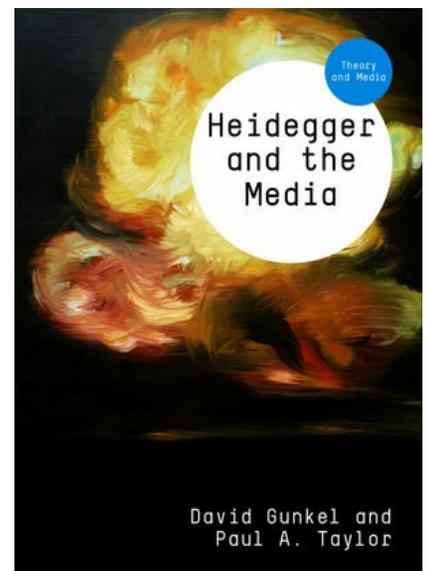
An analysis of media undertaken in Heidegger's name is most directly relevant to his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', published in 1953. Heidegger uses rigorous etymological investigation in this essay in an attempt to uncover the essence of technology. This essence, he argues, is nothing technological; it lies elsewhere, and beyond the comprehension of dominant anthropological and instrumental views of technology. Technology, Heidegger argues, is a revealing of truth and of knowing. The essay has clear relevance for technical media. However, Gunkel and Taylor's bookshows how Heidegger's most famous philosophical work on ontology, *Being and Time*, is also relevant in this context.

The Introduction to *Heidegger and the Media* lays some important groundwork for what is to come. It claims that fundamental questions concerning mediation arise from Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (*Da-sein*, 'there-being'). This untranslated term refers to Heidegger's unique definition of Being. *Dasein* comprises Being in humans' specific context and their position in the world. It is a human and a social being. Moreover, it corresponds to basic, everyday conditions of human existence that go unnoticed and unthought. Regarding media, Gunkel and Taylor argue that *Dasein* enables us to understand mediation and mediated life. Mediation is a basic factor of being, and is something that cannot be escaped. These ideas are applied in different ways throughout the book, but it is worth reflecting on two specific instances.

The first chapter poses language as two-way mediation. Language is considered the first and primary medium of human communication—a meta-medium. Heidegger's use of language is sharp and reflexive, and challenges assumptions we have about media. He flips the conventional idea of language — we speak *it* — on its head; language also 'speaks', it expresses what is hidden from direct experience. Media too express such things in ways that go beyond mere representations. The chapter analyses Heidegger's concepts such as *Rede* -primordial discourse that comes before language – and 'idle talk' – an element of *Dasein*'s everydayness, which pertains to all forms of mass media – as well as analysing how the concept of language evolves through his work. It concludes by

comparing characteristics of Heidegger's later anti-realist theories of language. The arguments presented show why language is an important and enduring topic in any discussion of media.

The issue of truth in mediation dominates the second chapter. The authors contrast standard accounts of mediation as truthful representation with Heidegger's distinction between truth and correctness. For Heidegger, truth is the basic question for philosophy. We are philosophically preconditioned to equate truth with correctness, and since Plato, representation is seen as their equivalent. This has significant ideological consequences: 'it is in the very guise of being so explicit that the media manages to conceal its true impact' (p.66). Heidegger refutes this seemingly self-evident position. He asks what is meant by 'truth' that goes beyond what is 'merely correct' by returning to the ancient Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, which implies an uncovering or revealing of Being. Representations of all kinds are not mere instruments to convey information, but they reveal what is the real. These discussions shed light on standard assumptions about the nature of mediation; as the authors explain, this analysis helps us understand the 'complexity of media representations, the accuracy of information and the task of critical media production and consumption' (p.68).

Central to Heidegger's importance is his persistent critical questioning of conventional assumptions. He identifies aspects of conventional claims and assumptions that have gone unnoticed, and submits them to a rigorous method of questioning. The book sheds light on Heidegger's philosophical sources — Plato, Edmund Husserl, Immanuel Kant — and interlocutors — Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Marshall McLuhan. For this reason, and for its clarity, it has value for those new to Heidegger as well as those more accustomed with his work.

While it does make clear vast sections of Heidegger's work, I would have liked a deeper engagement with media contexts. This usually comes after explanations of Heidegger's work and, as such, is somewhat secondary. This might frustrate those familiar with media theory who hope for in-depth analysis of the topics discussed. It is, however, to be expected in a book of this limited introductory scope, and is my only criticism of it. It still manages to signal the rich openings between Heidegger and media. Heidegger's philosophy of media is similarly touted as a means to navigate today's complex media environments by Clifford G. Christians in his contribution to *The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory*.

Overall, this book clearly demonstrates the relevance of Heidegger's work in media contexts. It also draws conclusions from Heidegger's work that may go on to affect how we approach Media Studies as a discipline. Because saying anything about media necessarily involves some other kind of media, we should approach the task in a self-reflexive manner: 'Media Studies will have been a speculative science . . . or not at all' (p.59). The authors strongly conclude that belief in Platonic realism — veracity of representation — is a naive approach to media. This is where analysis of media influenced by Heidegger has its point of departure.

_____

Niall Flynn is an independent scholar working in Film & Media Studies. He received an MA in Film Studies from University College Cork (2012). Flynn's current research focuses on models of media history, with a view to understanding digital cinematic media. Read more reviews by Niall.