

Body, Soul and Society

Rethinking Media and Communication Ontologies

The 19th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research

Miyase Christensen & André Jansson

It is a common discernment that modern Western societies entail a problematic division between the conceptual realms of “body” and “soul”, and that the ideal of rational thinking and progress (the mind) has come to dominate both. It is also a commonplace argument that Western modernity – in its disciplinization, individualization and commodification of body (and soul) – differs sharply from both traditional societies and Eastern philosophies. A brief look at the past few centuries of Western thinking, however, reveals obvious fields of tension within the various veins of Western social theory and their conceptions of modernity. Efforts towards understanding modernity were always accompanied by inquiries into the forces of rationality and discipline, on the one hand, and enchantment and hedonism, on the other. Earlier social theorists conceived differently of the individual and society, and the social versus spiritual realms against the backdrop of modernity, producing competing visions. Where Marx saw a capitalist society and grounds for revolution, Durkheim (following Comte) saw an industrial society and the need for evolution, and Weber a paradox of rationalism that deeply marked modernity, which ultimately produced a disenchanted culture. Questions of body and soul, in all their articulations, have been crucial to both social scientific and humanistic analysis, and continue to be integral to numerous current debates – not least in media and communication studies – and to normative visions of what constitutes the “good life” and “good society”.

Ontological understandings of Body, Soul, Society and related concepts are also linked, and increasingly more directly, to the status of media and communication in society. Parallel to this, as media and communication studies evolve in their increasing interdisciplinarity, a holistic approach to identifying and expanding upon the enduring and emerging patterns of such conceptual, theoretical formations becomes necessary. Various landmarks in the social scientific and humanistic roots of the field provide entry points for such deliberation: from functionalist sociology to the collapse of arts and aesthetics into critical theory, to the more autonomous accounts of the “cultural” and the “aesthetic” in post-structuralist analysis; from the Romantics’ sublime and the banal to “new media” aesthetics of remediated visuality; and, from the mind-centred conceptions of the triad of human agency-social life-modernity in Freudian and Lacanian theory to the body-oriented psychology of Reich, to postmodern, gender and queer theoretical accounts of the self and society in a state of ambivalence and dislocation.

The development and appropriation of media technologies, ideologies, and cultural forms (re)produce and respond to these fundamental notions – as “conceptions of re-

ality". In particular, political and moral debates regarding the "fears" and "wonders" of new media vis-à-vis lifestyle habits tend to highlight society's basic (competing) assumptions concerning the material and mental/spiritual nature of human ontology. Added to these are the growing centrality of risk communication and environmental sustainability issues in media and communication studies, and the emphasis placed on effective communication methods for social change.

The objective of the conference theme for NordMedia 2009 was to scrutinize the triadic interplay between Body, Soul and Society in terms of how they have been, and are currently, understood, implied and implemented in media and communication studies and to what ends. The approach was twofold, dealing, on the one hand, with how Body, Soul and Society have been applied as concepts of "reality", and, on the other, with how they have (re)produced certain formations of knowledge. How do these concepts, in their broadest sense, produce certain ways of thinking in media and communication studies? How is the thinking around these categories bound up with (inter)disciplinary fields of power in terms of scholarly traditions and paradigms? A reflexive analysis of the different conceptions of these and a wide range of related notions throughout the history of media and communication studies would also offer an important key to our understanding of the development of certain fields and paradigms.

While each concept attains a certain autonomous status, and may therefore be associated with different kinds of scholarly work, the goal of the theme was above all to consider Body, Soul and Society as an ontological ensemble. Through the conceptual locus of Body, Soul and Society, the conference was geared towards ontological debates of broader concern than what might be achieved through "intra-disciplinary" concepts such as media, communication, audience, convergence, etc. This means that the theme also assessed where and how media and communication studies are linked to surrounding fields and disciplines, as well as how contemporary transformations of media and communication research are related to historical debates and concepts. In order to bring about this double dialogue, the theme was also operationalized through a re-assessment of classical scholarly debates, which have problematized the Body-Soul-Society interplay in various ways.