The distinctiveness of digital criticism

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Screen

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Abstract
The core concern of media studies today is the material form of mediation. In whichever direction we take our analyses, the specificity of the discipline lies in its attention to the detailed functioning of textuality. The sociology of communication, the political economy of the media, the philosophy of media aesthetics are distinctive subdisciplines of other, older, fields of research. What distinguishes ours is the irreducible materiality of mediation. We can perhaps feel that we are less prone to overgeneralisation, mythmaking and simple errors of fact because of that attention; and that we are in a better position to make statements about audiences, institutions, economies, societies, cultures and aesthetics because we have spent long years, both individually and as a research community, looking at the minutiae of historical and contemporary media. And yet we seem to have betrayed the digital media not only in the failure to archive electronic media but intellectually too: in the half-acceptance of a view that the digital media in some way effectively dematerialise the older media. Once dematerialised, media can no longer fall into our field or, alternatively, we are confronted with the proposal that we abandon the central object of our studies, the materiality of the text, and remake ourselves in the theoreticis mould with which the US academy in particular greeted the embarrassingly political discourses of 1970s ‘Screen Theory’. As literary theory has pursued the dematerialisation of the book, print, paper and inks in the abstraction of the text, so media studies faces a choice between dematerialising and rematerialising its object.

Keywords
media and communications; media criticism

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