

The Medium Is the Message of the Future: Tyranny of Media in Organizing Our Imaginary

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“Media determine our situation” (Kittler, 1999, p. xxxix). Media also determine our future. The tyranny of the media describes how future types unsatisfactorily repeat our own fraught relationship with media technologies and communication. Narratives of the future treat media as transparent channels for information rather than active constituents of reality. Communication technologies more often than not are embellishments to the *mise en scène* and evidence of a future achieved rather than elements causal to that future. For example, the book (Card, 1994) and film *Ender's Game* (Card & Hood, 2013) explore the socialization of an individual (Ender) and the sociology of a culture (Earth), rather than how that future was made possible partly by the communication technologies of the ansible¹ and virtual reality.

Rather than imagine radically different mediational environments, sci-fi tends to be conservative in dealing with communication technologies. An immediate objection could be “what about the holodeck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Roddenberry, 1987–1994)?” but the quotidian use of the holodeck as a space and time travel device to see distant lands or learn about history suggests an instrumental rather than cultural approach to communication (Carey, 2009). Although the holodeck creates bodies in space, the holodeck captures the essential ability of media technologies to rearrange time.

¹ An ansible is a fictional machine capable of instantaneous communication and used in science fiction novels by authors such as Ursula Le Guin and Orson Scott Card. It can send and receive messages to and from a corresponding device over any distance whatsoever with no delay. Ansbles occur as plot devices in science fiction literature. Retrieved from <http://www.jessesword.com/sf/view/16>

According to Kittler (1999), media technologies spatialize time, affording the manipulation of temporal sequences: Books and movies alike can be paused, rewound, or skipped. However, not all media rearrange time alike. Innis (2008) observed that media bias social organization spatially or temporally. Time-biased media (stone, parchment) emphasize maintenance in time, religion, tradition, and decentralized power structures. Space-biased media (paper, radio) emphasize extension in space, politics/law, rationality, and centralized power structures. He argued that a society flourishes by achieving balance in media technologies and lamented the exponential space bias evident in the West. A space-biased society produces spatialized perspectives of time, evident in practices like time management (Sharma, 2014) or sci-fi.

Framing the future as a zone of action is time management in the future tense. Sci-fi itself as a genre of thought, concerned with the future, with an emphasis on technology and rationality, tends to be a symptom and intensification of a space-biased culture rather than a corrective. The holodeck's instrumental purpose is somewhat balanced by its occasional use by Worf for Klingon rituals, but he is an exception that proves the rule. For Worf, the holodeck offers a simulacra of the culture he is ostracized from, a culture itself marginalized within the Federation. His rituals within the holodeck are as evanescent as his status within Klingon culture. My first question is: *Are there examples in sci-fi of balance, or are we left with mainly stereotypes of time versus space-biased cultures and conflicts between the two?*

Another symptom of sci-fi as an outcome of space bias is, ironically, its failure to deal with the future of the future. With some exceptions, Western society is firmly oriented toward presentism, a consequence of space-biased technologies (Innis, 2008). The future is interesting insofar as it is a leading edge of fashion, trends, or technology and as a proleptic threat of "falling behind." The past marks how far we have come or—for those who see the present as a fall from grace—how far we have fallen. Yet as a reflection of the present, sci-fi does not often engage with its own futures, reflecting—perhaps accurately—our own presentism. More often, sci-fi engages with an appreciation of the past. Klingons recite mythology and sing opera; Picard quotes Shakespeare. In *Babylon 5* (Straczynski, 1994–1998), the Book of G'Quan tells the story of the last shadow war; in *Battlestar Galactica* (Moore, 2003–2009), the Book of Pythia guides humans and Cylons to Earth. One example of an interest in fashioning a future is the Second Foundation's work on revising Seldon's psychometric equations to guide collective futures (Asimov, 1991). Yet even this example is unsatisfying. Foundationers look to the past for instruction on the future, and as a remix of the scribes and scholars of religious texts, their relationship to the past exists solely to chart a path for the future.

In these examples, engagement with the past works as a rhetorical device to emphasize that the past of the future—the present—is the proper course to achieve that future: not very futures-oriented, in other words. I suspect the lack of engagement with the future of mediation is because we are subject to our media technologies. The lack of imagining a future consequential to our proposed futures supports a reading of sci-fi as a genre teleological to our present and our contemporary biases in media technologies. Therefore, my second question is: *What would a vision of the future look like that took its own contemporary conditions seriously and projected that forward? In what ways does sci-fi use the past (our present) to advocate for a utopian vision or warn against dystopian consequences?* I'm thinking here of something like a sci-fi version of Iroquois' sensibility to making decisions with the seventh generation in

mind, but rather than us imagining the seventh generation, projecting how the seventh science-fictional generation imagines the eighth.

This sort of renewed imaginary requires a shift from an individualistic to a more collective perspective, but if we follow Innis, that is a primarily technological, and only secondarily a social transition. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9; Piller & Berman, 1993–1999) tried to imagine a collective species that required no media technologies called the Changelings. Changelings exist in a liquid state in a giant lake called the Great Link. Their natural state is intersubjective, but members can separate themselves from the collective and shift shapes (mineral, animal, vegetable) as desired. They have no need for media technologies, because they communicate perfectly intersubjectively, being to being. “Communicate” in this case inaccurately connotes the pure communion that makes communication obsolete for Changelings and necessary for other beings. When Changelings take humanoid form, the insufficiency and inefficiency of language permeates every interaction, and they frequently lament the difficulty of linguistic communication. It’s not that they don’t understand language—rather, they too readily see the failures of communication in achieving a shared reality. For this reason and others, Changelings see themselves as superior to all species. Indeed, their mythology implies that language and subjectivity are to blame for petty grievances, and they see all grievances as petty and beneath them. A Changeling proverb is that “no Changeling has ever harmed another.” This all changes after Odo, a Changeling adapted to humanoid culture, becomes the first Changeling to harm another. The implication is that language is partly to blame, and that language and subjectivity are both mutually constituted in difference, in other/Other. The Changeling story is ultimately a parable about language as a fall from grace. The Changelings become an imperial species after an originary encounter with violence, leading to a distrust of other species, suggesting Changelings themselves became somehow corrupted after encountering linguistic species.

In the end, Odo returns to the Great Link because he cannot bear separation any longer. For Odo, mediation itself is a consequence of the recognition of a self that is severed from the collective, a necessity to integrate with that collective, and also that which reifies the rupture between himself and Changelings. Although Odo’s story concludes bittersweetly, the moral of his story is pessimistic and conservative: A retreat to an originary, utopian, prelinguistic state is Odo’s destiny and suggests there is no common ground between communication and communion. This prompts my third question: *How does sci-fi deal with the messiness of mediation and intersubjectivity without binary oppositions or false (and facile) resolutions?*

Inasmuch as language itself constitutes one point of conflict, DS9 also explores the relationship between spoken and written communication. In DS9, the Bajoran religion forms around “Prophets,” called “wormhole aliens” by other species. Unlike Changelings, Prophets are noncorporeal, atemporal beings. They communicate with humanoids through dreams and hallucinations. Humanoids experience the visions either by using Orbs sent by the Prophets or entering a wormhole where Prophets reside. Dreams and hallucinations are like oral, preliterate communication. The dream and the spoken word both disappear as they are experienced. Preserving words requires fixity in a medium, and the Bajorans formalize visions into their religious texts. But inscribing symbols also changes the relation of words to subjects. Writing

down words allows for their storage, transmission, processing, and rearrangement. The written word is a way to organize time.

The Prophets, as extradimensional beings, have no need to manage time—they are outside of time. What's been said has always been said and will always be said. "All of this has happened before and will happen again," is a proverb from the Book of Pythia in *Battlestar Galactica* (Moore, 2003–2009; see Figure 1). The word, once written, can happen again and again: you can reread this sentence. One of the main story arcs related to this consequence of print explores the human desire to manipulate and repeat time, a theme manifested through Starfleet Captain Benjamin Sisko's desire to be reunited with his wife, who dies tragically in the pilot. Media technologies substitute for our shared inability to manipulate time.



Figure 1. "All of this has happened before," *Battlestar Galactica* (2003).

[Ctrl +click title for video clip.]

Rather than look to the past, sci-fi looks to the future, yet its material conditions of production are no different than the production of other knowledge. *If history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, what does this say about our visions of the future that are repetitive to the point where we can recognize "futuretypes"? Additionally, what can we do to take more seriously the technological base for the production of our narratives of the future? A book works differently than a movie and differently than a video game. This line of questioning would also lead to a critique of big data science and predictive analysis. If we are subjects of our media, a la Kittler, what sort of media do we need to develop to become more ethical, just, equal subjects? What would that media look like? Are there examples at hand?*

Or, if these are not technical questions, then what sort of political, policy, or imagineering work is necessary?

Coda

The manipulation of time, along with repetition, space, and rearrangement, are central to the story of *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2015). If the Prophets are examples of atemporal beings, the humans in *Interstellar* are all too aware of their own temporality, as even the one experience that binds people together—passing time—becomes differentiated by the relativistic speeds of moving astronauts and stationary families. One way to interpret *Interstellar* is that space becomes the medium of communication for a society so space biased it literally becomes unstuck in and from time. The point of the mission after all is to leave Earth after it has been ravaged by a blight caused by drone warfare—a realistic result of a space-biased culture. *Interstellar* is manifest destiny writ large, even stellarly. Manipulating space—a dropped book; a drawing in the dust; a ticking clock—is the medium of choice for a future species that has totally lost touch with time.

Another tension in the story is that between utilitarianism and romanticism. Love—ah, timeless love—is frequently invoked as a motivation in *Interstellar*, yet the pieces for the main character Joseph Cooper's success are put in place by the NASA scientist Dr. Brand's deception, utilitarian approach to goals, and disregard for individuals over species. Dr. Brand's real plan was to populate a viable planet with human embryos; the gravitational propulsion system was a red herring he gave the astronauts. Cast in this light, *Interstellar's* narrative is essentially biopolitical, echoing Foucault's (1997) proposition that the primary function of the modern state is "the power to make live and let die" (p. 241). Cooper's observation that he needs two numbers to buy a pair of jeans and the school needs only one number to determine his son's future suggests the state is alive and well despite its absence in the story.) The modern state is born largely due to the medium of print. In a sort of perfect symmetry, *Interstellar* connects the print book at the beginning with the Tesseract² at the end, confirming Kittler's thesis that humans are subject to their media technologies and Innis's fear that Western society is becoming irredeemably space biased.

Writing of romanticism, Kittler (Kittler & Enns, 2010) reminds us that "there are of course media technologies without love, but there is no love without media technologies" (p. 106). Unromantically, it is not love but media technologies that make the transcendence of time possible. *Interstellar* tells a tale that begins with the codex—the invention of the nonlinear manipulation and experience of time—and ends with

² The Tesseract is a means of communication for the *bulk* beings in the film *Interstellar* to express action through gravity with NASA. The *bulk* beings can perceive five dimensions as opposed to four, able to see every moment in the past, present, and future as well as influence gravity within any of those time frames. . . . It is implied in the film "that these 'bulk beings' may in fact be humans existing millennia in the future that possess extremely advanced technology and have evolved to the point of existing outside of the four dimensions of time and space." Retrieved from <http://interstellarfilm.wikia.com/wiki/Tesseract> and http://interstellarfilm.wikia.com/wiki/Bulk_beings

a fourth-dimensional version of the same technology. All of this has happened before and all of this will happen again. *Or will it?*

Response by Jessa Lingel

Dan asks about representation, mediation, and connectivity. His questions hinge on how science fiction commits certain concepts to strangeness (often species and travel) while retaining *normalité* elsewhere, often, as Dan notes, in communication technology. Sometimes this conservatism is a matter of pragmatism of only being able to push on a certain number of conventions in one narrative. But at other times it's an aporia, an inability to see or refusal to engage a given phenomenon. (Elsewhere in this collection, Roseann has pointed to the disappointingly tendentious sexism and heteronormativity in much science fiction, a grim reminder of the limits of imagination.) In this brief response to Dan's provocation, I want to concentrate on two examples of communication in speculative or science fiction that take radically different approaches to engaging with (or disengaging from) language and translation.

The first is the *Codex Seraphinianus*, a cult classic of surrealist art imagined by Italian architect Luigi Serafini (2005). First published in 1981, the book consists of a series of images that document an alternative universe that is fantastic, perverse, and hallucinatory. The images are accompanied by text that Serafini acknowledged only in 2012 as made up; until that point, controversy persisted among linguists as to the comprehensibility of the *Codex's* text. Were the *Codex* merely one or 10 or 50 pages long, it would intrigue. At over 300 pages, it is at once compelling and infuriating, an intransigent yet mischievous intervention at the convergence of imagination and language. The *Codex* purports to belong to a genre that explains and defines—yet the text defies logical analysis or systematic inquiry. It is only possible to engage with the persistent absurdity of the *Codex* with one's own commitment to absurdity, and in this way I see a model of communication in keeping with Dan's call for inventiveness.

The second example is the film *Quest for Fire* (Annaud et al., 1981), a film about cavemen who have and then lose fire. This loss is the crux of the film, but for my purposes in responding to Dan, the plot matters less than how the film handles language: The movie takes place entirely in subtitles. Actors in *Quest for Fire* speak a prehistoric language created by science-fiction language experimentalist Anthony Burgess. In doing so, the film bravely insists on a point that so much science fiction would deny—the flexibility of language. The question raised with this intervention is why should we assume that 20th-century English would be the dominant language of the future? Doing so forecloses radical rethinking of many kinds of translation, not only linguistic but cultural and historical translations as well.

With these narrative limits in mind, we might ask ourselves, when does science fiction make demands of our imagination and when does it foster laziness? I'm reminded of Wyatt Cenac's comedy bit that laments a decision by producers of *The Lord of the Rings* not to include people of color as hobbits—Cenac questions how it's possible to ask viewers to imagine elves, talking trees, and wizards while assuming that the inclusion of Black or Brown actors as hobbits would provoke disbelief. Whereas the *Codex Seraphinianus* resists comprehension even as it engages (and perhaps enrages), *Quest for Fire* dutifully calls attention to assumptions of legibility. Science fiction functions by holding some things constant while rendering others strange, with an all-too-common assumption that language must be made

conservative so that other interventions can be made strange. But surely it's worth asking what could happen, what worlds, languages, and translations could be imagined, were the reverse true.

Response by Aubrie Adams

In this piece, Dan poses several pivotal questions about the role of media and communication technology in the ways that we envision our future. He draws upon examples from science fiction to ultimately claim that these narratives have done little to expand the ways in which we currently use and relate to media technology. As such, he argues that our current media usages actually determine the ways in which we envision our future media usages, and that this is done in such a way that stifles our imagination. Though several critical points worth further reflection are raised in this provocation, the scope of this commentary focuses on one particular question: "What would a vision of the future look like that took its own contemporary conditions seriously and projected that forward?"

This particularly compelling question asks readers to consider whether current science-fiction narratives do a reasonable job at examining our future from an ever-forward-thinking perspective, and if our current narratives are inadequate in performing this role, what would this look like if it was actually constructed? Dan provided several examples in which characters of the future reminisced and shared a nostalgia for their past, such as the Klingon's opera and Picard's Shakespeare. To expand upon this further, several main characters in the *Star Trek* universe have hobbies they are passionate about that are also anachronistic and oddly oriented toward 20th-century activities. For example, Captain Sisko from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* is enthusiastic about baseball, with several episodes in the series revolving around this theme. In fact, he leaves behind his most prized possession, a baseball, as a message to one of his enemies to basically say that he will return. In addition, Tom Paris from *Star Trek: Voyager* spends much of his time working on antique cars. Both characters pursue their passions through the use of the holodeck and simply use this technology as an informational tool.

Within these examples, one could make the case that this simply makes the characters more relatable to a 20th-century audience and helps bridge the gap between our two different time periods. Nonetheless, it poses an interesting dilemma. Can science fiction use communication technology in ways other than information transfer, and can we envision our usages of media in novel ways? Additionally, can a future-oriented society continue to look toward the future rather than dwell on the past?

The audience is left to ponder what it would look like for a science-fiction narrative about the future to consider its own future. To what extent does this become paradoxical? If we look into the future and find that even within that future people are ever still looking into their own future, when do we stop looking in to the future long enough to notice what is going on in the present? Perhaps the overall theme of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* does a reasonable job at performing this role. The series is clearly rooted in the future, and, unlike other story arcs, the main objective is to explore where no one has explored before. The show is primarily about building new knowledge and expanding what is known about the universe. Though it most often focuses on solving problems in the immediate future, as pioneers and explorers, the ultimate goal is forward thinking in that the characters hope to learn more about the universe and uncover what their future holds for themselves as an intelligent civilization. In this way, it

functions as a fictional narrative that takes place in the future that considers its own future to at least some degree.

However, the relationship to communication technology and media messages is still largely related to an information transfer procedure. As such, futurists and science fiction writers should be compelled to continue examining how the future envisions the future and how our communication technologies and relationships to them may continue to change to avoid being bogged down within narrow conceptualizations.

Response by Adam Rottinghaus

I really like what you wrote here, especially when you emphasize the spatial biases of contemporary media technologies. As you rightfully point out, futuristic sci-fiction is itself a product of a spatially biased culture desperately trying to confront its own temporal/spatial limitations and possibilities. Your invocation of Kittler's claim that "media determine our situation" reminds me of something John Durham Peters once wrote about the late media theorist. Peters writes, "Machines are our fate according to Kittler, and to say so is not to witness to an awful downfall of the human condition; it is to properly grasp our situation" (Kittler & Enns, 2010, p. 2). Your provocation suggests that machines are our *FATE*, in a very real sense. We are inextricably bound to them in our past as much as our future—both virtual and actual as you would have it. The *Interstellar* Tesseract and Kittler's aphorism regarding love and media technologies crystalized these themes. You give us Kittler—via his medium theory lineage of Innis—to express the dominance of and reliance on a conservative approach to media in imagining the future. I find this an intriguing choice given Kittler's ambivalence toward media content and his commitments to the physiological and technological aspects of mediation (and aesthetics). So, I'll bite! I think the real insight that Kittler and medium theory add to your provocation are not in the examples of representations of media in the future, but in your metacritique of futuristic and speculative sci-fiction, which this special issue on futuretypes has begun to taxonomize.

I want to first make a connection between the space-biased culture and the different relationships between media and time within the books, films, and TV series you mention. You raise several questions about the relationship between media and the future with examples ranging from holodecks to linguistic forms to modes of knowledge. In fact, I believe you answered your second question in your response to my own provocation! You hammer on a theme that you never quite express as bluntly as I hoped to see. If Kittler is right, we cannot escape the tyranny of media in organizing visions of the future, because we cannot escape the tyranny of media in constituting our minds as data processing nodes in a discourse network. We "so-called humans" fetishize our own individuality and agency, but Kittler paints a broader picture of how media subject and exploit our embodied sensory processors that shape our conscious experience of the world around us.

I want to point out that it is no coincidence that TV, film, and books dominate the futuretype narratives because they continue to remain profitable for the consumer electronics and culture industries. Like Marshall McLuhan's "global village" (1994), visions of the future come from the limits of our collective and mediated imaginations, as well as the conditions of cultural production. For all the power the cultural

industries hold, contemporary critics know they have never been as powerful as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1997) claimed; and, so we must acknowledge the same of Kittler. Both the message and the medium must matter to some degree. If it is indeed the case that books, TV, and film have become totalitarian media forms representing the future, than you rightly suggest we need to develop new forms of media that are more temporally biased to balance the spatially biased media that dominate global capitalism. The need to "restore balance to the force" is a political insight drawn from Harold Adams Innis (or perhaps George Lucas), to which I'm inclined to agree.

However, you note that sci-fi tends to be conservative with its use of media technologies in imagining the future. I am going to twist your words here and propose that *spatially biased media technologies create conservative uses of the future*. James Carey and John Quirk (1989) wrote that the future was not a place people eventually found themselves, but a cultural strategy of moving and mobilizing people to prescribed ends by predetermined means. They argued that, especially in an era in which a "mythos of the electronic revolution" dominated the cultural imaginary, digital communication technologies have been elevated to a more sacred place in discourses of the future. In one of his last essays, "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet" (2006), James Carey wrote that we are now coming to terms with the fallout of techno-utopianism, which accompanied the digital revolution. Taking a historical approach to the rise of digital communication technologies, Carey (and others, such as Carolyn Marvin and Lisa Gittleman) has pointed out that the pronounced similarities between the discourses of the telegraph and the Internet. A cultural history dense with changing communication technologies and business models built on planned obsolescence have amplified Carey and Quirk's (1973) argument for how the future functions socially and politically seems only to increase in accuracy and relevance.

More recently, in *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (2010), Larry Grossberg argues that the future today operates in service to the present and is being evacuated from the political sphere of action. From the discursive perspective, spatially biased media technologies use the future to reproduce the status quo because the future is imagined as a malleable political, cultural, or economic resource. But that leaves us at a bit of a political impasse. If we live in a spatially biased culture, and through media technologies reproduce a conservative imagination of the future used to serve the immediate needs of the present, then media's tyranny is technical, representational, *and* physio/psychological. What room is left for politics when media's tyranny of organizing the future already truncates our ability to imagine possibilities of alternative futures beyond resources for the present?

The political impasse brings us back to Kittler and the metacritique of futuretypes (perhaps this *has* already happened, and is merely happening again). As you note, the very fact that in this issue we are schematizing these futuretypes is evidence of a tyranny of content, imagination, and medium. In our schematizing (or perhaps scheming), the hope is that we contributors are reflecting upon the limits to our spatial imagination of the future and exposing how and what is constructing those limitations to create new spaces (and times!) for generating alternative visions of the future. The real benefit of your use of Kittler and medium theory comes when you draw attention to the fact that producing this special issue on futuretypes is itself intervention in the cultural imaginary of the future. I'll conclude by saying that the future is an interesting site of reflection for media representation, as shown throughout many

provocations and responses, but as a discourse shaping the cultural practices of the present, the future is an urgent site of political action mediating the fate of us "so-called humans." Good show, sir!

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