
Studying the Smartphone Screen: Developing a Multi-disciplinary Framework

Dr Aakriti Kohli

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of the screen and concomitant screen cultures is the context to this research paper. It sets out to grapple with the theoretical challenge of defining the 'screen' and screen media itself. As an apparatus it evades easy categorization as a medium or device or an instrument or even a technology. Even in exploratory studies where the researcher is unsure of the nature of things and is trying to learn and make sense of the world, there is an implicit conceptual framework one works with. This research paper will argue the need for studying contemporary digital screens such as that of the smartphone, from the perspective of what constitutes the conditions of our mediated experience. The hope is that developing a phenomenology of the screen-object can illuminate the subject's engagement with it as well.

Introduction

In media studies and similar disciplines, the way individuals interact with digital media and technologies is particularly significant – it's essential to understand the interconnectedness of these devices and technologies, along with the ways in which they are increasingly linked to social and cultural practices. The daily experiences of individuals are becoming more influenced by digital interactions. This influence extends beyond just media creation and consumption; even the ordinary and commonplace aspects of life are being navigated through digital technologies.



Among the various devices we refer to as digital technologies, the screen itself plays a crucial role. The screen is what provides a visual representation of the digital world. This can include the television screen, the cinema screen, or the digital displays mentioned earlier. However, today, interactive and tactile screens are the most prevalent means of viewing television or cinematic content. In modern times, no matter which types of media we engage with and consume—be it news, games, films, advertisements, or personal communication—the way in which it is presented to us, and the manner in which we experience it, namely the screen, continues to be the predominant medium. The screen comprises various elements – it functions as a form, an interface, and even a format (particularly when content is tailored for specific screens). The previous classification of ‘big’ versus ‘small’ screens, or cinema compared to television, appears to be a restrictive categorization now, as screen size no longer determines the expectations for the type of content presented. Here, I refer to the ‘screen’ as a conceptual category that includes screen media along with the associated devices and technologies. Consequently, the screen appears to blur the earlier boundaries between electronic and print media, as well as between sound and video, since it integrates all platforms (print, television, cinema) and their corresponding content.

The smartphone is the most widely used screen, followed by tablets and laptops. People most frequently use smartphone screens to engage with social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, where many digital connections are formed, and the sharing and consumption of visual content occur. Smartphones are rapidly becoming the most favored screen choice. As of December 2019, India had 502.2 million smartphone users, indicating that over 77 percent of the population now accesses wireless broadband via these devices. On average, Indian mobile data users consume around 8.3 gigabits (GB) of data monthly, while users in China average 5.5 GB, and those in technologically advanced South Korea range from 8 to 8.5 GB. With 1.2 billion mobile phone subscriptions, Indians downloaded a total of 12.3 billion apps in 2018, making them lead the world in app downloads, just behind China. The typical Indian social media user dedicates 17 hours each week to these platforms, surpassing the time spent by social media users in both China and the United States. The anticipated number of smartphone users in India is projected to reach 859 million by 2022, up from 468 million in 2017, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.9%, as reported by a joint study conducted by ASSOCHAM and PwC. These figures are remarkable and highlight the growing reliance on digital technologies, especially the smartphone screen. The screen serves as a medium for consuming media content, creating our own content, and utilizing various applications for communication with others. Consequently, the screen emerges as a significant subject of analysis in modern social dynamics.



The transformation of the screen and concomitant screen cultures is the context to this research paper. It sets out to grapple with the theoretical challenge of defining the 'screen' and screen media itself. As an apparatus it evades easy categorization as a medium or device or an instrument or even a technology. Even in exploratory studies where the researcher is unsure of the nature of things and is trying to learn and make sense of the world, there is an implicit conceptual framework one works with. A survey of existing scholarly work on new media objects reveals predominantly five major strands: (i) studies that privilege technology and the technological process over social life and its disrupting influence, (ii) studies that demonstrate how existing social processes adapt newer technologies to their contexts and needs, causing changes but never beyond what the social demands of these technologies, (iii) behavioral studies that lament the rise of information communication technologies and their psychosocial impact on individuals and communities, and political participation (iv) studies that exist on the threshold, revealing impact and influence of technologies on social life and vice-versa, without attributing power to either, and finally (v) studies that laud the celebratory potential of information communication technologies, and ascribe to them the possibilities of growth, change and development.

This research paper will argue the need for studying contemporary digital screens such as that of the smartphone, from the perspective of what constitutes the conditions of our mediated experience. The hope is that developing a phenomenology of the screen-object can illuminate the subject's engagement with it as well. The screen has been a particular site of contestation in media and cinema studies, and scholarship has ranged from the metaphorical and technical to the representational. However placing the thrust on classifying, describing, interpreting and analysing the structures of screen experience can be helpful in explaining our own experiences with the screen. In not explicitly asking what the screen does to people, or what people do with the screen, I'm hoping to explore what is the screen, and what are the conditions that have produced the screen and our experience of it. Which is, how and why are we experiencing the screen the way we do? In order to this, I will present an innovative and multidisciplinary framework to pursue the screen-object. This framework which I have developed after pursuing existing theoretical and conceptual studies as well as fieldwork observations will demonstrate how studying the screen can be best ensconced by these approaches.

A conceptual framework works as a toolbox, aiding in unpacking concerns, questions, and issues. In the subsequent sections I will present a discussion on my self-reflexive and interpretivist framework which is influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology, sensory studies and the work of Bruno Latour on technical mediation. During the course of this discussion, I will also map the linkages and discontinuities between



the theoretical approaches I am attempting to synergize. These approaches which at the outset will seem incompatible but after a careful reading will reveal, at least figuratively, a symmetrical relationship between them and their understandings of the body, human experience and technical mediation.

In the following sections, I will discuss what the concepts look like, how they lend themselves to address the issue of conditions of screen mediations, how the concepts relate to each other, and finally how they are relevant to my concerns and what are the possible limitations of using them. I will show how studying the screen phenomenologically can be approached with a focus on many aspects – experiences, mediations, affect, senses, human and non-human agencies and so on.

Towards a Phenomenology of the Screen

To begin with, what is phenomenology? Among other things, it is a philosophy that places emphasis on experience. It places an accent on lived experiences of humans to derive any and all meaning (Smith, 2003). For someone following the phenomenological approach, the task would be to describe and later interpret all structures of experience, and their conditions. This would entail describing consciousness, the very imagination of that experience, and their relations with other individuals. A phenomenological approach to media studies would involve considering the media in question, and the screen here, as a mediator between the consciousness of how it is produced and consumed (Markham and Rodgers, 2017). The German philosopher Edmund Husserl is generally regarded as the founding figure of phenomenology. He was driven by the need to make philosophy more rigorous, by focusing on the “things themselves” (Husserl 2001, p. xxxv). In this focus he was not calling for philosophy to be more objective and empirical with “facts”, but instead for research to describe the lived experience. In order to do this, he suggested that we leave assumptions and presuppositions by setting aside “natural attitude” of what we know of the world, and “bracket” these things we know of the everyday world by a process of reduction or “epoche” so as to pay attention to consciousness itself without having any assumptions about the object-world. In Husserl’s understanding, a pure description of a phenomenon by this method would free us from assumptions about the world out there. Husserl further spoke of “intentionality”, where human consciousness is made up of “intentional acts” in relation to “intentional objects”. This “intentionality” is what helps us to constitute objects. These objects though are perceived only partially by humans, as the act of knowing is circumscribed by past experiences, attitudes, beliefs and even expectations (Smith, 2003). These very previous frames of references then fill out our subsequent perceptions and experiences.



For Husserl the application of natural science methods to understand human issues was ignorant, as it was not just external factors which lead to human response and reaction, but their own perceptions of what these factors meant. For him, the study of our life worlds needed to emphasize on the world as experienced by the person and not something external to them (Husserl, 2001). This approach would help unfold the meanings of these experiences as they are lived, without taking the help of prior categorizations and conceptualizations of the world. Ultimately this would bring in focus the examination of phenomena, the experience of which has become natural and taken for granted. This process would then help unfold newer and possibly forgotten meanings. This was decidedly a movement away from the Cartesian dualism of reality ‘out there’ or separate from the individual. This elimination was possible because Husserl regarded that minds and objects occur within human experience and consciousness, and consciousness was a co-constituted exchange between humans and the world (Armstrong, 2005). Bracketing for Husserl was a process by which we suspend our biases and see and describe the phenomena for what it really is, or “as they are” (Husserl 2001, p.42). I see two limitations of using this framework, one that it is not entirely possible to suspend all preconceptions, but these can instead be known and laid out. And second, since Husserl begins with bracketing or suspension of all bias, notions and beliefs, it is not possible to use any additional theoretical framework with this approach. This is unsuitable to investigate screen experiences, since exploring the screen and conditions of mediation warrant more of an innovative conceptual approach in order to properly address the issues at hand.

Martin Heidegger, who worked with Husserl, in later years disassociated himself specifically due to the method posited by the latter to explore lived experiences. While Husserl was focused on describing beings or phenomena by suspending or bracketing any assumptions or taken for granted notions, the former focused on one’s prior experiences and situatedness in the world. While Husserl’s mode of enquiry and philosophy was epistemological in nature, Heidegger approached it more ontologically (Armstrong, 2005). Phenomenology laid out how to do rigorous science by suspending speculation, Heidegger on the other hand brings our attention to “being-there” (*Dasein*), an extension of not just describing human consciousness, but also this consciousness in relations with others, hence the difference between “Being” and “beings” (Welch 2017, p.14). In his development of a hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger emphasized on ‘foreconceptions’ as a structure for being in the world (Critchley et al., 2008). These ‘foreconceptions’ cannot be suspended or put aside, but need to be acknowledge, hence nothing can be encountered as a blank state. In that sense, the relationship between humans and the world is a transactional and irreducible relationship, as they are constituted by each other.



He referred to this as interpretation via the ‘hermeneutic circle’, where the researcher makes their assumptions, bias, beliefs and attitudes explicit, and then goes on to study the phenomenon first by describing the parts of an experience, then moving on to the whole experience and oscillating between these two in order to reach a level of meaning which is at least at that moment, making sense and free of contradiction (Holroyd, 2007).

In departing from Husserl, Heidegger posited that interpretation of a phenomenon is guided by expectations and previous experiences. In his most important work, *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger argues that implicit in understanding a phenomenon are “forestructures” which include beliefs, attitudes that always guide the process of interpretation. In that sense understanding is always “ahead of itself” (Armstrong, 2005). Here Heidegger conceptualizes that understanding is inextricably linked and circuitous to expectations in our interpretation of any phenomenon and this description of a structure of understanding is also the basis of hermeneutic phenomenology developed by him.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was further developed and used by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), who believed that this method should help identify the conditions within which understanding takes place. He considered interpretation as a dialectic between the meaning of a text and what the reader brings in terms of frames of references. His work on understanding and interpretation laid emphasis on the dynamic and evolving nature of interpretation and meaning-making. He believed that bracketing or subjecting our biases and assumptions is a futile exercise and that in fact our prejudices condition our knowledge and understanding, thereby helping us interpret and understand and experience. Since these prejudices are based on our historical being, all our interpretation and understanding will involve some form of bias (Linge, 1977). Further, Roman Ingarden (1893-1970), another prominent figure in phenomenology who rejected idealism, worked on a phenomenological approach towards aesthetics in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931) in his endeavor to resolve the tension between what was real and what was ideal. His focus on works of art stemmed from the difficulty to slot them in either realm as these works were not completely autonomous and relied on the intentional acts of creators and readers. For him they began with the consciousness of the creator and came to life again with the consciousness of the readers, which meant that it is not reducible to either. In essence for him, this object transcends any one particular experience and continues to exist through different acts of consciousness. He argued that these works have an “ontically heteronomous mode of existence” as they are neither fully independent or dependent on the creator or readers’ consciousness, though it is based on them but can be seen to be transcending them (Thomasson, 2003). I find this conceptualization very useful in understanding



technical mediation and studying the experiences of the screen. In some ways, Ingarden's description of the art-object and its existence, is very similar to how science and technology theorists such as Bruno Latour see technical mediation as the exchange between human and non-human actors, or actants if you like. I will elaborate and discuss these linkages further in later sections. In elaborating on different meaning structures, Ingarden differentiates between the "aesthetic object" formed by the reader and the "artistic object" created by the creator (Thomasson, 2003). This suggests the multiple possibilities of deriving meaning, using and experiencing of that work. He further goes on to argue that understanding that work is a temporal process and it can only be partially understood but never fully grasped, and the meanings may change constantly. In a structuralist argument, Ingarden admits that there are possibilities of variation in perspectives, but these very perspectives are also predetermined by the very structure of the work itself. While I agree with Ingarden in how he regards and views the works of literature as existing in a space that transcends the creator and reader, his structural limiting of the possibilities of viewing make me uncomfortable. This position confines and limits the reading to a one-way relationship, whereas readers occupy a more dynamic reading position, their own assumptions and ideas sometimes leading to a complete reversal in meaning. Another philosopher of hermeneutic phenomenology, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) provided a corrective to this position and argued towards understanding the conflicts that might arise in interpretation because of the variable ways in which humans experience and interpret. He pointed towards the creativity inherent in language which can lead to a defiance of conventional ways of understanding and interpreting the world, as language and texts are unstable and endlessly open to different meanings and experiences. The screen then is not self-enclosed and can lead to newer ways of interpreting, experiencing and meaning-making than what the creators intended. It is important then to see the screen as an object situated in culture, and our consciousness and existence as manifesting themselves in these cultural objects, in which we fill our desires to exist and 'to be' (Armstrong, 2005). That is, our experiences are inextricably entangled with historical, social and cultural formations.

The preceding discussion on phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology reveals that an interpretivist phenomenological framework of research privileges the ontological perspective that there exist multiple realities, that are constructed and can be altered and adapted. The 'real' is not something 'out there', but constructed, local and specific. The knowledge that I then produce of the screen, is at best an understanding and interpretation I have come to produce, and not a definitive statement about the nature of reality.



Screen and the Production of the Sensorium

The mind-body Cartesian dualism running in Western philosophy which privileged the mind also had another casualty – the body was left under-theorized and neglected (Cox, 2018). Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) took this further in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), where he retained many ideas of Heidegger and also provided a corrective to Husserl's idealism. For him, perception and perceptual experiences are embodied and situated in the body and he rejected the mind/body dualism. When he situated the consciousness in the body, he also emphasized on the externalities which ultimately constitute subjects. I will return to this subsequently to form a link between him and Bruno Latour's work with reference to technological mediation.

It is sometime in the 1980s and 1990s that academic disciplines took bodily and sensory turns (Howes, 2013; Pink 2015). This re-evaluation of the role of the body emerged because of some social and cultural trends (Shilling, 2007). Feminist scholarship, especially from the second wave had factored the body in its analysis early on, but studies on senses, including haptics, taste, body therapies and the increasing social and cultural significance of sound in popular culture seemed to bring the body firmly under light and inquiry. There is now an emergent focus on the body in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, cultural studies, media studies, geography and marks a critical turn (Cox, 2018). Though the disciplining of the body, and the body as a site of contestation has been argued by Foucault already, but embodied being and sensory experiences have so far been little explored. The call here is to move the body from a passive state to an active, feeling, thinking and a very material agent (O'Loughlin, 2006). Merleau-Ponty and his work on perception continues to be an important reference point for evaluating the body in relation to the mind. For him, perception was not just a passive reception of the senses, instead it was intentional and an active process of interpreting. Though here he was referring to an intentionality that takes place before reflection, before conscious thought, more of a motor functionality (Cox, 2018). In that sense our actions towards objects are defined by the body itself and not always because of the objects themselves. As humans we see an opportunity to act on an object, and the body responds accordingly, hence according to Merleau-Ponty our perception is embodied, as it is an opportunity to act bodily. Subsequently there is no one correct way to perceive an object, even for the body, as it is interactive and contingent upon how the body chooses to interact with the object. In a discussion on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Cox (2018) describes how he spoke of "Maximum grip", as a position of fully resolving the tension between us and the object optimally. It is only when the body finds the right positionality with respect to the object that it achieves "flow" (p.3). In his argument, it is sufficient



learning of that motor skill which makes the body act appropriately and independently of thought, though he is not referring to action that is repetition without thought, but rather an active process which adjusts to the object, a practiced expertise, if you like. Perception, and the body by extension, learns how to act on the object, after making adequate sense of it and the context. It is a process of achieving optimum position with reference to the object to relieve the “tension” (Ibid.) In an example of a typist, Cox quotes Merleau-ponty’s remark extremely crucial for my argument, that the typist has “knowledge in the hands” (p.4). This suggests that users of the screen, haptically with their fingertips know what to do with that object without perhaps being able to explicitly state what guides them to do so. Further, this tells us that the body keeps learning, adapting, taking in information without a conscious act on our part, and the body’s relation with the object keeps refining over time. Additionally, for Merleau-Ponty, all sensory experiences are integrated and not separate signals being perceived independently. Therefore, the screen can be considered to be evoking holistic and affective experience.

It has also been noted that there are some limitations to this approach if it does not factor cultural and social influences which affect the body and the way it acts. For instance, women are socialized into sitting in particular ways from childhood, and that conditioning gets grounded with the body, in ways in which the body knows how to perform itself over a period of time. This tells us that this approach needs a corrective, to acknowledge that the body is located socially, culturally and historically in an interaction with larger structures (Allen-Collinson, 2009). For me it is important then to place the body as central to human experience and the activities it does with the screen, and to understand the knowledge which the body possesses, and its ways of knowing and being through the senses, acknowledging at the same time, the larger structures within which the body is also located.

This phenomenological approach to perception via the body and its senses speaks to the field of sensory studies which have been influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty. Howes (2013, p.10) defines Sensory Studies as a “cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture”. The usefulness of this approach is that it recognizes the various subjective meanings attached to the senses. The study of auditory, haptic, kinesthetic and visual senses is crucial in my understanding of the screen mediated experiences. Howes and Classen (2014) in their introduction to “Ways of sensing” emphasize on “intersensoriality” or moving away from the traditional categorization of senses as independent and further the argument on the interplay between them, much as has been argued by Merleau-Ponty himself. For them, senses can collaborate and work simultaneously, but also come in conflict with each other.



Vannini et al (2012) list some of the emerging terms in Sensory Studies, which can be useful in my reflection on my own screen experience as well as during field work. First, they talk of “Somatic Work” (Vannini et al. 2012, p.19) or the ways in which humans learn how to use their senses to understand, interpret and communicate with others. Another way to explain this would be to look at the senses as a kind of skill-building. The second is the “Sensory Order” or “the sensorium” (Vannini et al., 2012, p.59) which is how the senses are trained in a particular culture, and the meaning of the senses emerges from specific practices. The third are “Sensory Communities”, which is the development of entire communities that share their way of using their senses and making their own meanings out of them. The fourth is “Sensory Socialization” which is the ways in which we come to learn about the senses and their experiences and come to attach meanings to them. Fifth, is the “Sensuous Self”, which is how the self emerges from these very sensory experiences, shaped within a culture socially. The sixth and the final one is “Somatic Career” which is linked to the “Sensuous Self” and points to the historicity of sensory experiences which have come to constitute an aspect of identity. This call for a “sensuous scholarship” though remains riddled with methodological challenges and I will be discussing the Sensory Ethnographic approach that I will proposing in the last section.

Screen and Technical Mediation

My phenomenological frame though, still seems to be wanting for a fuller explanation of the phenomenon at hand. While it is true that phenomenological approaches reject the mind/body dualism and focus on the mediation between the subject and the object, the singularity of Heidegger does not fully account for the co-constitution of the subject and the object, or *Dasein* and the World to be precise. How can the mediations between the screen and the subject be theorized by accounting for the multiplicity of this process? How can specific approaches to technology and technological mediation be made available to sit well with phenomenological approaches? Further how can I incorporate non-human agency of technology and the screen to fully understand the conditions of mediation? Some post-phenomenological approaches, especially those dealing with technology have made attempts to draw some parallels between Martin Heidegger and Bruno Latour. I will now make an attempt to discuss the ways in which they are compatible, and the points at which they diverge, which will prove useful to correct the limitations of only using a traditional phenomenological approach. My feeling of unsettlement with the limitations of my theoretical framework pointed me towards some works which showed me how phenomenology is equipped with resources which can journey to converge with Bruno Latour’s insights (Harman, 2007). Very few researchers have attempted this challenging task, most notably Verbeek (2005), Harman



(2007), Riis (2008) and Conty (2013), who are working towards post-phenomenological approaches, and some such as Denson (2017) who have developed a specific Techno-phenomenological approach inspired by the post-phenomenological investigations on human-technology relations by Don Ihde. Both Heidegger and Latour seek to transcend the subject/object divide in order to explain their co-constitution and interdependence to reveal “technology’s hidden creative potential”. If we were to pay attention to Latour’s call to “embrace both mediations and multitudes... (how) subjects and objects have been replaced by mediations that can finally ‘show themselves in themselves’ and express their own agency... for an emergence consciousness that is immanent, interdependent, and greater than the sum of all individual minds...” (Conty 2013, p.1) we must then attribute Being equally to all actors. This is a position very similar to Denson’s (2017) though his terminology differs from Latour’s and aligns explicitly with the work of Don Ihde.

I will now begin with how Latour himself does not see his approach as being compatible with Heidegger’s or phenomenology via his critique of both. For Latour, Heidegger demonstrates a certain nostalgia for crafted man-made objects in opposition to technologically manufactured ones, even though this can be explained by the different worlds, times and cultures they were situated in (Conty, 2013). The question then is, how ontologically different are they in their approaches to technology? Another problem for Latour emerges from phenomenology’s insistence of locating agency and intentionality solely with humans. This is contentious for him, since according to him nothing belongs to the subject which has not been given to it (Khong, 2003). He speaks of those agencies outside the body, which shape the individual’s mind and body. He turns the phenomenological approach over its head, by not beginning with consciousness of how the subject informs the object but how the object constitutes us as subjects, very similar and reminiscent of how Ingarden also considered the art-object as transcending the subject/object realm and existing through different acts of consciousness. I believe this approach is important to understand my primary concern – the conditions of mediated experience between the subject and object - because fundamentally, for Latour, objects are as agentic as humans. In his famous speed bump and policeman example from *Pandora’s Hope*, he asks revealingly, that when we slow down before the speed bump, can the authority of both the speed bump and the policeman not be equated? (Latour, 1999) For him, phenomenology stops short of going ahead in terms of intentionality and consciousness. Conty (2013) though argues here that Latour in his critique of phenomenology does not always differentiate between the phenomenology of Husserl and that of Heidegger, which differ considerably, especially in Heidegger’s effort to precisely distance from what Latour levels as a critique:



to move away from transcendental consciousness and rejecting bracketing which removes the subject from the world and its influences on it. If we were to agree that Heidegger and Latour in their own approaches moved towards acknowledging the impact and influence of the outside on *Being*, then we can perhaps move towards how Latour's actor-network theory can illuminate human-technology interactions, conditions, and contexts. It has also been argued that their concerns move towards similar directions, though their approach differs, but the point at which they do not meet, is where Heidegger stops with his "singular relations" and when Latour embraces the multitudes of mediations (Conty 2013, p.314).

The over-arching concern of this paper was to explore the conditions of mediation that produce and are produced during the screen experience. The screen, as a technological artefact exhibits processes of technical mediation and it has been argued by some that Latour's discussion of technical mediation reflects many of Heidegger's concerns about technology as well (Riis, 2003; Conty, 2013). In order to explore the similarities in Heidegger and Latour's approach towards technical mediation, I will discuss their conceptions of technology, as well as Latour's critique of Heidegger, which ironically shows more symmetry between the two. The primary issue Latour has with Heidegger is his conception of technology as an all-consuming force on humans. He disagrees with it as he does not see this relationship as one of domination by either side. I will now attempt to mediate the relationship between their ideas, by first examining how Latour defines technical mediation. Since for Latour there is no relationship of dominance between technology and humans, he conceives of technical mediation as a 'symmetry'. A user with a screen in hand is not the same as the one without it, and the screen in hand is not the same object either, in comparison to a screen lying on a table for instance. In this sense Latour argues that the symmetry lies in the myth that there is a "neutral tool" fully under human control or the "autonomous destiny" that no human can master (Latour, 1999, p.178). His 'symmetry' asks us to look beyond the two possibilities towards a third agent. He calls it the field of 'interference' between humans and non-humans, within which relations to technologies unravel. He anticipates criticism to this, and introduces another term, 'combination', to offset any critique which says that ultimately it is humans who act upon non-human tools. According to him humans provisionally act at that moment with the help of technology. As an example, 'I watch' means nothing unless 'I watch on screen'. He further goes on to explain technical mediation by speaking of the 'folding of time and space' (Latour, 1999, p.183). This is in relation to 'combination' where technical devices and humans can be understood as 'black boxes' (Latour, 1999, p.183) which fold humans and non-humans, temporally and spatially. He argues that these black boxes become blacker as humans and non-humans continue to engage and interact with each other,



furthering their displacement in time and space. For his final concept, he sees technical mediation as a ‘crossing the line between signs and things’ where technology can transcend the conventions of oral and written discourse to speak their own language, and this for him acts as a bridge between things and signs. This is very similar to what Merleau-Ponty calls the *chiasm*, a perceptual intertwining and intimacy between the subject and object, where the object’s presence guides one’s own perceptions, after which both become interchangeable (Toadvine, 2016). In Latour’s policeman and speed bump example, the speed bump can be seen as a ‘black box’ or in this case the screen can be seen as a ‘black box’ where the screen and humans exist in a symmetrical relation, where both bring each other into existence via interference. On his reflections on the object and subject relationship, Latour configures it as:

“Objects and subjects are made simultaneously, and an increased number of subjects is directly related to the number of objects stirred – brewed – into the collective. The adjective modern does not describe an *increased distance* between society and technology or their alienation, but a deepened *intimacy*, a more intricate mesh, between the two.” (Latour 1999, p. 196).

On the other hand, Heidegger frames his views on technology with a single concept, that of *das Gestell* (a collective emerging after calculation) and four explanations for understanding technology (Heidegger, 1977). Heidegger is preoccupied with the very ‘essence’ of technology irrespective of the artefact in question. For him the essence lies in seeing technology or technical mediation as a process or the ways in which something comes to manifest. His first concept is that of ‘revealing’, in which technology brings something to appearance. This revealing is mediated through technology, and has a specific identity. This specific-ness is then explored by him in further concepts. ‘Challenge’ refers to how any technology puts certain demands on society as it is ‘revealed’. This reveal challenges humans to use resources to respond appropriately. These resources are referred to as the ‘standing-reserve’, his other concept, which are mobilized to respond to this challenge. This further leads to a process of ‘ordering’, his last concept, which refers to how the ‘standing-reserve’ is ordered and more resources made available, both human and non-human. For him technological mediation then begins with how technology or the screen here reveals itself to humans via visual and aural signs, and poses challenges of use, which humans draw from their standing-reserve of ordering of resources to act upon them. Though the humans seem to be in command, they in fact respond to the challenges brought forth by the screen, and hence this demonstrates an interlocked process. Therefore, Heidegger’s actors experience technical mediation in the very essence of technology and the challenges it imposes on them, and are similar to Latour’s agents who are actively using technology and become a part of the ‘collective’ but are parts of a larger process that governs their



behavior. So, the screen-mediated experience is a process involving human and non-human actants, all playing specific roles.

Riis (2003) in making an argument for seeing the symmetry between the two asks us to not get distracted by the differences in their terminology, and look for ways in which they both conceive technology and technical mediation in concurrent ways. Latour's 'collective' folds all humans and non-humans across time and space and Heidegger's *das Gestell* does not differentiate between humans and non-humans in terms of the demands it puts on them and their 'standing-reserve'. In that sense the screen object then exists on a surface concealing what it is and what it does. When we take it in our hands, it reveals as a standing-reserve, and is ordered to complete various tasks. It is the standing-reserve where the conditions of mediations exist, and the screen and humans co-constitute and produce each other. Hence similarly even for Latour, it's the human-screen that does technical tasks. For Heidegger the essence of technology shows us a world of interconnected humans and non-humans, and neither can resist the challenge of being ordered, and subsequently forms the 'collective'. The crucial point at which Heidegger and Latour depart, is when the former essentializes technology and laments this danger, the latter celebrates it and speaks of a network of humans and non-humans, understood as resources. Riis (2003) finally argues that, "Latour's philosophy of technology appears as a mirror image of Heidegger's. In a figurative sense, a symmetrical relation emerges between their respective understandings of a technically mediated world... Both hold the technically mediated world to (i) fold together humans and non-humans (ii) challenge them to mobilize the world and (iii) suspend any kind of individual freedom." (p.297)

The preceding discussion was an attempt to work towards a multidisciplinary framework and build a collaborative approach that can help account for the multiplicities (conditions, experiences, senses and technology) that constitute the conditions of screen-mediation. This framework can be fruitfully used to understand the conditions of mediation between the screen and the subject generally, and even specifically for the research sites one locates or chooses to understand, such as online dating applications or online shopping applications or online visual content on the screen.

Screen and the Methodological Toolbox

Building on my conceptual framework from the preceding sections, this section will discuss the shape of my proposed methodological toolbox. Any academic enquiry which makes use of quantitative or empirical research methods stresses on the importance of what can be observed and accessed, and the



central concerns of such enquiries are modelled according to empirical research methods. However, a dissatisfaction with these methods, especially in the 1980s gave rise to a trend which focused more on experience, description and meaning (Osborne, 1994). In essence this was a disenchantment with methods that cannot fully account for or address questions of human life. Out of this have emerged many research methodologies that seek to describe human experience, such as ethnography and phenomenology among others.

Flowing from my conceptual framework which supports the ontological perspective of multiple realities, my methods acknowledge the relationship between me as a researcher and the phenomenon I am setting out to understand and describe. I am interactively and creatively linked with what I'm researching in trying to understand the conditions of mediated experiences via the screen. My method then would be to begin with a process of (i) self-reflection, where my knowledge, assumptions and beliefs about the nature and conditions of mediated screen experience that are embedded in my interpretative process will be explicitly stated. I will during the process, pause, and give thought to my own experiences of the screen, and reflect in my writing how my experiences relate to my questions. This would entail including my personal observations in juxtaposition with my, (ii) interpretation of information gathered from research participants via interviews and observation, as well as, (iii) representation of these experience outside the context of this research including, films, memes, advertisements and videos. Hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretative, and focusses on historical constitution and meanings of experiences. As argued in my conceptual framework, the screen evokes a sensuous and affective experience in the body, and the body is central to human experience and the activities it does with the screen. To this end I propose to use (iv) sensory autoethnography as a method to understand how the body mediates between the screen and the subject. Pink (2018) in her work on sensory autoethnography characterizes it as an important exploration of one's own sensory experiences, perception, knowledge and practice within a culture. She has also argued elsewhere (Pink, 2015) that the researcher's autobiographical narrative of their own embodied sense experiences is a means of producing 'academic knowledge'. By using this approach, I hope to reveal from my sensory experiences of the screen, a description of the body and the screen as well as the culture within which the screen exists.

Participant observation and interviews can be conducted with those willing to talk about these experiences, and come from diverse backgrounds in order to facilitate a rich and thick description and stories of their particular lived experiences. Observation and interviews should be conducted more than once to reach a point of saturation, in order to make sense of the whole, the parts and the whole



experience again in much more clarity. Beginning with a general description of their screen experiences, specific questions of their screen experiences with respect to a particular application can be inquired in an open-ended manner. Since verbatim answers do not capture the full essence of what is being spoken about, liberty can be taken to read between the lines of what is being said in the interviews. Therefore, the analysis should be a conversation between the interviews and observations, along with my own assumptions of this experience within the interpretive framework.

In lieu of a Conclusion

As I have argued in the preceding sections, the question of the conditions of mediation and screen experience requires a more innovation approach of devising a methodological framework for studying this interaction. Conventional media methods of analysing media texts, studying their representation and reception cannot thoroughly encompass the full range of human sensory capacities brought to bear upon the screen when interacting with it. The experience of interacting with the screen is an embodied one, which can only be fully interpreted if we also focus on the sensory experience of the subjects (or even the researcher as I have argued). The preceding sensory-ethnographic theoretical discussion points out to how this method can be used to interpret the everyday environment where the digital screen's presence is ubiquitous (Pink, 2017). The sensory context then mediates the experience between the screen and the subject, and can be studied in the multiple everyday contexts in which the screen is constantly invoked.

For the last few decades, digital media, new media artefacts and information communication technologies in the media have been pursued in many academic disciplines. It is a deeply cultural, social, political and economic phenomenon. Hence it is not surprising that it is being studied for its cultural impact, social changes, political possibilities and commercial flows. The long-standing theoretical traditions of communication and media, psychology, literature, computer science and technology, geography, sociology, political theory among others have studied new media artefacts using existing conceptual frameworks, to accommodate them as-is, in studying medium, representation, content, reception, influences and uses. Through this paper I have made a case for a theoretical and conceptual reconfiguration and innovation in order to understand the experiences of the conditions of mediation, and account for the ruptures initiated by these new developments in technology. Further, many influential media theories may be inadequate and may not be able to fully account for newer forms and practices of emerging technologies. We might at this point, have to compel ourselves to rethink the relationship between contemporary media theories and practice.



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