Traffic – Media as Infrastructures and Cultural Practices: Introduction

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The notion of ‘traffic,’ taken in its historical as well as in its current sense, covers a wide field of cultural processes related to interaction, communication, exchange, and transport. These cultural processes, involving the circulation of living beings and signs, things and energies, physical and mental objects, quantities and qualities, are based on a range of technologies that may assume quite diverse manifestations, but have at least one thing in common: the technologies in question represent means, ‘media,’ which establish inextricable links between natural environments, social practices, cultural semantics, and material infrastructures.

The present volume sets out to explore and investigate these fundamental relationships from the perspective of media theory. The institutional framing that helped to prepare this perspective was provided by the international conference Media Transatlantic iv: Traffic held in March 2012 at the University of Paderborn, Germany.1 This event, which brought together scholars from Canada, the United States, Israel, New Zealand, Austria, and Germany, continued a series of transatlantic symposia that began in 2007: Re-Reading McLuhan. An International Conference on Media and Culture in the 21st Century (2007, Bayreuth, Germany), Media Theory on the Move. Transatlantic Perspectives on Media and Mediation (2009, Potsdam, Germany), and Media Theory in North America and German-Speaking Europe (2010, Vancouver, Canada).

The idea that phenomena of traffic are relevant for cultural and media research, in that every process of transport is deeply embedded into a background of

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1 The Paderborn conference was organized by members of the Research Training Group Automatisms. The editors wish to thank Theo Röhle in this context for planning and ensuring a smooth running of the conference. We furthermore thank Martin Boeing-Messing and Fiona Rugani for assistance in preparing the manuscripts for this collection, Eric Scheufler and Christoph Ribbat for their linguistic expertise, and Norbert Eke for organizational advice. Our special thanks go to Hartmut Winkler for most inspiring discussions on traffic and media. He made possible the conference and the present volume.
infrastructures and cultural transactions, is already suggested by the etymology and historical semantics of the related terms. The history of the English noun *traffic*, e.g., points to a Mediterranean context of trade and commerce. The earliest English forms of the word (*traffyke, trafficke*, etc.) emerge in the 16th century and are derived from the French *trafique*, which in turn originates from the Italian noun *tráf(f)ico* and the underlying verb *tráf(f)icare* that are in use already in the early 14th century. The verb is commonly assumed to represent a complex Romanic form which decomposes into the elements *tra-*-, corresponding to Latin *trans* in the sense of ‘across’, and *-ficare*, deriving from Latin *facere*, meaning ‘to do’ or ‘make’; *transficare* would thus have the sense of ‘to transact’ or ‘engage in transaction’ (cf. *OED*).

From the 16th century on, the English precursors of *traffic* are used with reference to trading over distances and the corresponding transport of goods and commodities. In the 17th century, this meaning is extended to commerce, exchange, bargaining and business in a broader sense. From the beginning, there is an even wider, figurative use that covers phenomena of familiarity, intercourse, and communication. In the 19th century, the meaning of *traffic* undergoes a considerable shift and narrowing, turning to processes and technologies of physical transport, the ‘passing to and fro of persons, or of vehicles or vessels, along a road, railway, canal, or other route of transport’ (*OED*). Apart from denoting the movement of goods and people by ship, railroad, automobile, and later by aircraft, *traffic* is used with respect to telecommunication technologies such as the telegraph since the second half of the 19th century, including the ‘messages, signals, etc., transmitted through a communication system; the flow or volume of such business’ (ibid.).

Thus from the beginning, the semantics of ‘traffic’ oscillates between a narrower, technical sense of transport, and a wider sense of social intercourse and cultural communication. This phenomenon is reflected by the historical knowledge related to problems of traffic and logistics (cf. Schabacher 2013c). The formation of such knowledge starts already in ancient times, where it emerges primarily in military and commercial contexts, and can be traced to the high and late Middle Ages (cf. Teuteberg 1994, 176; Schiedt et al. 2010). Since the 18th century, the occupation with questions of traffic is intensified, and the corresponding accounts are formulated more systematically, as in the framework of German cameralistics (cf. Justi 1755; Heeren 1805); here, early scholarly

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