Contingency Alert

Editorial Note on Necessary and Impossible Media

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The concept of contingency is essential to cybernetics and systems research. “Anything is contingent that is neither necessary nor impossible” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 45), and nothing is more natural for us second-order observers than our preoccupation with forms that neither must nor cannot be observed the way we are observing them. Contingency is the leading medium for our observational agility.

If we shift our focus from forms to media or to form-media relationships, however, even the most modest attempts to observe anything (contingent) are complicated by the observation that observations of most forms are contingent on the presumption of necessary and impossible media. Unlike form, which has the ability to oscillate, a medium is nothing but the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive complement of its form. Form is perfect continence (Spencer Brown, 1979, p. 1). All fascination and confusion caused by whatever medium, therefore, implies that we observe media in the plural and hence media as forms—and probably as forms that are structurally coupled with other forms. Obviously, however, the observation of form-form or form-media couplings does not allow for the same observational flexibility as the observation of forms. There are laws of media, and there are media effects. Observations of life forms imply the observation of water as a necessary medium of life; and observations of life forms within the medium of amber are as inaccurate as are non-intermediated observations of organizations within the medium of values (Roth, 2017); at least, as long as these observations are to remain within the medium of science.

If science remains the leading medium of our observations of media, then we second-order observers too will need to focus on not only the contingencies but also the necessities and impossibilities of these laws and effects of media. Within this broader context of media studies, we could be particularly alerted by, or curious about, situations where one and the same form is drawn in different media, where different forms are drawn in one and the same medium, or where forms are observed to change their medium.

A necessary and possible requirement for these navigations of the laws and effects of media is a better understanding of our own leading medium: contingency. Even skewed versions of doubly-negative definitions of contingency have their qualities, and yet the more general challenge remains to understand the program that produces

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this definition by cross-tabulation (of the distinctions un-/necessary and im-/possible) and, hence, to de-/code the output of or input into the remaining three quadrants of the emerging matrix.

One first outcome of this inquiry into the program architecture of our leading medium may be the observation that both contingency and causality belong in the same quadrant of either this or another matrix. Either matrix would hence be a both necessary and possible bridge between our and the traditional leading medium of our academic fields.

References


Seydel, S. M. (2015). *Media History*. Photograph. Swiss multimedia artist Stefan M. Seydel observes interaction effects between the dissemination media (from mid to bottom: speech, script, print, computer) and the salience of particular forms of social differentiation (from mid to top: magic, religion, art, Dadaism). God’s Lamb, Dürer’s Hare, and Schrödinger’s Cat mark the thresholds between the corresponding media ages. (Caption: Steffen Roth. Photo credit: Stefan M. Seydel, dfdu.org).