Media and the environment, media and environments, media and environment... Each of these terms presupposes something a little different. And one could add the terms media environment—often an industrial or a marketing concept; mediated environment—the technologizing of a place such as the public library or the deep sea; and environmental media—a pairing used to denote both humanistic explorations of environmental themes and issues in movies, television programs, games, and so on, and, in scientific usage, categories of material such as air, water, and earth. Exemplifying the latter usage, a US Environmental Protection Agency (2018) webpage employs the heading “Contaminated Media at Superfund Sites” to list—as media—mine lands, sediments, groundwater, and soil.

Let us take the first case: media and the environment. In it, the latter term is clearly identifiable as an object—of concern, of study, of measurement, and of management. It is a conceptual construct of the mid-twentieth century, forged out of multiple strands including “nature” (in contrast to culture) and “natural history,” “ecology” as a field of study focused on evolving biophysical relationships, and physical and biogeochemical processes sliding along from the most local to the most global of earthly scales. Yet to the extent that it is singular (the environment), it is all the more separated from the human species that is assumed as its counterpart. “The environment” today registers most...
commonly as a set of issues (of climate change, deforestation, desertification, ecological disruption, the dispersion of toxins through the many environments that make up “the environment”) and a series of “overshoots” (overfarming, overfishing, overharvesting of any and all resources, and that especially challenging topic, overpopulation). The discussions of all of these topics have tended to downplay the outsized consumption and carbon emissions patterns of privileged bastions, and the race-, class-, gender-, and culture-based injustices that subtend them. “Media,” for its part, registers today as the objects, networks, and infrastructures that connect many people in convoluted communicative webs: the internet, social media, smartphones, radio and television, photographic media, virtual reality, augmented reality, and all the rest.

These framings all require more critical engagement than they typically receive. After all, some individuals or groups of people may not have access to—or may not want to enter into—communicative relation with the world of “mass” or “mainstream” (or indeed any) media. Yet their lives, too, may be profoundly affected by the unceasing sensing, scanning, and rendering of digital earth, often for purposes connected to extraction, exploitation, and control. Moreover, a mediated environment is more than a matter of its registration (as picture, icon, data), communication (as image, discourse, metaphor, trope), or transportation (from one form or site to others). As demonstrated in the work of many media theorists today, including some represented in this journal, media do not merely communicate, transmit, and transport; they also transform. Bruno Latour makes a distinction between “mediators” that transform and mere “intermediaries” that do not; but a core principle of much media scholarship is that media are active participants in the social construction and material production of the world.

In the second case—media and environments—we are left with two plurals but no clear sense of whether they are coterminous, interactive, or perhaps fractally related in multiple configurations. Yet this grammatical egalitarianism yields at least one benefit: the recognition that not only do our media mediate between people and between people and environments, but also environments themselves mediate and environ. Environments are not inert or passive containers, mere recipients of the tool-wielding whims of our species. Accordingly, although our journal has staunch roots in the humanities and the arts, we seek collaborators, objects of inquiry, and perspectives from the sciences, social sciences, and beyond. Such coalitions are all the more necessary when faced with questions like, Where do media end and environments begin? What exactly do environments mediate and media environ? How do we best grasp phenomena from the signaling drift of pollen and marine acoustics to the inflation and deflation of collective will toward climate mitigation?
The third and final case—media and environment—is, of course, the conjunction we have settled on for this journal, expressed with the more effusive “+.” (The and in the title is for common usage and indexing purposes, though perhaps the word “plus” has greater allure when you come right down to it: “media plus environment”?) What might be presupposed in the conjunction is an interaction between something plural (media in all their many forms, including emplacements in the built landscape) that is also singular (“the” media) and something singular (“the” environment) that is also plural (all the different environments—and natures, materialities, and ecologies—conventionally and problematically conceived of as surrounding and permeating “the human”). Matters and meanings of media+environment are germane to—and co-constitutive of—the impactful jumble of aggregations in a space-time context (Massey 2005) being thought variously as the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene (Malm 2015; Moore 2015), the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016), the dystopian future that is already here (Estes 2019), and the White Anthropocene (Yusoff 2018), among other pressing formulations.

We nominated and paired these titular terms—Media+Environment—for heuristic purposes and not because they are a priori separate or all-inclusive. We are well aware of what Evelyn Fox Keller (2010, 17) has called “the presupposition of disjunction on which conjunction rests.” Indeed, some of the provocations in this inaugural issue make the very point that this separation is untenable, either conceptually or practically or both. The two realms may be distinguishable in many ways, but they are also intertwined and mutually transformative. Media are of interest precisely because they do transform: they enable, facilitate, and alternately foreclose divergent forms of communication, agency, and alteration to different players in the fields they bring together. They are tangible somethings, involved in novel forms of mingling and rearranging space, matter, substance, agency, sociality and identity, and sensorial perception and affectivity. They are material, rhetorical, infrastructural, and relationally active. To study the “state(s) of” media+environment, then, means to study what is being made of this high-stakes stew of concepts, relations, and social and physical bodies.

For this inaugural “stream” (our term for an ongoing collection) of Media+Environment, the editors invited distinguished respondents already working at these juxtapositions to share timely and provocative status reports based on their own interests and these questions:

- What are or should be the roles of media (traditional media, electronic media, media defined in its broadest or more specific formulations) in a world of socio-ecological crises, and how are media approaching and reconstituting those roles?
- How are media makers engaged in the production and resolution of environmental challenges? How are media being used by vulnerable or politically active communities of resistance?
• How are media themselves rewiring “the environment”—the natural and infrastructural environment, the social environment, the psychic and sensible environment—and what are the implications of this rewiring?

• How are media fields—from cinema studies, communication studies, and visual culture to production and policy—responding to environmental challenges?

• How are environmental fields—including sciences, humanities, policy, design, and activist communities—responding to and working with the changing social, technical, and policy frameworks of and around new media?

All these questions constitute the nexus at which Media+Environment intends to make its mark. Here follow the burning, stirring, informed, and empowering responses we received at the journal’s concerted outset. We anticipate many rejoinders—and very likely even more questions—coming forward as Media+Environment continues to facilitate critical and creative work and alliances with diverse peoples and publics. We hope that this mediated space—as a system of tributaries and confluences that may be added to—will be a thriving habitat for readers, scholars, artists, and activists of media, environment, and all that they conjoin.

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