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Culture
+ Technology

A PRIMER

"Technology as Articulation"

2005

Technology as Articulation

Perhaps the crucial thing to understand about articulation is the assertion that culture is made up of articulations (or connections) that are contingent. Contingency implies that these articulations or connections are not necessary, and it is possible that they could connect otherwise. In explaining how articulation works, Stuart Hall once used the image of a truck.[4] Imagine a semi with a cab and a trailer. The cab is articulated (connected) to the trailer. Together they constitute a connection, a relation, an articulation, and a unity: a truck. But this connection is not necessary. It is possible to disarticulate the cab and the trailer and rearticulate it by attaching a different cab or a different trailer. The newly configured truck is a new identity and a new unity, even though it too might still go by the name "truck." All identities or unities are like this: they are made up of articulations, but these articulations are neither necessary nor permanent. Identities are thus contingent; in other words, they are dependent on the articulation of particular elements that could change, thereby changing the composition of the identity. *Articulation can be understood as the contingent connection of different elements that, when connected in a particular way, form a specific unity.*

But what are these "elements" that get connected? The answer to this requires rethinking the term "element," which is misleading in that it suggests only "things," like cabs and trailers, or computers and video cameras. However, elements, understood as articulations, can be made of words, concepts, institutions, practices, and affects, as well as material things. Indeed, one can articulate an idea to an object to an affect, like connecting "progress" to automobiles to the affect "cool." In addition, every so-called element is itself an articulated identity, and therefore always part of a connection of still other "elements." A car is a unit, but it articulates many elements: parts, processes, a manufacturing industry, roads, advertising, an ideology of individualism, the pleasure of speed, and so on. The idea of progress seems to be a simple concept, but it too is made up of many other ideas, practices, and affects: a belief in evolution, the valuation of industrial technologies, the pleasure we take in gadgets, and so on. So rather than draw attention to the articulation of things, a cultural studies approach draws attention to the movement and the flows of relationships. Because language and popular philosophy have "taught" us to talk about and understand the world in terms of things, we do still tend to think and talk about things. But the challenge is to re-

member that even things are merely labels for momentarily frozen elements (misleadingly) isolated from the web of contingent relationships within which they are animated. Culture is better understood as the movement and flow of relationships within which things are created and animated, rather than as the accumulation of things.

We propose that you think about technologies in terms of articulations among the physical arrangements of matter, typically labeled technologies, and a range of contingently related practices, representations, experiences, and affects. Thus, surveillance technologies in the United States post-9/11 would be understood as being the particular contingent relationships among (at least) the following: the physical arrangements of matter (such as the thing we might call the video camera); the fear of terrorism; the propensity to think of space as something that needs to be controlled; a desire to care for and protect citizens; the belief that cultural profiling can predict and prevent terrorism and crime; the acceptance of a level of racism, classism, and sexism; a popular culture that idolizes new technology as "cool"; the titillation typically felt when snooping in a culture in which much is kept private; a strong commitment to the technological fix; a belief in the equation of new technologies with progress; the existence of a physical infrastructure and knowledge necessary to produce increasingly complex technology; a global intelligence community; a governmental leadership that emphasizes a particular political agenda; a legal practice that operates within a framework of rights and laws that define privacy within particular parameters, and so on.

These articulations are not fixed for all time; they do not remain permanently in place. They can and do change over time. But, here too, the speed and direction of change is contingent. Some articulations remain relatively tenacious; they are rather firmly forged and difficult to disarticulate. Hall called these "lines of tendential force," which draws attention to their tendency to remain articulated.[5] Others, however, might be more easily broken and thus subject to disarticulation and rearticulation. It all depends on the particulars of the nature of articulations at any particular historical moment. For example, on the one hand, legal efforts to protect the privacy of citizens, given their articulation to a political commitment to the rights of individuals expressed in the Bill of Rights, might be successful in reshaping the legal framework of what constitutes unjust invasion of privacy and effectively curtail certain forms of surveillance. On the other hand, the cultural commitment to the technological fix, to the equation of new technologies with progress, and the pleasure of the "cool," are not likely to go away any time soon. The tenacious force of this latter commitment will work against disarticulating the use of technologies in any form, most certainly against curtailing the "cool" use of surveillance technologies.

To think of technology as articulation insists, as should now be obvious, that technologies are not mere things. Rather, they consist of complex articulations that have been typically thought of as the context of a technology. But as you can see, one of the insights of articulation is that context, or culture, is not something "out there" out of which technology emerges or into which it is put. Rather, the

particular articulations that constitute a technology *are* its context. There is no culture *and* technology; rather there is *technological culture*.