

Media and Ambivalence: The Value of a Quandary

Introduction

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Ambivalence is often associated with indecision or ineptitude, capable of paralyzing our ability to make decisions and take sides. For institutions such as the media and academia, which privilege messages that project certainty, ambivalence is a particularly terrifying concept. Even so, the concept has been central to how media scholars have thought about messages, reception, effects, and technologies. While some consider that ambivalence undercuts and undermines the media environments it inhabits, others consider it is a necessary complication of the overused binaries of late modernity. This article argues that the presence of ambivalence in contemporary media environments may well be the best we can get in times of extreme polarization.

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In its most promising form, ambivalence presents a quandary. It suggests that being torn can be better than being sure, that conflict can be resolved by straddling both of its sides or that trying on different faces offsets the discomfort of contradiction. These steps are not immediately clear, because much about ambivalence is negative. Ambivalence conjures up circumstances that are decidedly incomplete, states of mind and actions supposedly riddled with incoherence, disorder, and unpredictability. Often associated with indecision, ineptitude, or incapacitation, ambivalence ends up making it hard to agree on which side of our social, legal, economic, cultural, religious, or political realities needs tending first.

When coupled with the media, the value of ambivalence becomes even more difficult to pin down. The media are designed to deliver missives that can project an air of certainty, regardless of how much doing so is justifiable or what is at stake. Among media scholars, admitting ambivalence can end up unravelling academic accomplishments and nullifying the knowledge generation so central to scholarly life.

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This creates its own problems for studying media environments. Zygmunt Bauman (1991) was among the most vocal to remind us that ambivalence has been what modernity always needed—a crutch to make the case for its own relevance. As modernity fronted a view of ambivalence as an obstruction to academic certainty, it produced an ongoing pivot toward consensus—in universities, disciplines, fields, and faculties—that necessarily thinned out ensuing scholarly endeavors. At what cost did the review boards, funding projects, journals, conferences, and professional associations diminish the value ambivalence could have had? It is difficult to say, for getting rid of ambivalence can reduce even what is most desirable and strived for into rigid and overly constrained modes of thought.

Why does all this matter? We need to recognize that being undecided—despite its limited positionality—has become our go-to response for just about everything. Think about politics and democracy. Public health and climate crisis. Disaster and conflict. Violence, state terror, and genocide. Projects that just a few years ago would have been assured a clear response today elicit little more than both-side-ism. Both/and, not either/or. So, it shouldn't be surprising that the extreme polarization currently embracing the globe now means that ambivalence may be as good as we get.

This has put media scholars in a singular position, for ambivalence has always been central to the discipline. It has been responsible for how media scholars think about messages, reception, effects and technologies. The discipline's ongoing back-and-forth between great/direct/powerful and limited/indirect/small media effects is testament to the role of ambivalence in demonstrating that the grass is greener on the other side (Gitlin, 1978; Katz, 1953; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1947). In his seminal work, Stuart Hall (1980) discussed both the polysemic nature of media texts and the multiple meanings they produce that foster ambivalent reception. Henry Jenkins' (1992) work demonstrated that as fans form emotional connections with media texts, they feel part of an engaged community while developing a critical stance on the texts at hand. Even when technology promises to foster collective action against injustice and political wrongdoings, as Sherry Turkle (2011) showed with digitization, it is also used to track, threaten, and silence activists who dare to speak against injustice (Morozov, 2011; Tufekci, 2017).

This means that media scholars have been among those who regard ambivalence in ambivalent ways. They have been instrumental in charting how we struggle to understand the conflicting processes that form our contemporary media landscapes. For some, ambivalence undercuts and undermines the media environments it inhabits, introducing a level of uncertainty that obscures both the media's workings—including its messages, roles, technologies, practices, and effects—and is most patterned and exceptional about the media writ large (Bourdieu, 1998; Harbers & Broersma, 2014). For others, ambivalence is a necessary complication of the overused binaries of late modernity, sustaining what American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (1936/2009) described as the "test of a first-rate intelligence," whose "ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" would produce generative opportunities built around the "the improbable, the implausible, often the impossible" (p. 69). Regardless, then, of how positively or negatively scholars feel about ambivalence, its presence is a clear component of media environments everywhere. It figures just as strongly in their scholarship.

And so, the issue we face is obvious: we need a better response for everything in media worlds that refuses categorization. Is it possible to reenergize ambivalence as it takes shape via the media? Can we figure out how to use it to correct our own blindness to certainty's limitations? Can we use ambivalence as a preferable frame for knowledge generation? Can we establish who gets to decide on or demonstrate ambivalence, and under which conditions? Most important, can we clarify why we've been so slow to recognize that media environments have never been as clear-cut as we would like them to be?

The articles in this Special Section consider these questions by discussing how different media and technologies help create ambivalent meanings and complicate the debates taking place in the public realm in different social and political contexts. All the articles are extended versions of papers presented at the 4th edition of the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication, jointly organized by the faculty of human sciences at the Catholic University of Portugal and the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication (University of Pennsylvania), in coordination with the Chinese University of Hong Kong's School of Journalism and Communication, the Annenberg Schools at the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Helsinki's Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities, and The Europaeum.

In the opening article, titled "Repetition and Ambivalence in COVID-related Chinese Political Jokes," Ran Wang discusses how the ambivalent meaning of political jokes challenges the normative boundaries of politics. Through a case study of COVID-19 jokes in Chinese social media, the author argues that ambiguous jokes repeatedly shared online result in the creation of new meanings. By foregrounding repetition as a key mechanism in joke circulation, the study provides valuable insights into how political humor operates in digital environments in an authoritarian context.

The second article, "Destroyer of Worlds": Individual Narratives, Mass Atrocity, and (Moral) Ambivalence" by Liz Hallgren, discusses the release of Christopher Nolan's (2023) Oscar-winning film, *Oppenheimer*, and the Biden administration's decision to sanction the use of cluster munitions in the Ukraine War. Providing an in-depth analysis of how the narrative events were constructed in the media, the author argues that both actions can be understood as a single discursive event and that the narrative modes that privilege the individual as the central node for understanding mass atrocity allow for the emergence of vacuous moral ambivalence.

The next article, "Is It a Fit or Is She Just Skinny? A TikTok Hashtag as a Site of Ambiguity Around Fashion, Gender, and Women's Bodies" by Ira Solomatina, analyzes how videos posted on TikTok under the hashtag #IsItAFitOrIsSheJustSkinny assimilated women's dissatisfaction and anger around the discriminatory practices of the fashion industry. Using discourse analysis, the article demonstrates the lack of inclusivity and the promotion of thinness by fashion brands and argues that the videos posted on TikTok to criticize such practices functioned as expressions of postfeminist aesthetic productivity.

Authored by Fernanda Soria-Cruz, the fourth article examines femicide in Mexico and how it emerged as an ambivalent phenomenon. The author argues that tensions in forensic, legal, activist, and media practices play a central role in the construction of what counts as femicide through complex practices of refusal, misclassification, and resistance. Grounded in agential realism and forensic

theories, "*No Fue Suicidio, Fue Femicidio!*: Ambivalent Facts in the (Un)making of Femicide in Mexico" concludes that the struggle between erasure and hypervisibility complicates feminist demands for justice and accountability.

The last article, "The Ambivalences of Virtual Love: Conversational, Embodied, and Hyperreal Intimacy in the Social VR Platform VRChat," by Jindong Leo-Liu, addresses the reshaping of virtual landscapes of intimacy with the introduction of new technologies. Focusing on social virtual reality, the author addresses the different forms of virtual intimacy on VRChat and how they reflect and reconstruct the ambivalences between virtuality and reality. Based on digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, the article posits that hyperreal intimacy can function as an effective concept for understanding the potential achievement of virtuality-reality harmony in emerging virtual environments.

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