

The Media



How do different communications media influence the social experience of space and time?

This question is not specifically asking you to set up an argument or debate, but rather to describe the range of ways in which different media influence the experience of space and time. The shifting experience of space and time has come to the fore as a topic of sociological debate since the development of global digital technologies, and this recent change will no doubt occupy much of your essay. Remember, though, that older technologies such as print media and radio also shaped and still shape our experiences of space and time. To provide a good answer, though, you need to do more than just provide a list of examples. You will also need to draw upon some of the models of the media offered in the chapter to structure your answer.

The main theoretical models available in the section ‘Theorizing the media’ are from McLuhan, Habermas, Baudrillard and Thompson. McLuhan is perhaps the most immediately appealing because the world of globalized communications would seem to support his idea of the global village, an unbounded space where we are all neighbours. Baudrillard goes beyond this and sees the penetration of the media into all aspects of social life as transforming the social into a realm of hyperreality: the very nature of reality has changed and is no longer externally anchored in time or space. Habermas concentrates on the transformation of the public sphere through the development of new technologies. The public sphere is a conceptual space rather than a physical location but the growth of communications has extended its range – from eighteenth-century coffee houses in the First World to a potentially global online community. This optimistic view needs to be questioned, as global communication could equally open the possibility of global misinformation, ideology or distraction. Thompson’s distinction between face-to-face and mediated interaction is useful in looking at different media, as is his distinction between interaction and quasi-interaction. Face-to-face interaction is rooted in time and space, whereas mediated communication stretches these interactions across the globe.



You may choose to use all or only some of these theorists in your essay. The important thing is that you link the theories to the examples you are discussing. A wealth of examples is available in the chapter to build into your argument. The Internet is a clear example of a new kind of virtual social space where physical distance is made irrelevant by the instantaneous means of communication. Equally, you could explore these themes using television, mobile phones or global entertainment media as examples. How would the different theorists react to these examples?



Your discussion could take many forms, but in drawing it to a conclusion you need to be wary of making generalizations about ‘the media’. Keep constantly in mind that different media have different impacts upon the experience of time and space and that the impacts will vary depending upon the social context in which they occur.