Communication is at the root of all human existence. The recording and disseminating of ideas and speech via media is the basis of society and culture. Theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Guy Debord have shown that media is pervasive, influential and powerful. In the era of electronic reproduction, where notions of time, space and representation are questioned, media design functions by critically examining and responding to these forces. For Walter Benjamin, film revolutionized representation, empowering the spectator as participant and profoundly affecting culture and society. Media design seeks to create these kinds of interventions and experiences that elicit response and demand active interaction. McLuhan argues that while print serves to fragment, separate, and promote individualism within society, “electronic devices are new forms of work, decentralized and made available to everyone.” (McLuhan, p.8) Media design helps to connect culture, society and technology in more flexible, relevant and unifying ways.

Media theorists examine the ways time, space, representation and authorship have changed, revealing new meanings and significance. We live in a world of instantaneity and disposability, of borderless space and accelerated time. In Peter Lunenfeld’s words, we exist in a “permanent present”. Jean Baudrillard calls it a “hyperreality”, where things are more real than real, and, at the same time, nothing is real. We experience the world through Debord’s “spectacle”, filtered through media and presented in massive quantities. Commodification has broken down the “aura” of authorship and originality, and as Benjamin states, mechanical reproduction has liberated the “object”. On the one hand, a media saturated existence and sense of distraction could foster an atmosphere of anxiety, as filmmaker David Cronenberg illustrates in “Videodrome”. On the other, McLuhan urges us to see it in another way: “Instant speeds abolish time and space and return man to an integral and primitive awareness” (McLuhan, p. 152) Whether via video installations, GPS devices or database technologies, media design can help us to experience and understand what happens when the constraints of the status quo are lifted.

The political and subversive power of media is another subject worth examining. Magnus Ezensberger writes: “The new media are oriented towards not action, not
contemplation; towards present, not tradition…The media produces no objects that can be hoarded and auctioned.” (Enzensberger, p. 265) The Situationists used subversive tactics such as derive and detournement, via juxtaposition, simultaneity, and surprise. Since media designers are faced with the challenge of creating things that are ephemeral and conceptual, these kinds of tactics are important to think about the world critically and in a productive manner.

It is interesting to look at how McLuhan describes our relationship to the media in the electronic age in terms of print. He writes of typographic print as a fragmenting force in society. Like time, print is a construct used to impose order, regularity, and detachment, and offer a “private point of view”. (McLuhan, p. 172) Electronic media, on the other hand, is described as a “cool” medium—low in data, but encouraging participation to find meaning. An example would be the internet or blogs which offer a more balanced level of interactivity and potential community building properties.

Participation, collaboration, research, and theory are vital properties of media design. In the era of electronic reproduction, it is also important to examine how information is communicated. The unidirectional flow of information from producer to consumer is no longer acceptable. In the essay “Tele-Information Systems” the authors describe several ways information can be dispersed (allocation, conversation, consultation and registration). (Bordewijk, p. 576-583) Media design is conscious of how these systems interact while developing new technologies and strategies to keep the balance of power in check.

By re-envisioning the world in new and interesting ways, media design offers an alternative set of criteria to view rapidly changing environment in which we live. In the electronic age it is even more imperative that media design raise awareness and develop technologies that are productive, engaging and empowering.

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Bordewijk, Jan L and Ben van Kaam, “Towards a New Classification of Tele-Information Services” from New Media Reader, p. 576-583, (2003, Massachusetts)