

Keywords revisited: *media*

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1. Introduction

In 1976, and indeed seven years later when he revised *Keywords*, Raymond Williams could not have envisaged just how significant the media, one of his lifelong interests, would become in late twentieth-century society. His entry on the term *media* (and also *medium*) comprises just over one page.¹

For linguists or philologists, however, what is of interest is not so much that the last thirty years have brought about a complex technological revolution, which has affected every aspect of life at home, school or in the workplace, but that the tiny word used to reflect such crucial changes, itself already overloaded with meaning, has had to keep up. Or shall we say tiny words. My concern in this article, particularly in its second part, is with representations of cultural value in our conceptualisation of media texts, institutions and industries, expressed particularly in the semantic prosody of the word *media* and its associated compounds.

What follows is also an attempt to do justice to what Williams saw as a kind of “historical semantics”: “the emphasis is not only on historical origins and developments but also on the present – present meanings, implications and relationships – as history. This recognizes . . . that there is indeed community between past and present”.² Williams is generally much more drawn to the less harmonious aspects of this process: the conflicts and discontinuities. But, as I hope to show, for this keyword the past also happily informs the present, in that the meanings are more integrated than might be at first apparent; and most conflicts of meaning are nicely resolved in grammar.

It will be remembered that William Empson, in his review of *Keywords*, detected a rather gloomy tone to the whole book; I have adopted a more sanguine, Empsonian stance.³ But, like Empson in his work and Williams in *Keywords*, we must begin with the invaluable *OED*.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (1976; London: Fontana Press, 1988), 203–4.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ William Empson, review first published in the *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1977; reprinted as ‘Compacted Doctrines’ in *Ambiguity: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 184.

2. *Medium*

Williams's "history" of *medium* is of necessity quite brief, since he is anxious to get on to *media*, but he succinctly notes its origins and earliest sense "from medium, L – middle . . . in regular use in English from IC16, and from at latest eC17 . . . [in] the sense of an intervening or intermediary agency or substance" (*intermediary* and *intermediate* also come from the same root).

Quotations from Burton and Bacon follow, Bacon's - although truncated - containing an interesting linguistic collocation: "[But yet is of necessitie cogitations bee] expressed by the Medium of Wordes". Williams, surprisingly perhaps, makes no comment on this very early association of language, and speech and writing, with information media and as "channels" or "vehicles" of communication; but language as the medium of thought, the phonic medium of speech and graphic medium of writing, are still very common expressions. Indeed, in some modern reference books *medium* is only defined in this particular sense.⁴

In all editions of the *OED* Williams's basic sense of *medium* is unpicked, as it were, to include related senses (not necessarily in the same order in the different editions):

- (1) something intermediate between two degrees;
- (2) an intervening substance through which force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses (e.g. as a vehicle for light and sound: since the sixteenth century); and
- (3) a pervading substance (e.g. aetherial medium: since the seventeenth century).

Not unexpectedly, all of these senses are non-animate. Then in the 1850s, first in America and then in Britain, we find: "A person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate between the living and the dead" [my italics]. The *OED* has only one other example before this date of *medium* used for a human being (an interpreter to a king, 1817); and it only has one after (a *gobetweeen* between squatters, 1896; online edition). In essence, the discourse of spiritualism, which came into prominence on both sides of the Atlantic from the 1850s onwards, nicely appropriated the word as a metaphor (not signalled as such by the *OED*); and it has outlasted possible alternatives such as *automatist* or *sensitive*.⁵ *Psychic* was certainly applied to the celebrated

⁴ Not surprisingly perhaps, see the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, ed. Tom McArthur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner, *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); who strangely omit *media*.

⁵ Frederic Myers, one of the founders of the Society of Psychical Research in the 1880s which was set up to investigate the claims of spiritualism, thought *medium* "a barbarous and question begging term", since no intermediary function could be proved. (He preferred his own coinage *automatist*.) His friend Sir William Barrett agreed. See William F. Barrett, *On the Threshold of the Unseen* (1895; London: Kegan Paul and Co. Ltd, 1917), 124–5.

D. D. Home, the model for Browning's 'Mr Sludge', to whom I return below; but today the word tends to be used as a generic term, or as an alternative to *clairvoyant*, since, technically speaking, psychics do not necessarily claim to be in contact with the dead. The answer to the persistence of the term *medium* appears to lie precisely in the history of the word, and in its inanimate, rather technical senses. As stated above, it collocated with *light* and *sound* and also with *the (a)ether*; and it could be used to mean 'instrument', 'vehicle' or 'channel' of communication. Given the far from fortuitous links between spiritualism and the rapid development of technology, particularly in relation to the new marvels of transatlantic communications, spiritualists were keen to emphasise the medium's role as a technical transmitter, and have been from the nineteenth century to the present day quick to adopt any scientific imagery which would emphasise that the medium functioned like a piece of technical apparatus such as a telephone exchange.⁶ The medium even today will still "tune in" to the "vibrations"; or will "get X coming through" or have "crossed lines". There is perhaps the echo of radio collocations such as *medium wave* or *medium frequency*. Hilary Mantel's fictional medium contemplates: "you did get these crossed wires, from time to time. Something to do with radio frequencies, perhaps?" And she tells her audience:

"When I get a message from spirit world, I can't give it back . . . Think of me as your answering machine. Imagine if people from spirit world had phones. Now your answering machine, you press the button and it plays your messages back. It doesn't wipe some out, on the grounds that you don't need to know them."

"And it records the wrong numbers, too", said a pert girl near the front . . .⁷

The medium is the medium. The effect is to depersonalise, to make alien; but also to deny human agency, and hence any moral responsibility. Spiritualism is also legitimated, elevated to a science.

In Browning's poem 'Mr Sludge, "The Medium"', published in 1864, the author seems highly conscious both of the novelty of the term (note the quotation marks in the title) and of its polysemic origins. In adjacent stanzas the differing senses are played upon: first of all, the sense of 'intermediary' or 'channel':

⁶ See Steve Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Katie Wales, 'Communication Between Worlds: Scientific Imagery in Nineteenth-century Spiritualism', in *(Re)creating Science in Nineteenth-century Britain: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Amanda Caleb Mordavsky (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). Scientific imagery was also used by the scientists who investigated mediums.

⁷ Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black* (London: Harper, 2005), 26. Compare this non-fictional description by a practising medium: "a medium is like a telephone exchange. She does not call up the dead – they call her up. Like British Telecom, sometimes the wires get crossed or there is interference on the line or the voice at the other end is so faint that it is hard to make out what the person is saying." Also: "The process [of communication] is rather like tuning the knobs on a television to get better reception" (Linda Williamson, *Mediums and their Work* (London: Robert Hale, 1990), 75).

Sludge, our friend,
 Serves as this window, whether thin or thick,
 Or stained or stainless; he's the medium-pane
 Through which, to see us and be seen, they peep . . .
 [medium-pane not in the OED]
 . . .
 Or else it's – 'What's a "medium"? He's a means,
 Good, bad, indifferent, still the only means
 Spirits can speak by . . .'⁸

In the second stanza quoted, there is again the sense of 'means' or 'channel', but also an echo of the *OED*'s first sense of *medium* as 'the mean', 'middle quality': neither good nor bad but indifferent; or 'mediocre' (also etymologically related); or a happy medium, so to speak. Actually, a medium got there first with that pun: Colin Fry went round the UK last year filling civic theatres with his "Happy Medium Tour".

As Empson stated in his review of Williams, "the different meanings within one word are liable to intercut".⁹ Browning's wordplay is but a heightened form of what mediumship has always done, which is to exploit the technical associations of the word in line with the exploitation of communications technology. Mediums are, in effect, media mediums, and always have been. The sub-title of Marina Warner's latest work of cultural history *Phantasmagoria* undoubtedly plays on the common root of psychic and conduit: *Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-first Century*.¹⁰ The first "rappings" resembled Morse Code; the direct voice mediums aped the gramophone trumpet with their speaking tubes; today's messages from so-called *mental mediums* come via "psychic hotlines"; and you can even "text-a-psychic". Hence, "call the live medium line to see if there is a message for you". Spiritualism, then, in a *Keywords* sense, has always "tuned in" to the *Zeitgeist* and today is big business, in this "New Age" of ESP and alternative religions and therapies. In turn the media "ghost" the mediums.

In September 2006 *The Times* reported on a cross-media installation at the Brontë parsonage involving a psychic and a medium talking to camera about their "spiritual vibes". Coventry University has recently launched a Masters course in parapsychology, which includes an option on the representation of the paranormal in the media. The aim of the course is to provide a "middle

⁸ Robert Browning, *Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 503. The quotation marks in the title of the poem are likely to be ironic.

⁹ Empson, "Compacted Doctrines", 184.

¹⁰ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

ground” – a happy medium again? – between science and religion.¹¹

3. *Media*

There is no doubting the continuing cultural significance of the word *media*, which has hardly yielded to other possible synonyms in the past century. Moreover, it is difficult for lexicographers to keep abreast of the large numbers of new collocations and compounds which in turn reflect the latest technological advances in communications and the media or electronic revolution which has resulted in what Kristeva sees as our “mediatic society”.¹²

Even the OED online entry for the word (last updated in June 2001) has not yet taken *new media* developments into account: *digital* and *computerised media*, *e-media* or *electronic media*, *hypermedia*, *mixed media*, *DIY media* and *multi-media*.¹³ In an age of mass-production and mass-marketing (see below), the sheer diversity is perhaps unexpected, almost oxymoronic. Jan Zita Grover, in an article on the keywords surrounding AIDS, writes aptly of Williams’s set of words being “at the straining points” in society, and *media*, in this new millennium, must now be the prime example of this.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the word features in a special double issue of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, on “A lexicon for the millennium”.¹⁵

In one sense *media* is a classic example of the kind of semantic change that happens when objects change – like *pen*: meanings changing in response to changing social needs. As Williams states: “words which seem to have been [here] for centuries . . . have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning”.¹⁶ Yet *media* of necessity is more complex than a word like *pen*. There appear to be three main uses, around which different kinds of compounds or collocations tend to cluster.

1. The most up-to-date reference is to *new media* referred to above, to designate the products of the internet, DVD, mobile phone, satellite and digital TV, et cetera. To the list of words above can be added *ethernet media*, *Me Media*, *moving image media*, *screen media*, *online news media* and *web-based media*. Lexically, we can note how *media* forms the base of the collocation or compound, reflecting the diversity of types or genres. *New media* have also,

¹¹ The phrase used by the course director, reported in the *London Student*, 5 June 2006.

¹² In *After the Revolution: On Kristeva*, ed. John Lechte and Mary Zournani (Sydney: Artspace, 1998).

¹³ *Multi-media* is, strictly, not to be confused with *multi-modality/multi-modal*: the latter refer to all kinds of semiotic channels (e.g. visual and paralinguistic). However, the advent of *new media* has undoubtedly “enriched” the meaning of this term.

¹⁴ Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords”, in, *The State of the Language*, ed. C. Ricks and L. Michaels (London: Faber and Faber), 142.

¹⁵ Debra Spitulnik, “Media”, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9:1–2 (1999), 148–51.

¹⁶ Williams, *Keywords*, 17.

significantly, given the root word *medium* a new lease of life, in that we talk of the *medium* of Netspeak; or of text-messaging; or of tape or disk for recording and copying; also known as *format*.

2. The second sense, culturally predominant still, is that traced historically by the *OED* as “the main means of mass communication”: collectively newspapers, radio, television and advertising, derived from the phrase *mass media* in the early 1920s, with ‘mass’ (referring to the large audience reached) quickly absorbed. In this sense *media* generally refers to news media in popular parlance, despite the influence of advertising revenue on all kinds of news dissemination, including on the internet. *The press*, however, is no longer a close synonym, since this phrase now tends to be used of traditional printed newspapers (which may themselves be obsolete within a generation). Popular magazines, terrestrial and satellite TV (broadcast media) are better served in this sense by the word *media*. The *broadcast media* in particular, including the internet, are characterised by *immediacy*: a word from the same Latin root.¹⁷

3. Closely related to this sense is one which has acquired some human connotations: namely that of the reporters or journalists working for organisations engaged in mass communication, an aspect recognised by the *Encarta World English Dictionary*, for instance.¹⁸ To Williams’s own collocations that included *media people*, *media agencies*, can be added *media consultant*, *media man*, *media pundits* and so forth. This is no metaphorical process, however, as appeared to be the case with the *psychic medium* above, but an (almost inevitable) less figurative process of metonymy, as in use of *the Press*, *Board*, *White House* and so on to refer to the people in those institutions as well as the institutions themselves. The human reference is made obvious in sentences with some kinds of verbs, e.g. when pop stars and the royal family are either *hounded* or *greeted* “by the media”; or when “the media have refrained from comment”.

What also needs to be recognised here, however, is an evaluative dimension to the word: what Bill Louw might call its ‘semantic prosody’.¹⁹ This was quite evident when *mass media* was in vogue (from the 1920s), since ‘mass’ could quickly become synonymous not simply with ‘uniform’ but

¹⁷ John Lechte, “The Who and the What of Writing in the Electronic Age”, *Oxford Literary Review*, 21 (1999), 14.

¹⁸ *The Encarta World English Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

¹⁹ Bill Louw, “Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer? The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosodies”, in *Text and Technology* ed. M. Baker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993), 147–76. See also Quentin Skinner in his discussion of *Keywords*, concerned with the direction of any keyword’s “evaluative force”: “Language and Social Change”, in *The State of the Language*, ed. L. Michaels and C. Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 574.

with ‘vulgar’ or, in contemporary usage, the phrase *dumbed down*: cf. *mass-production*, *mass-market*, *mass culture*, *mass leisure*. Even in the late 1950s, Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* uncomfortably implicates the new post-war television culture, a manifestation of the “mass media of communication”, as a kind of opiate of the working classes, alongside the *pulp fiction* of romance and thriller. Williams’s *Culture and Society*, published around the same time, also criticises the shallowness of modern mass culture and entertainment.²⁰ Move on to the final quarter of the twentieth century and the word *media* itself has acquired pejorative connotations, not in consequence of its dissemination across society at large but because of the juxtaposition of certain cultural trends which reflect the media’s own agencies: the unquestionable growth in power of the *tabloids* vis-à-vis the *broadsheets*; their influence in politics; the rise of *yoof culture* with its gossip magazines and cult of the pop star and celebrity; and hence the rise of *the paparazzi*. All these inflationary tendencies can be symbolised in the 1983 ironic respelling *meeja*, self-reflexively coined in the media. The same *media* also gave rise to compounds reflecting the overall cultural shift (not all of them noted by the *OED*), such as *media blitz*, *media circus*, *media coverage*, *media darling*, *media exposure*, *media event*, *media exposure*, *media hype*, *media industry*, *media interview*, *media interest*, *media junkie*, *media markets*, *media personality*; *media-friendly*, *media-gate*, *mediagenic*, *media-saturated*, *media-savvy*, *media-shy*, *media-speak*, *media-wise*. We can note here the use of *media* in the attributive “topic” position, reflecting its cultural importance.²¹ We might, therefore, contemplate calling *media* an Empsonian “pet word” rather than a keyword as such.²²

Part of the negative prosody attached to *media* and what the word stands for has been displaced onto *media studies*. Although the phrase is first recorded in the *OED* from 1951, the discipline itself was slow to take root in either the British or American education systems. Indeed, Branston and Stafford think it is a “young subject”, with syllabuses still being developed at secondary level by the various examining bodies.²³ However, in a form much influenced by cultural studies, communication studies, journalism, film studies, design, semiotics and linguistics, *media studies* is common across the Higher Education sector, especially in arts and humanities. Critics of the discipline - and there have been many - dub it a “soft” option, and a “Mickey Mouse” degree.²⁴

²⁰ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Pelican, 1957); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958). See also Raymond Williams, *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).

²¹ *Media* plus noun sequences are noted as ‘relatively productive’ in contemporary English, especially in the register of news, by Douglas Biber et al., *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (London: Longman, 1999), 592.

²² A “petword” is peculiar to a period; a “keyword” is more literary: William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), 73–4.

²³ Gill Branston and Roy Stafford, *The Media Student’s Book* (3rd edn.; London: Routledge, 2003), 2–3.

²⁴ The epithet was apparently first used as a disparaging metaphor as early as 1931. There is no entry in the *OED* for a degree course in the UK, but in 1958 for an American course and 1992 for an elective unit.

There have been reports in the press in 2006 that “elite” institutions such as Oxbridge colleges would refuse to accept media studies as an ‘A’ level, despite the fact that those same institutions now incorporate film into their English and foreign language degrees; and there were implications in the same coverage that only “working-class” or “poor” students would study the subject. Interestingly, the *OED* has a quotation from the *Daily Telegraph* ten years ago which states that “It has been an uphill struggle to persuade universities to accept entrants with A-level subjects such as media studies”. Nonetheless, many academics recognise that young people have a range of competences to handle the new technology, as well as a high degree of *media literacy*; and their ranking in respective status of the *mediums* (sic) of film and printed texts differs from that of older generations. Even at primary school level, new media-based modes of pedagogy are proliferating.²⁵ As a field, *media studies* takes seriously many of the issues which concerned Williams, and which are also touched on in the entry for *media* in the book *New Keywords* edited by Tony Bennett and others in 2005.²⁶ Such issues concern power and monopoly (*media barons, media brand, media conglomerates, media institutions, etc.*), as well as the idea of *mediation* (from the same root).

Mediation has a separate entry in Williams’s *Keywords*, which refers to the “social agencies . . . deliberately interposed between reality and social consciousness, to prevent an understanding of reality”.²⁷ Such “agencies” later became crucial in the work of Norman Fairclough in critical discourse analysis (CDA), giving rise to a new subject area called *mediated discourse analysis*.²⁸ For Fairclough, the domain of politics produces a particular kind of *mediatised discourse*, in which *the media*, manipulated by spin-doctors, play a central role between politicians and the public. With the notion of ‘go-between-ness’ so prevalent in this field, is the etymological sense of *medium* so far remote? Branston and Stafford think not. Modern media, they say on the first page of their widely used textbook, could be seen as “a kind of conveyor belt of meaning between, or in the middle of, ‘the world’, and audiences” (my italics); and in the margin they add a note: “The word *media* comes from the Latin word *medium* meaning middle”.²⁹

The extent to which developments in the media “mirror” or “express” social change in an apparently neutral way, but at the same time influence or shape the social and cultural landscape (and even human consciousness), is something also discussed by *media students*, as the issue of

²⁵ Most recently vice-chancellors joined in the debate to defend media studies and other “Mickey Mouse” courses, in a report nicknamed “The Mouse that Roared” (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1 December 2006). The report argues that in 2003 the “media and fashion industry” was worth £90 billion. Boris Johnson, Shadow Higher Education Minister, is quoted in the piece as saying: “There are some courses that are not as taxing as they should be, but I believe in academic freedom”.

²⁶ David Morley, “Media”, in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, eds. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 211–14.

²⁷ Williams, *Keywords*, 206.

²⁸ See, for example, Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Longman, 1995); and Rodney Jones and Sigrid Norris, *Discourse in Action: Introducing Mediated Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2005).

²⁹ Branston and Stafford, *The Media Student’s Book*, 9.

determinism. As Quentin Skinner puts it, “our social vocabulary helps to constitute the character of our practices”.³⁰ The medium is not simply a channel, intermediary or transparent window-pane. In this context one might consider current debates in the press about text-messaging. Arising as a by-product of mobile-phone technology, it is teenage consumers who have popularised this “medium”, and also invented a language for it: the medium has created the message. The debate around this development is whether their linguistic behaviour in using this medium (e.g. in spelling and syntax) is being shaped by it; and if so whether for good or ill. There have been similar debates in the post-war period about the effect of comics (the 1950s) and about computer games (the 1980s). There are also related debates about the broader, allegedly detrimental effect of text-messaging on the English language as a whole, especially following recent claims that text-message forms are being allowed in GCSE English examinations.³¹ Morley’s entry on “Media” in *New Keywords* seems to strike the right balance: we “have to recognise”, he says, “the very real transformative power of these [new] media technologies without falling into an overly deterministic mode of explanation of their effects”.³²

Nonetheless, the tone of Morley’s entry can appear over-optimistic at other points. Despite a Marxist slant to the publication as a whole, he argues in this contributions that we are entering a much more “democratic” age of individualised and interactive communication,³³ though without evaluating how far we are also in the age of oligarchies including Microsoft, Google, and eBay, as well as *media conglomerates* like Sony, AOL TimeWarner and Disney which, by a kind of *media imperialism*, control *cross-media* global communications. Just as the development of (earlier) *modern media*, as Williams observes, occurred simultaneously with the growth of advertising in the early twentieth century, so the revenues of today’s internet companies are largely dependent on *e-media* advertising. In October 2006, Google acquired YouTube, which shows home videos, precisely because of the huge potential for advertising revenue.

4. *Medium(s) and media(s)*

Williams’s entry on *media* concludes rather abruptly with a single sentence, almost an afterthought: “It might be added that in its rapid popularization since the 1950s *media* has come often to be used as a singular (cf. phenomena)”.³⁴ But why, we might ask? Is it simply to do with the Anglicisation

³⁰ Quentin Skinner, “Language and Social Change”, 576.

³¹ In the *Daily Mail* (2 November 2006), Murdo Fraser, deputy leader of the Scottish Conservatives, is quoted as saying: “You wonder what future there is for grammar and high standards of English usage when this kind of thing is allowed to go on”.

³² Morley, “Media”, 213.

³³ Under “Mass”, 207–9, Morley does acknowledge that this might be a kind of pseudo-individualism.

³⁴ Williams, *Keywords*, 204.

of so-called “foreign plurals”, which he is implying? The whole issue of foreign plurals hides long-felt pedagogical concerns regarding elitism or social snobbery, as well as fears of “dumbing down”. The *OED* has a pertinent quotation from Kingsley Amis in 1966: “The treatment of media as a singular noun is spreading into the upper cultural strata” (and not “stratum”, note).

From a purely linguistic point of view, because of the complex semantic history and usages of *medium* and *media* to the present day it is difficult to find analogous words: not even *phenomena*, let alone *strata*, *criteria*, or *agenda* (as singular), despite their similar semantic vacillation as regards degree of countability. *Data* may pattern with a singular or plural verb, but *datum* is hardly used any more (nor is *agendum*). We might ponder with Skinner, who queries in relation to *Keywords* generally whether “linguistic disagreements” are also disagreements “about our social world itself”.³⁵ But precisely because of the complex usage of *medium* and *media*, issues of concord and plurality are being slowly resolved by native speakers of English: a system is emerging from usage, as grammar configures with different senses:

- 1 (a) *A/the medium* (‘psychic’) *is . . . ; (the) mediums are . . .*
- (b) *A/the medium* (‘material’, ‘format’) *is . . . ; the media are . . .*
- 2 (a) *The media have* (pl.) *been (camped on the star’s doorstep)* (i.e. ‘collective’); + *they/their*
- (b) *The media is* (sing.) *a powerful force in politics* (i.e. ‘mass’ noun); + *it/its*
- (c) *A (new) media; the (new) medias* (pl., ‘count’ noun)

In 2(a), *media* as a collection of individuals functions like nouns such as *police*; in 2(b), as a mass entity it functions like *the press*, and the singularity in the grammatical agreement seems to strengthen the meaning of institutionalisation. In 2(c), because of the proliferating diversity of *new media*, it is not surprising that a formal plural should be used. Nor is it surprising that any of these should be treated as a countable object.³⁶ But the “anomalous” marking, however widely condemned in the past, certainly works symbolically to distinguish the new electronic technology from the traditional.

Dictionaries and guides to usage are an interesting historical record of attitudes to concord and plurality with *medium*. But even with these sources, readers should always be wary of their date of composition. Twenty years ago, Greenbaum and Whitcut in their revision of Gowers were quite

³⁵ Skinner, “Language and Social Change”, 567.

³⁶ Cf. in Black South African English, where *luggage* as a singular is equivalent to a *piece of luggage*: hence plural *luggages*.

categorical: “the plural can only be *media*, and *media* can only be plural”.³⁷ Whitcut’s own new edition of Eric Partridge, ten years on again, advised that the singular noun is “a practice to be eschewed”. Burchfield, in his revised edition of Fowler less than ten years ago recommends “When in doubt use the plural”, but “never write *a media* or *the media(s)*”.³⁸ The more recent *Encarta World English Dictionary* simply states that either a singular or plural verb will do, as indeed with *media studies*.

Present-day linguistic corpora can tabulate user preferences in concord in a non-impressionistic way. However, pronouncements still vary. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, a corpus-based work, asserts that with *media*, “plural concord is the majority choice”, though whether in writing or speech is not stated.³⁹ But Pam Peters, using data from the British National Corpus, finds the singular and plural verbs equally common, though in spoken examples the singular “predominates”.⁴⁰ It would be interesting to pursue the analysis in further detail, focusing on whether the mass or collective nuance prevails in the data.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show how - despite a proliferation of senses over the centuries and in particular during the twentieth century to keep pace with technological and cultural developments - the meanings of *medium* are more “integrated” in the Empsonian sense than one might at first think.⁴¹ But the semantic load carried increasingly by *media* is leading to a particularly striking pattern not simply of a plural re-registered as a singular in meaning, but also of a plural re-registered as a singular in form. As Williams makes clear, he was never interested only in words and their meanings; his study of keywords formed part of a larger, materialist history which explored “the practices and institutions which we group as *culture and society*”.⁴² *Medium* and *media* are significant words in such a history. My emphasis above, however, in bringing the word into the twenty-first century, has been mainly philological rather than sociological. I have produced, in the end, what Williams felt was important but also needed to be linked to wider cultural analysis: a series of updated footnotes to the monumental historical dictionary that is the *OED*.

³⁷ Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut, *The Complete Plain Words by Sir Ernest Gowers Revised* (London: HMSO, 1986), 132. Gowers himself, in 1948 – had he noted *media* – might have been more tolerant. He writes of words like *government* that “there is no rule; either a singular or plural verb may be used”. But he does advocate consistency within the same document. See his *Plain Words* (London, HMSO, 1948), 74.

³⁸ Janet Whitcut, *Eric Partridge’s Usage and Abusage Revised* (London: Penguin, 1994), 187; R.W. Burchfield, *Fowler’s Modern English Usage* (rev. 3rd edn.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 488

³⁹ Douglas Biber et al., *The Longman Grammar*, 181.

⁴⁰ Pam Peters, *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 342–3.

⁴¹ Empson, *Structure of Complex Words*, 50.

⁴² Williams, *Keywords*, 15 [my italics in quote].