



Karl-Heinz SpieÖ. *Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 323 pp. EUR 62.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08034-7.



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Communication History in German Scholarship

Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter, edited by Karl-Heinz SpieÖ, is a collection of essays from the editors of the Mittelalterzentrum at the University of Greifswald, who organized the lecture series “Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter” in winter semester 2000-2001 as an interdisciplinary effort on the form and function of communication past and present. The series, of which this work is volume 15, previously addressed only early modern and modern topics. This is the first volume to consider the medieval period. As the preface mentions, a great deal of new research has been done in recent years on expanding the discourse on communication history in relation to the Middle Ages. The work includes the disciplines of history, art history, archeology, as well as German and Romance literature studies. It also covers forms such as the body, objects of daily life, letters, pictures, coats of arms, theater and fliers. The definition of the concept of communication is not entirely clear and each author in this work has, at least to some extent, a different take on its uses. Communication has become an almost universal category in this sense without any clearly defined constraints. I am left with the impression that the editors believe communication, as a category, deserves a place beside class, gender, and the nation in determining

how we make sense of the world. This theory suggests that one can reconstruct a sense of meaningful communication via a particular means of media that greatly improves our understanding of the past.

Although this field is potentially vast, Volker Depkat in the first essay provides an excellent discussion of terminology and its relation to the concept of historical communication and historical media. His essay establishes a basis for further research into these areas. Media history is the history of the technological means by which messages are passed. Communication history is the history of social communication in which media history plays a major role. He is particularly focused on the works of Habermas and Luhmann, giving clear summaries of their positions as well as being critical of their limitations. The essay takes the view of Habermas, who understands communication as a means of acting and behaving in the world. For Habermas, a theory of communication would be that truth is not absolute for all societies at all times; it is constantly renegotiated. Communication is centered on success in that it aims for mutual understanding. Truth in communication is an assumption that individuals make in order to allow communication to function. The second part of his essay addresses

communication in respect to particular use in medieval studies. Finally, he provides a brief discussion on the methodological problems of this type of study. The work is rewarding to read more than once and provides an excellent guide and orientation for the rest of the volume.

Christina Gransel's essay forms a nice complement to the earlier essay, as well as addressing technical developments in mass media in modern history, and it also covers communication history as well as media concepts, arrangement of categories, models of development and the evolution of terminology. The essays on advice giving (by Doris Ruhe) and letters (by Jürgen Herold) focus on the traditional written text. Doris Ruhe's essay, which applies communication history to Old French courtly texts, is particularly interesting because it does draw a social historical context in which the literature is analyzed. Essays by Hedwig Rijkele, Ulrich Müller, Ludwig Biewer, Klaus Krüger, Robert Fajen and Nikolaus Henkel also focus on other forms of communication, covering a variety of topics with many examples and illustration. For example, Rijkele considers the transfer of saintly relics, Müller brings in the use of archaeological evidence to aid the concept of communication history in explaining economic cultural ties, and Krüger considers the applicability of linguistically understood communication to the meaningfulness of graphic representations, the attempt to represent "speaking" in a visual form. Biewer's effort to assert the existence of a symbolic communication system in coats of arms of central European nobility does not seem to achieve the aim of this volume of applying communication history to medieval studies, because he does not prove that there is meaningful communication along a broad enough field, supposing too much assumption of truth by the partic-

ipants, and because he does not demonstrate that this can be evaluated at the same level as painting or writing. Robert Fajen shows clearly in his essay how certain contents of a medium of communication can shift into another medium by showing the same motifs used in the romance *Le livre du Chevalier errant* (1395-96) by Thomas III and Markgraf von Saluzzo, and some years later in a fresco cycle in a family castle.

All of these essays provide detailed studies into different mediums of communication. The final essay (by Falk Eisermann) addresses the development of the printing press and the great revolution in communication via the use of fliers in a political context, marking a traditional boundary of medieval studies. The volume shows that medievalists are grappling with major theoretical issues and provides a valuable resource of data in well-written essays. The topic seems, perhaps, too focused and would benefit from a broader theoretical base by also considering historical theories of post-colonialism or the more recent criticism of post-colonialism in trans-nationalism. Still, this work makes an excellent introduction for students or scholars wishing to explore the idea of communication history relevant to medieval studies. It also offers a starting point for scholars to expand their perspective on their own medieval research via the concept of communication. The authors have demonstrated how the use of communication history can take already thoroughly discussed areas of medieval studies and shed new light on how we might approach and understand particular topics. I would recommend this book to scholars wishing to understand the current state of medieval studies in Germany or to teachers trying to offer students an alternative set of literary approaches in German Medieval studies.

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