Department of Arts,
Culture & Media

Jennifer Bernstein
Associate Professor
jennifer.bernstein@rutgers.edu
Warren Street, Room 510

Severin Bunse
Adjunct Professor
severinbunse@gmail.com
Warren Street, Room 509

Office hours:
By appointment

Department of Arts,
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Chair: Ned Drew

Course pre-requisites:
As specified by major sequence

*This course is a BFA in
Graphic Design Requirement.

If This Were A Medium

Overview

Every medium (whether a website, installation, or phone notification) carries meaning through its structure. In this exercise, we'll treat everyday objects, artifacts, or systems **as if** they were communication mediums, asking:

+ What can this structure do?
+ What kind of meaning could it shape?
+ What does it afford — and what does it limit or disafford?
+ Who does it include?
+ Who does it exclude?

Each student pair will receive an object/artifact/system to explore and analyze. Some may already be considered mediums in certain fields — like a map or a doorway. Others may not. That's part of the point.

This exercise invites you to analyze any structure through the lens of medium — asking **how it performs meaning** through its built-in rules, patterns, and participation dynamics.

Whether or not something is traditionally labelled a medium, we're asking you to read it **as if it were** — and to see what that reveals.

This isn't about creating a design or classifying objects. It's about uncovering the underlying logic of a structure — the affordances, dis-affordances, and smallest units of meaning (Structural Meaning-Units, or SMUs) that shape experience. **SMUs are the smallest intentional building blocks of meaning in a designed work — the "atoms" of a design's meaning system. They may be visual (typeface choice, color use), temporal (a cut rhythm in time-based work), spatial (threshold in an installation), or interactive (scroll reveal, filter toggle). Each SMU acts as a structural sign, scaffolding meaning within its context.**

They're relational (exist in relationship to one another), and are shaped by how people move through, interpret, or respond to the system.

Ultimately, this exercise is about understanding **how structure performs meaning** — and how every structure carries embedded values, assumptions, and power dynamics, whether those were built in intentionally or emerged unintentionally. As Bruno Monguzzi puts it:

"**Communication is ultimately dealing with what you wish to happen in someone else's mind. So, what kind of response are you trying to achieve? And, or, what kind of information do you need to pass on? And which are the appropriate devices?**"

Meaning isn't simply delivered — it emerges in a **dialogue between structure and audience**, shaped **through participation, interpretation, and response.**

Learning Goals

+ Shift from content-first to structure-aware design thinking
+ Identify affordances and disaffordances in unexpected systems
+ Articulate a potential SMU for an object-as-medium
+ Recognize how structures shape inclusion, exclusion, and access
+ Explore how meaning is co-constructed across users, contexts, and interactions
+ Build a foundation for intentional medium selection later in the semester

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Medium Analysis – What Can This Structure Do?

+ In groups of two, explore and analyze the assigned object/artifact/system **as if** it were a medium —
  by analysing its structural logic (i.e. as a structural environment for meaning-making)

+ Identify its affordances (what it enables or allows) and disaffordances (what it limits, resists, or excludes)

+ Discover its SMUs:
• If this were a medium, **what are its smallest meaningful units?**
• What do those units do: **trigger, invite, constrain, express?**

Reflect on access and power:

+ Who might find this structure intuitive?
+ Who might find it alienating?
+ What values, behaviors, or biases are baked into its design?
+ Is it one-way, or does it invite dialogue and participation?

Deliverables:

+ A 7 minute group presentation

+ A visual diagram showing affordances, constraints, or SMU logic (i.e., map a feedback loop, highlight access
  points, trace a meaning-unit path)

Key Terms:

+ **Affordance** = what a structure allows, enables, or makes possible

+ **Disaffordance** = what a structure limits, resists, or makes difficult — even if unintentionally

+ **Structural Meaning-Units (SMUs)** = the "atoms" of design's meaning system — the smallest unit through
  which structure performs meaning