

Media and the Interpretant: Between Facts and Feelings

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Abstract

Contemporary media are a dominant form of communication that empower messengers who influence audience perceptions of the world. Considering the effects of the media and extreme divisions in contemporary social and political discourse in the US, understanding the differences between facts and opinions is of special significance.

During an interview with the author, Richard Lanigan (2001) explained the concept of the *interpretant* and the semiotics of how people learn, and develop codes of behavior. This previously unpublished interview provides comments that help clarify important issues in relation to the media. Focusing on established semiotic principles, this essay explores a basic understanding of recent neurological science that provocatively appears to be consistent with semiotics, and that can be applied to a better understanding of the effects of media.

Keywords: Richard Lanigan, media, semiotics, interpretant, neurological science

Media and the Interpretant

Ideas circulated through media sources are powerful societal influences that are received in different contexts and potentially interpreted in different ways. Media producers have the power to exploit the reach of communication technologies and appeal to audience members who seek confirmation of pre-existing ideas, beliefs,

fears, and desires. Along with attracting audiences to information, entertainment, and social media products, skillful media producers can also influence opinions, beliefs, and behaviors that have substantial political and economic effects. Considering some intentionally simplified neurological research findings that arguably appear to be consistent with established principles of semiotics, the purpose of this essay is to explore problems that emerge because of how we learn, and consider the effects of media sources that potentially motivate audience responses.

Humans learn by experiencing and interpreting signs that represent meanings. Signs are perceived in many forms such as words, sounds, images, and ideas that refer to objects or meanings (Gaines, 2010). Interpretations are derived from processes that bring together representations and anticipated meanings or consequences. The *interpretant* is a concept suggesting that many possible interpretations of signs emerge from a variety of contexts, and different perspectives at various times and places. Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, Charles Sanders Peirce developed his conception of the *interpretant* over many years while describing its role in the semiotic process:

A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its object; that which it conveys, its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant. The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit. The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series. (Peirce, CP, 1, 339)

While the interpretant accounts for changes in perceptions, learning occurs by establishing rules of understanding a sign that emerge when interpretations are associated with other meanings and responses to other signs. One strength of the concept can be seen as its relation to the processes of learning, but it also underscores

the potential for deception and misunderstands. Contemporary media are such a dominant form of communication that the ability to manipulate media audiences' perceptions of the world is potentially problematic. This is not a simple situation of getting information right, but a complex social and political dilemma affected by new technologies. Semiotics will not resolve society's problems, but understanding how meanings are structured and how people learn can help clarify the issues at hand.

Lanigan and the Role of the Interpretant

The role of the interpretant needs to be explained in the context of contemporary media and communication. Professor Richard L. Lanigan, director of the International Communicology Institute, is a recognized authority in the disciplines of semiotics and communication. Lanigan's prolific body of work is clearly applicable to current media issues, especially the idea that "semiotics offers a nice little analytical tool" to confront the differences between facts and opinions (Lanigan, 2001). During an interview with the author, Lanigan (2001) explained the concept of the *interpretant* and the semiotics of how people learn, follow rules of understanding, and develop codes of behavior. This interview is particularly important because it represents Lanigan as a speaking and a teacher interacting in real time to questions, and can be distinguished from the more formal language of his published work. All of the references to Lanigan (2001) were derived from this interview. In consideration of Lanigan's extensive scholarly contributions, his innovative work further develops ideas from Peirce, Morris, and other leaders in semiotic and phenomenological thought, making this previously unpublished interview a valuable opportunity to explore comments that clarify important issues in relation to the media.

Considering the reach of contemporary media, and extreme divisions in social and political discourse around the world, understanding the differences between facts and opinions are of special significance. At best, discourse can only move toward a consensus of opinions, whereas facts require verification of observable evidence that can be replicated. To clarify the issues at the center of the divisive media, a basic understanding of semiotics can help identify the objective limits of signs and distinguish the differences between facts and opinions.

Lanigan's understandings are guided by the principles of *Communicology*, the study of the persistent cycle of expression, perception, and interpretation of meanings

that are fundamental to the embodied nature of communication and experience. Recognizing semiotics as the *expression of meaning*, and phenomenology as the *embodiment of perception and interpretation*, he explains that signs and sign functions are experienced in the process of learning (Lanigan, 2001). In the context of media information, audiences may assume that ideas represented in the media are credible based on the perceived authority of their sources, but the actual veracity of such claims cannot necessarily be verified without specific expertise. Lanigan describes a semiotic process that can help to demonstrate how media have facilitated extreme divisions in our current social and political discourse that raise questions about the limits of knowledge derived from various sources.

A basic semiotic process consists of a sign or *representamen* referring to an object or meaning, and the *interpretant* which is the embodied experience of understanding the meaning of a sign (Lanigan, 2001). The concept of the *interpretant* does not refer to an individual act of interpretation, but to a potential for signs to be understood from a variety of temporal, spatial, and embodied perspectives. When signs are perceived and understood to have meanings or consequences, the experience produces a rule for understanding. According to Lanigan, “You need to think of the interpretant, not by its technical name, but as a moment that you have learned how to learn” (2001). This is a continuous process involving signs representing meanings, potentially interpreted in different contexts, so that learning happens through a progression of associations. “If you take the simple equation that on one side there’s expression, on the other side there’s perception, then objects get perceived, signs get expressed. When expression and perception come together as an experience, that’s the interpretant” (Lanigan, 2001). Every event involving perception and interpretation engages a new and different context suggesting an endless succession of potential interpretations. Every interpreter, occupying a unique point-of view, brings the sum of all of their past experiences and cultural orientations to their perceptions and interpretations. Media experiences surpass the spatial and temporal limits of communication with our natural, immediate surroundings. The conceptual functions of the *interpretant* are profoundly significant now since new media have effectively brought about “the quick and wide dissemination of misinformation and a resilience to correction” (Berentson-Shaw, 2018, p. 42). While media circulate an overwhelming quantity of information, the concept of the *interpretant* demonstrates how people tend to rely on their previously established beliefs and understood from associations within the contexts of their own

experiences.

For Peirce, the interpretant is the mental effect of a sign, and “an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit” (CP, 1, 339). Peirce’s description assumes the potential for multiple interpretations taken from a variety of perceptual contexts, but also suggests a possibility for reaching a final understanding of an object or meaning. From each perceptual context of a sign, the interpretant is an event providing an individual interpreter an opportunity to learn.

The distinction between an interpreter and the concept of the *interpretant* is significant. For Morris, “The interpreter of a sign is an organism; the interpretant is the habit of the organism to respond, because of the sign vehicle, to absent objects which are relevant to a present problematic situation as if they were present” (1938, p. 31). While thought opens one to associations derived from past experience, the term *habit* suggests that learning has occurred and manifested in repetitive behavioral responses to certain signs. Assuming those experiences were accurately understood, one would then trust them as if they represent knowledge of fact. Lanigan further emphasizes that learning is a function of the interpretant and an attempt to become efficient at processing experience.

One interpretant can be a learning experience which in essence can be generalized to lots of possible learning experiences. This is where you get into the kind of technical description where you say an interpretant can be an interpretant of another interpretant. In other words, we can have a series of these learning experiences. That’s what culture is. We know that learning experience is culture. (Lanigan, 2001)

When learning takes place, the interpretant reflects a rule for how to respond to particular signs that essentially establish cultural practices. When a similar situation occurs again, rules for understanding those signs emerge as a memory expressing learned behavior (Lanigan, 2001). Once an idea is established, habitual responses replace the need to learn something again and decide what to do about it. “Our whole daily life relies on these interpretants, these codes of behaviors because we can anticipate what we could do or not do” (Lanigan, 2001). Collective memories, already experienced and understood, enable older generations to share short cuts to knowledge that has been transformed into cultural practices.

Learning depends on associations that continue until settling upon a habit of understanding that reflects the context of a particular interpretive event. Cultures are defined by shared practices of this kind that are based on similar habits of interpretation and understanding. Lanigan further identifies different individual, social, and cultural levels of learning that systematically grow and cycle because every learning event changes and extends the interpretant to an interpretant of another interpretant (2001).

Problems emerge when people understand things differently. And while events described in the media happen in remote locations and are included as news or even integrated into entertainment media, people can easily disagree about meanings and projected consequences.

If the two of us agree that the sign, this information, is a fact, it takes on the condition of being an object. It has objective status for us. And that's what we mean by objective. We mean that somehow, usually in a behavioral sense, I can do what you've done. That confirms it as a fact. Now, if I can't duplicate it, if I can't do what you say you've done, then I will say well, that's just going to have to be your opinion. I just can't do it. Meaning that, we can engage in the same sign behavior, but my behavior just doesn't produce that object. (Lanigan, 2001)

Something can actually exist without being perceived as having significance to an interpreter. It may therefore be ignored by an otherwise conscious individual while emphasized by someone else who anticipates important consequences associated with the same signs. This is consistent with Peirce's explanation of semiosis that involves "an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a coöperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant" (CP, 5, 485). An object or event must be recognized in order to fully function as a sign and therefore represent a meaning that engages the referential process of an interpretant. A sign may be perceived as problematic by one group and be taken for granted within the cultural norms of another group. Peirce claimed that, "If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect" (CP, 2, 303). If something is unobserved or dismissed as insignificant, no conclusions will be drawn. Thus, various communication strategies employed by powerful media sources in the US can affect public debate about contentious issues such as gun laws, abortion, and

employer/employee relations. Considering the cycle of expression, perception, and interpretation of meanings, semiotics anticipates differences of opinions, disputes, misunderstandings, and even changes of interpretations over time arising from a variety of points-of-view. Media extend this situation by providing many channels offering differing opinions.

Every interpreter brings the sum of all of their lives and knowledge to the way they interpret and understand new experiences (Deely, 2013, p. 333). This is significant whether interpretations are correct or incorrect, verifiable or not. The range of conclusions and responses drawn from interpretations of media demonstrate the need to consider personal perspectives, the accuracy of representations, and potential for misunderstandings, as well as questioning the reliability of information sources. People who disagree “may be inclined to judge each other to be perversely wrong” (Peirce, CP, 5, 386). All signs can potentially be used to tell a lie or be misinterpreted, but facts have the essential burden of requiring verification. Special knowledge or expertise is required for verification of information in many cases, whether cultural or circulated in the media. Ultimately, interpreters are vulnerable to the authority, reliability, and integrity of all sources of information.

The semiotic principles discussed here describe the processes of learning and interpreting media representations that depend to a great extent on the perceived reliability of the sources of information, and the ability of audiences to recognize evidence that can support claims of truth. Again, this is not a naive assertion that understanding semiotics will facilitate simple solutions, but an attempt to provide a better understanding of the processes involved in how we identify and act on information. According to Berentson-Shaw, “Research has found that once a range of personal and cultural factors are taken into account, there is actually a very weak and, in some cases, negative relationship between knowledge and attitudes to evidence” (2018, p. 26). Facts are not the sole determining factors because many influences affect an individual’s sense of what is true. The following section addresses the neurological processes that affect how people develop *feelings* of certainty about the veracity of their understandings, and what they believe they know with or without verifiable evidence.

Neurological Science, Semiotic Principles, and the Media

The question of how we know what we believe we know has been effectively altered for humans living with the immediacy of electronic media technologies. While human perceptual capacities remain generally limited biologically, innovations in communication technologies deliver media representations with an immediacy that gives the impression that human experience is not restricted by time and space. Media productions need to be considered in light of our human perceptual limitations, and the fact that media messages can be crafted very effectively to persuade and deceive as well as to motivate people to act.

There is much debate about the relationships between semiotic principles and recent advances in neurological science. Both approaches share characteristics that arguably appear to be consistent with how we perceive and interpret the world. That debate is beyond the scope of this essay. For the purpose of developing a better understanding of the effects of media, the following section explores some limited and simplified descriptions of basic neurological science that suggest a number of consistencies with semiotics.

Media audiences choose from a variety of information sources that may present radically different interpretations of the same events, statements, stories, and ideas. In the past, journalism had an established tradition of identifying commentary to distinguish news from opinions, but those practices have become blurred in social media and commercial journalism. Opinions are generally undifferentiated from verifiable information for many people using the media. This is significant because audiences tend to choose sources of information based upon personal biases, and they also tend to passionately believe their own sources while vehemently disagreeing with others.

Neurologist Robert A. Burton writes, “Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know’ arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason” (2008, p. xi). The feeling that one knows something is not based on actually having learned from evidence-based experience and well-reasoned thought. That sense of knowing may emerge because of familiar *feelings* about a particular interpretation, but understandings derived from habits and beliefs generally cannot be substantiated. This state of feelings about knowledge is based on the concept of *a priori* (Gaines, 2017, p. 88). According to Peirce, the nature of

the *a priori* method of settling opinions is “to adopt whatever belief we are inclined to,” until we are confronted by undeniable facts that have real effects (Peirce, CP, 5, 386). A priori and intuition can provide helpful clues or be a misleading feeling provoked by the consequences of some past event. At best, such feelings can lead one to investigate further and search for verifiable evidence.

According to Burton, “If the feeling of knowing is a primary mental state not dependent upon any underlying state of knowledge, then our next step is to see how the interaction of conscious thought and the involuntary *feeling of knowing* determines how we feel we know what we know” (2008, p. 41). Neurological science has confirmed that the biology of the brain stimulates these feelings as the brain receives information through the senses. “By understanding how increasingly complex layers of neural networks emerge seamlessly into the conscious mind, we have the foundation for seeing where contradictory aspects collide and why certainty is contrary to basic biological principles” (Burton, 2008, p. 41). In terms of survival, evidence should provoke a reconsideration of a priori understandings, but media persistently reinforce habitual responses.

A basic explanation of neurological processes suggests there may be structural similarities to semiotic principles that are applicable to understanding perceptions of the media. Sense perceptions originating from signs stimulate activity in the brain. Neural receptors in the brain use synapses to pass information through an electrical signal to other neurons initiating a search for meaning (Burton, 2008, pp. 41-54). On a simplified level, neurons are “the fundamental units of the brain and nervous system, the cells responsible for receiving sensory input from the external world” (Raye, 2017).

Neuroscientists sometimes speak of what they understand even though what is being described is not visible (Lakoff, 2009, p. 197). For example, a rudimentary illustration using neurological “brain-based terminology,” is that when neurons receive enough information from thousands of other neurons through synaptic connections, a process of heightened activity is stimulated through neurotransmitters creating a web of connections called neural networks (Lakoff, 2009, p. 197). Neurons that are activated by experiences build connections with other neurons responding to similar but unique experiences like metaphors until a permanent association is established (Lakoff, 2009, p. 83). Those familiar responses to certain types of perceptions initiate links between areas of the brain. “Connections are enhanced with

use, weakened with neglect, and are themselves affected by other connections to the same neurons” (Burton, 2008, p. 43). As these synaptic transmissions link receptive neurons affirming associations between old and new information, the process expands exponentially, and “Individual ‘mindless’ neurons join together mysteriously to create the mind” (Burton, 2008, p. 55). Thus, returning to the language of semiotics, learning occurs as interpretants refer to other interpretants (Lanigan, 2001).

Experiential descriptions of embodied perceptions suggest a similarity between neurobiological processes and the semiotics of interpretation. Signs refer to other signs in a continuous process connecting mental associations with representations of objects and the meanings that they refer to. Habitual responses to particular signs inhibit the possibilities for multiple interpretations from an individual or culturally established perspective. So as neurons receive sensory information, those perceptions apparently act as signs referring to other signs while networks of neurons seek associations with related stored information. Semiosis is an action of signs referring to other signs building the structures of ideas (Deely, 2001, p. 604), while neurons appear to connect with other neurons through networks seeking associations with past experiences. Similarly, the notion of a dynamic interpretant was described as the play of signs mentally searching for a conclusive understanding (Peirce, CP, 8, 343).

Computer scientists engaged in developing artificial intelligence have successfully applied advances in neurological knowledge and “have been able to build artificial neural networks (ANN) that can play chess, and poker, read faces, recognize speech, and recommend books on Amazon.com” (Burton, 2008, p. 44). Basically, the ANN works, not by affirming or disqualifying incoming information, but by seeking associations and connecting signs with other related signs, and evaluating the strength of the connections and relationships between new perceptions and older information in the network. “These shifting interrelationships are the basis for ‘learning’” (Burton, 2008, p. 44). By imitating the human experience of interpreting sensory perception and organizing signs into sign systems (Lanigan, 2001), computer scientists appear to be modeling the semiotic process of learning that develops through signs evolving into interpretants of interpretants.

An interpreter seeks understanding of new information relying on associations that were already established from past perspectives or experience, and the interpretant carries on the process of assessing the relationship between a sign and its object or meaning. Thus, as Lanigan stated, “The basic thing about sign relationships and

sign functions is to remember that you are talking about [. . .] how human beings learn things” (2001). The artificial intelligence community has applied neurological science and, in essence, demonstrated an application of the semiotic concept of the *interpretant*. Learning occurs by making associations as an “analogue of a modification of consciousness to keep our conclusions pretty near to the general truth” (Peirce, CP, 5, 485). But learning is not always based on accurate understandings, and that leads once again to the problem of inconsistent or conflicting interpretations of signs.

Mistakes and misinterpretations are common, and many social and cultural factors affect how one responds. Beliefs and cultural perspectives determine how people will act more often than verifiable facts will (Berentson-Shaw, 2018, p. 26). But, the processes that lead to accurate and mistaken interpretations can be initiated by the perception of the same signs that are experienced very differently.

Differences in perception can be radically affected by brain functions. For example, neurologists refer to an extreme example called synesthesia that “is commonly thought to represent an involuntary comingling of two normally unrelated sensory modalities, such as sight and sound” (Burton, 2008, p. 62). This can be experienced as hearing colors or tasting shapes by those who have a condition producing these kinds of sensations. The processes in the brain that cause the experience of synesthesia have lead neurologists to better understand how “differences in perception are at the heart of different worldviews” (Burton, 2008, p. 64).

Synesthesia offers a startling insight: Lower level brain modules can profoundly affect not only our ordinary sensory perception but also how we experience abstract symbols such as letters and numbers. If thought is the manipulation of words and symbols, we need to consider whether our very building blocks of thought might also be subject to involuntary, even genetic, influences that make each of us ‘private islands’ of perception and thinking. (Burton, 2008, p. 64)

Perception is an embodied experience that limits awareness to the position of a person in the world, and influences understanding more than the actual nature of sign systems (Lanigan, 2001). The experience of feeling certain about knowing or understanding develops from individual perceptions as thoughts take on significance from the immediate contexts of events and insights that seem to feel consistent with established understandings of experiences.

In spite of our social tendencies to be influenced by identity, culture, and relationships with others, human beings experience the world as isolated individuals. Awareness of our surroundings and experiences prompt responses that can be broadly categorized in terms of needs and desires, things that must be avoided, and the vast majority of perceptible experiences that can be “safely ignored” (Deely, 2013, p. 347). Especially in the contemporary media environment, much of our attention is forced to select from a constant assault of perceptual data before we ignore or delete information from a myriad of signs that were designed to compete for our attention.

Significant parts of those media conditions are a consequence of messages intended to be integrated within our social systems. People feel compelled to use new media technologies, and to select specific channels, application or programs based on their appeal to various personal tastes and identity factors. People feel lost without their mobile phones, GPS, social media services, and any number of media technologies. As a powerful aspect of our collective experiences, the species-specific *umwelt* of human beings has been extended to include electronic media technology. The semiotic concept of *umwelt* describes the biological capacities of perception that determine what a given species can apprehend with the senses (Deely, 2013, pp. 347-348). Media technologies have become extensions of our bodies that supersede the individual isolation of experience, communicate over great distances, influence cultural identities, and engender social divisions that fragment collective perceptions.

Between Facts and Feelings

We experience our bodies in space while persistently assessing how the immediate environment will affect us. The vast amount of information sent by media create a constant sense that the messages we receive from moment to moment may be important. This sense of immediacy prompts a feeling that it is essential to filter out the unnecessary, carefully watch for what is desired, and avoid whatever might be unwanted.

Meanings emerge from nature that only gain significance when they are anticipated to have affects or consequences for the interpreter. In contrast, media messages are intentionally produced to communicate and immediately affect receivers. Media often use hyperbolic styles of communication and promote habits of interpretation that influence how people identify with others and react to the world.

These effects are powerful because cultures are defined by shared understandings and common interpretations of meanings that prompt reactions to particular situations. According to Lanigan, when we share experience through communication, we advance an interpretant, and “We have a learning experience of a learning experience that refers to an object” (2001). This is the essence of shared cultural knowledge. “That’s how objects in a culture start to assimilate into the learning experience; language, names, and categories, not things, but the experience of things. Objects are really named by the interpretant that led up to the identification of its meaning” (Lanigan, 2001).

As with all media, the communication technologies in contemporary society come between what we experience individually, and what was experienced by others and produced for the media to represent a particular set of meanings. The nature of intentional communication is that it can be created to tell the truth just as well as to entice, entertain, deceive or intimidate. Media can create illusions of fantasy as well as representing actual objects or events. The experience of systematically organized signs opens a process of associations that fosters beliefs about consequences based on what the producers want the audience to perceive. In terms of media, everything from face-to-face speech to multimedia Internet communications involve someone else’s experiences processed through representations of ideas, messages, and interpretations about things that were produced for the receiver to experience. Sophisticated media technologies are used to substitute for real and direct experiences in the world. For individuals in the audience, the media is real and a direct experience. The audience is immersed in the normal perspectives of their own cultures even while the purposes of the media include a range of different realities.

The contexts of mediated messages presume to impose a belief in the authority of its sources. However, all communication demands the receiver to be discerning and skeptical because anything that can represent the truth can also be used to represent a lie (Eco, 1976, p. 7). After all, if someone wants to persuade, has a political agenda or has something to sell, media can effectively attract the attention of audiences. Salesmen and politicians appeal to the emotions, desires or fears of the receivers. Propagandists in the media evoke emotions by communicating blame, fear, and resentment against individuals or groups of people outside the dominant culture. Media consumers bring knowledge of past experience, and associations, real or imagined, as individuals in the audiences aspire to learn from those sources.

Audiences can benefit from considering the semiotic structures of how meanings are represented and interpreted, and questioning the veracity of each aspect of media experiences.

Misinformation and biased representations can play on cultural stereotypes through repetitive narratives intended to affect media audiences. Repetition creates a form of familiarity and associations that may not be valid. Habitual responses subsequently manifest through behaviors and practices that possibly act because of fears or exaggerated beliefs. But, one of the characteristic strengths of semiotic analysis is that its methods can reveal the limits of verification based on empirical signs and an understanding of how signs function to produce meanings. Media can effectively be used to express cultural biases against all varieties of different people including those with conflicting ideological beliefs. Sense perceptions initiate habitual thought processes that “emerge seamlessly into the conscious mind” (Burton, 2008, p. 41), and media messages are generally received as immediate experiences giving audiences a feeling of knowing. Critical thinking, grounded in semiotic understandings, requires specific knowledge, reflective awareness of one’s own biases, and the sense to question sources. Attention to the functions of signs can help distinguish verifiable facts from unsubstantiated beliefs and feelings.

The media have radically changed how we become aware of the world around us, and the way we learn individually, socially, and culturally. Audiences choose divergent sources and experience the terms of discourse through habits of understanding. Duplicating experience in a scientific sense requires material evidence to support a fact. Repeating words or images, as done in the media, and insisting upon the veracity of opinions does not verify the interpretation of meanings, experiences or representations. By effectively employing strategies including repetitive signs that excite emotion, media producers create illusions that appear to duplicate experience, but actually mirror other messages designed to restrain the ways events are described, control the terms attributing responsibility associated with possible consequences, and limit the possibilities of alternative perspectives.

A “term” is a word that is used, upon agreement between parties, to express a particular idea. At the same time, the use of a term is a strategy of limiting the range and application of an expression. When the elements of habit combine to produce a discourse, terms of engagement and comportment begin to emerge. It is through these terms that we are able

to act with increasingly less mindfulness—a lessening that can turn into forgetfulness if we are not careful. [. . .] Terms change, of course. They can change overnight. But until they change, they signify what they have been anticipated to signify. They serve as the basis of discursive habit and social expectation. (Macke, 2015, p. 7)

While people disagree about what they believe is a fact, the limits of verifiable evidence can be revealed by identifying sign functions. Speakers use emotional rhetoric in the media to gain the complicity of the masses and control social policies. Along with the pleasures and conveniences of media, parts of our social problems originate from the communication of ideas establishing habitual and cultural norms.

In the age of digital media, we live in a consumer culture that not only enables people to choose what to buy including media, but also makes people choose what to believe about nature and reality. “Evidence has been democratized but not the skills needed to interpret it” (Berentson-Shaw, 2018, p. 29). Considering the broad implications of electronic communications, the virtual ground is shifting. The complex mechanisms of media are used to exploit the potential for constructing *interpretants* that affect *how we know what we think we know*. Audiences need to be informed with an understanding of the distinctions between facts and opinions, and consider the effects of their own biases and life experiences on their perceptions. There is no verifiable truth in the nature of belief systems that construct ideologies. Yet the politics of how to address the collective problems of humanity are not generally determined by facts, but by beliefs and opinions created through the power of identification with narratives spread by various media. Understanding the nature of what can be verified, and the true consequences of facts would benefit media audiences, help promote civil discourse, and negotiate public policy.

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entertainment, news, and advertising, offering insight into audiences, identity, time, space, myth, and ideology. Before entering academic life, Gaines worked for more than 20 years in performance, media production, advertising, public relations, and as a music therapist.