

# Histories of progress and media histories. Response to Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz and Adam Kendon

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Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon have done a lot to frame our general understanding of microanalysis; anyone interested in the subject owes them a debt. The current chapter (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]) is in some ways a synthesis of overviews each has written since the 1980s. Their connection to many of the players involved allows them to write a history rich in its details. Moreover, their experience as practitioners of interaction research gives them an inside view of how the research was done. I learned a lot from reading them. I did, however, find myself wondering what a different kind of history would likely foreground. The history offered here is guided throughout by the question the authors pose explicitly at the end: “What can later researchers learn from the NHI project?” The authors are a part of a research tradition; the readers they address are potentially a part of it too. Work done in the present is indebted to the past, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before, and knowledge accumulates from a common pursuit even if the methods used are sometimes diverse. Such an idea of science is usually known as progress.

Professional historians tend to distrust the idea of progress, at least since Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History*. They are more often taught to look for “a clash of wills” whose unpredictable outcome we retroactively label progress (Butterfield 1965: 28). My own particular interest as a media historian is in the clash of media, which do not have “wills” but which do have their tendencies. That is, a given medium – or as scientists say, an instrument – is more than just an arbitrary sample of the world. It *is* the world for as long as one engages it. And prolonged familiarity with one medium and not another will likely generate a theory specific to that medium. In the interest of extending Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon’s text, I will give an example from my own research: an

example of a trend within “the movement movement” (Davis 2001) that NHI sits uneasily alongside. For, if NHI is the model for current work on interaction, it would have had to defeat this other model in a clash – defeat it theoretically and media-technologically, which in this case are really the same thing.

The authors mention in connection with Kendon’s biography that he began his career under Eliot Chapple, but grew “[d]issatisfied with Chapple’s insistence on measuring only the ‘actions’ and ‘silences’ of conversationalists.” One might have the impression that it was only a matter of adding more details to fill in a picture that Chapple left unfinished. We would still have to wonder about Chapple’s “insistence” that his picture be left unfinished and, indeed, attenuated – really no picture at all by common standards. It would have been easy enough for him to film people and study their behavior that way. It would, at least, have been equivalent in cost to designing and manufacturing his Interaction Chronographs. But the entire structure of Chapple’s thought and the details of his method were opposed to the use of film as an instrument of research. Microanalysis of film would leave social science “in the Athenian Agora,” he prophesied unkindly; and kinesics he considered “a futile exercise” whose notations never reached the deep structure of interaction rhythms (1975: 625; 1982: 50).

What he proposed instead with interaction chronography preceded NHI by over fifteen years. Its intellectual background was an austere form of positivism that the physicist Percy Bridgman had called operationalism. To operationalize one’s object was to reduce it to a form that would submit to some standard unit of measure. Therefore Chapple argued that the concept of interaction had no meaning at all unless it meant a form of measurement. Since one could measure time, he measured the length of utterance, which included the body motion that accompanied speech. To record this with greater accuracy he devised a machine. Different versions of his patented Interaction Chronograph had different forms of output, none of which were pictorial—and none of which allowed one to know the content of what was said. Their data could appear as sets of alternating letters, as parallel broken lines, as graphical curves, or as columns of numbers, but these were all just different renderings of various time quantities. The actual form of input remained the same for forty years. When person A or person B was observed as performing an “action,” the Chronograph operator pressed a key A or B, and held down this key until the person A or B was finished. The result was a record of who was active, how often, for how long on average, and many other things besides (see Watter 2020).

One of the measures was the adjustment of A to B: how well A and B conformed to each other’s patterns. Such an emphasis seems to bring Chapple close

to NHI, concerned as it was with the way that interactions “develop and are maintained.” But the similarities end there, for Chapple was essentially a biological determinist. He believed that people’s baselines were more or less invariant; that what we call life is a constant search for other people whose baselines are complementary to one’s own in-born rhythm. Two people with high rates of initiating action were not likely to get along; they would interrupt each other constantly and it would be best to keep them separate. The *Natural History of an Interview* taught a generation that people in proximity are almost always an organic unit. They function conjointly at every level of articulation. For Chapple, on the other hand, two people are lucky if they are able to establish any synchrony at all. They are really separate rhythms that would play like broken records if left to themselves, and this discreteness is always with them. Hence his persons A and B had their separate keys assigned them. Film, of course, embraces all within a frame: it is the medium most appropriate to the communication “matrix” (Birdwhistell 1970: 95), a metaphor that Chapple never used in his work. Nor did he refer to interaction as a “stream”, for it never appeared as a stream to his eyes. It was always punctured or intermittent like a line of Morse code. Both Chapple and NHI would agree on the point that Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon claim is NHI’s legacy: the lesson for social research “that bodily motion is patterned”. But the implications of pattern are very different for each and this difference can be traced to a difference in media. Of course, some people crossed over from one method to another, such as Kendon himself. It would be interesting to explore more fully how clashes of media can affect the course of a career, a project, a school – with results that neither medium wanted or even dreamed of, to adapt a line from Butterfield’s famous polemic.

As a side note, since we began with the question of scientific progress, we might ask which of these methods has found more adherents; and so which one has had – is having – more influence, for better or worse, on conceptions of human life. Birdwhistell once said that the work of kinesics could never be outsourced to a computer. That may be so. Counting and timing, however, are easily outsourced and many devices now exist to keep tabs on people. When we read of wearable sensors or “sociometric badges” worn in the workplace to chart people’s contacts – to see who spoke to whom, how long, how often – we may well think that chronography has found more disciples than any other school of interaction study. It is just that these disciples are largely not human, at least not by common standards of what is deemed human.

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