To move, media must be flexible. Think, for instance, of the remarkably consistent form of the upscale multiplex that has made a home for global blockbuster cinema in China, Mexico, India, Belgium, and Canada alike. Or consider the efforts of communities who have had to salvage, appropriate, and alter telecommunications infrastructure—developing their own technical expertise in the process—in an effort to bring internet connectivity to remote areas neglected by corporate service providers. While distinct, these examples each raise the question of how media flexibility is underpinned by the tension between modularity and modification.

Modularity involves the repetition, standardization, and recombination of existing forms: exhibitors use the standard form of the multiplex to signify the “world-class” status of their up-to-date cinemas, while amateur technicians rely on widely used antennas, wires, and protocols to plug into existing internet infrastructure. Conversely, modification calls on the ability to adapt given materials (including technologies, practices, ideas, and senses of self) to prevailing conditions: theatre chains grapple with issues of urban development, audiences, and taste cultures as they develop new sites in new locales, while communities adapt technology to the resources they have, the landscapes they inhabit, and the histories they share to make their projects work. In these and other examples, media forge the channels along which modular elements can be disseminated and within which opportunities for modification take root.

Considering these concepts as an entry point for the study of media in space immediately conjures associations with Michel de Certeau’s opposition between strategy and tactics. If modularity offers the opportunity to expand the “proper place” of the powerful and extend the imposed terrain on which the subjected must move, modification suggests the potential to rework that terrain along tactical lines. The modularity of communication infrastructures and media forms might suggest narratives of spatial and temporal compression and, in turn, buttress colonial narratives that render distant, foreign spaces more legible, accessible, or profitable for powerful interests. Conversely, the modification of modular media genres, formats, technologies, and environments evokes
profuse examples of narratives of localized or regionalized difference, adaptation, resistance, and even refusal.

Such associations between modularity, modification, power, and resistance do not hold seamlessly, and are useful only to the extent that they are contextualized and questioned. Media scholarship that engages in this work does not necessarily dispense with familiar associations with these concepts but expose the frictions and counternarratives that arise out of close, critical analysis. Reconsidering these associations raises questions including: What are productive ways of conceptualizing modification without fetishizing neoliberal concepts of ingenuity that displace the responsibilities of media institutions and telecommunications services onto individuals? How might we understand corporate modularity as involving forms of differentiation that enable flows of capital and hegemony? Where can we see the activities of user or audience modification being channeled or controlled by powerful interests? In what ways does modularity emerge from individuals, social groups, and communities rather than being imposed on them? Can we uncover or recover cases that subvert binaries associating modularity with the homogenous, the corporate, and the global and modification with the heterogenous, the individual, and the local?

The Media Fields Editorial Collective in the Department of Film and Media at the University of California, Santa Barbara seeks papers that interrogate the imbrication of modularity and modification in spatial practices and imaginaries and put forward thought-provoking examples of how they might be operationalized in the service of today’s media scholarship.

Potential paper topics include:
- Technological standards and standardization
- Circulating genres and formats
- Digital “modding”
- Film and television “packaging”
- Franchises, sequels, spinoffs, ripoffs, and reboots
- Platform systems and their users
- Communication infrastructures and their nodes

Please email submissions to submissions@mediafieldsjournal.org by the revised deadline of June 4, 2021. Please review our submission guidelines at mediafieldsjournal.org ahead of submission.