Scholars from Max Weber to Ernst Kantorowicz to Cornelia Vismann have contended that mystery is always administered by ministers, whether they be clergymen, lawyers, politicians, bureaucrats, or sorcerers. This complex process of mediation has generated considerable controversy in media studies and beyond: materialist approaches frequently subordinate the symbolic structures of mystery to the techno-managerial infrastructure of ministry; idealist methods risk re-mystifying the forms of ideological signification they purport to explain by ignoring the inner workings of power. However, both perspectives tend to reduce the mutual mediation between medium and message, materiality and meaning, ministry and mystery to linear causation.

This conference proceeds from the belief that a genuinely dialectical approach to ministry and mystery will sharpen the premises, methods, and stakes of media studies. We ask: What would a study of media that did not subordinate processes of signification to material or technical a priori look like? How will treating mystery, spirit, or belief not as aftereffects but drivers in their own right reframe the materialist assumptions that historians and theorists of media all too often adhere to? How can media studies shed light on those ghosts that persistently come back to haunt materials, practices, and technologies? How can we arrive at a more adequate understanding of the management of people, things, and environments by attending to the media and the metaphysics through which mystery is administered and ministry mystified.

We welcome papers from graduate students in media studies, art history, anthropology, literary and regional as well as communication studies, film, and architecture that engage with the relation of ministry and mystery. We are not so much interested in methodological reflections as we are in papers that try to expand on and call into question materialist and idealist approaches through particular case studies. We conceive of both ministry and mystery in a broad sense. Thus, the conference encompasses the administration as well as the mystification of colonization, extraction, financialization, devotion, consumption, and emancipation. We are particularly interested in comparative approaches, either across media, time, or geographic regions.

Topics include, but are not limited to:
- Metaphysical beliefs in economic concepts, incl. money, value, exchange, trust, and debt
- Meaningful objects and images: relics, icons, talismans, commodities, and trademarks
- Notions of corporate personhood from medieval political theology to the modern business enterprise
- Clerical bureaucracies and the orders of faith, belief, and devotion
- Intellectual property and intellectual property rights
- The administration of sex and gender
- The phantasmatic dimensions of race
- The semiosis of objectivity
- Nature and naturalization
- Magical thinking

Date: 03/31-04/01/2023
Location: Deutsches Haus at Columbia (420 W 116th Street New York, NY)
Please send abstracts (300 words max.) to: comparativemedi2023@columbia.edu
Deadline: 12/15/2022
Applicants will be notified by the end of January