The
Long
History
of
NEW
MEDIA

Introduction
History and New Media

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In the study of media, it seems now well established that there is little "new" about "new media." As the name of this volume implies, "new"-ness is not itself new. Indeed, one of the most central and least controversial themes in the study of media history (as well as many other kinds of history) is the idea that we've been here before, that novelty is more ordinary than rare. This idea is both familiar and misleading. For while the intersection of history with new media involves themes that are familiar to those who have studied the phonetic alphabet, print, and broadcast media, the comparisons we often draw between histories of different media do not imply that we are simply re-running that which has come before. The history of new media presents us with something more significant than merely another opportunity to see familiar distinctions being reasserted. To be arch about it: newness is not always old news. This volume is not to be mistaken for one that concerns itself only with the history of media technology, or, for that matter, only with the history of media technology now (in the early 21st century) considered to be new. As editors of this volume, we take a more catholic approach, accepting at the outset that histories of media currently deemed to be new are worth pursuing, but also asserting that such a history of a currently new medium would be little more than the beginning of things that could be done when we collide the terms "new media" and "history."

This volume is based on the belief that media and history are so intimately connected that the emergence of what can be called "new media" does something more than merely provide us with new media whose histories can be described. The history of new media challenges us to: become more reflexive in our understanding of how history operates, reconsider the meaning of "newness" as it relates to media and to broader themes in historical thought, reflect on how media operate in terms of information recording and storage, approach social thought with a renewed sense of how the theoretical relates to the historical, and contextualize what is taken as new so as to establish broader and suggestive continuities in the history of communication.

Each section of this volume pays heed to the basic idea that the long history of new media need not be undertaken with only today's sense of newness or with prepackaged definitions of what media are.

By compiling this volume of essays on the history of new media, we are also proposing that history has a special role to play in the study of new media. The linkage between history and new media is not difficult to make. After all, the "new" in new media must always be understood to be historically constructed. The new is also constructed with an eye on the future, or more correctly, an eye on what we think the future will be. James Carey described how the future has often functioned as "cause for a revitalization of optimism," as "the fulfillment of a particular ideology or idealism," and as a "participation ritual of technological exorcism."[1] It is not difficult to notice how new media have been incorporated into visions of the future that act much as Carey describes. And the power that is given to the future is usually associated with the "new" in new media. Not only does this mean that the new media of today will be the traditional media of tomorrow, an emphasis on the history of the future gives us an understanding of what this newness can be said to represent.

Book Structure

Part I of this volume, "Newness Contextualized," collects chapters that address the idea of newness itself. Newness presents obvious challenges to all historians, but for those who attempt to understand media historically, the idea of the new presents us with a heightened need for circumspection. In an article in the journal theme issue from which this collection of essays emerged, Benjamin Peters[2] has pointed out that much of what we take for the canon of media history focuses on the early history of media. In this sense, media history (with its focus on constitutive moments) comes to us as a kind of prepackaged new media history. It is worth stepping back from

this to inquire about the role that newness plays in media and in our histories of the media. If nothing else, this perspective leads us to ask: where are the histories of "middle" and "late" periods for media? A sober reflection on newness demonstrates the partiality of our existing histories and summons us to consider the historical dimension of all communication.

In keeping with this idea, the chapters in this section explicitly consider the meaning of newness. In pursuit of this, Devon Powers ("The End of New Music?") demonstrates how music has been historically constructed in terms of novelty and shows how the logic of newness shifts with changes in media and in industry, with important lessons for those who are interested in the history of attention. Noah Arceneaux ("'All You'll Need Is a Mobile Couch'") and Stephanie Ricker Schulte ("Cutting the Cord and 'Crying Socialist Wolf'") examine the histories of mobile television and public Wi-Fi connectivity, respectively. Their careful attention to visions of renewal by way of the technological sublime undone by material and discursive constraints helps to demonstrate how newness plays out in its second and subsequent acts. Christian Thorsten Callisen and Barbara Adkins ("Pre-digital Virtuality") put the entire idea of new media into helpful perspective in their analysis of continuities between the communication in the Republic of Letters and contemporary scholarly communication. They suggest that any presumed newness must be understood in terms of the broad playing field of praxis.

The "media" component of "new media" also has much to do with history. Here we hope that readers will attend to the numerous meanings of the term "media." A historical emphasis in the study of new media involves addressing media not as clearly defined objects, but as shifting practices, discourses, technical configurations, and cultures. Carolyn Marvin has asserted that media "are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges,"[3] and newness is one of the things about media that shows us how historically and culturally constructed they are. Writing in the late 20th century, Ithiel de Sola Pool asserted that we were in the midst of a technologically centered communication revolution, meaning that "we have reached a historical corner."[4] The idea that newness itself is a socially constructed process, that there are no natural edges in media, reminds us that historical corners like the one Pool asserted was facing us in the late 20th century are not brute facts but are claims that come from particular parties. The fact that media historians themselves are deeply implicated in the process of assertions of newness should prompt us to avoid presuming that the idea of the "new" implies much that is substantial in the object itself and quite a bit about our relationship to the object.

Marvin tells us that "the introduction of new media is a special historical occasion when patterns anchored in older media that have provided the stable currency of social exchange are reexamined, challenged, and defended."[5] Marvin's language is important. It is not that the introduction of new media allows us simply to

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redraw the boundaries with no regard for the past and its reproduction into the future, but that the introduction of new media is often linked to adjustments in material practice that can prompt a level of reflexivity in the ideas we use to understand ongoing social processes. To find examples of reexamination, we could turn to the field of communication, where it is not much exaggeration to say that the technological changes in communication processes that are often summed up simply through reference to the Internet prompted perhaps less reexamination of persistent ideas than we might have preferred. When we consider the interrelationships between the history of the media and the history of the theories we use to understand the media,[6] we see a complicated picture in which hopes, dreams, ideological presuppositions, global politics, and much else come to shape the questioning at work.

It is this kind of concern with the interrelationships between the history of media and the history of theories of the media that is addressed in Part II of this volume, "New Media History and Theory." Here, D. Travers Scott ("Sound Studies for Historians of New Media") lays out a sweeping project for how ideas from sound studies can be applied in the context of new media history, reminding us, amongst other things, that media are not just a set of technologies for reading. Zizi Papacharissi and Elaine J. Yuan ("What If the Internet Did Not Speak English?") and Dmitry Epstein ("The Analog History of the 'Digital Divide'") share a critical understanding of some of the Western assumptions of how media function that have been imported tacitly into the study of new media, and they offer productive strategies for us to get beyond such tendencies. Teresa M. Harrison ("The Evolving Medium Is the Message") performs the difficult feat of taking Marshall McLuhan's ideas at face value, and she considers the neuroscience implied in McLuhan's ideas as they relate to grander narratives in media history. Michael Dick ("Twenty Years of Unnecessary Forward Slashes") takes a very small part of the media landscape (the forward slashes in web addresses) and develops an outline for web history that promises to get web history past some of its less complicated narratives of progress.

If newness has been an important dimension in the history of media, it stands to reason that one way to address the idea of newness would be to work comparatively. Comparative histories of media carry with them the hope for a kind of parallax effect, whereby the similarities and differences between media emerge from explicit comparison, so that our perspective on each medium is put into a system with other perspectives. This effect is not dissimilar from what Kenneth Burke coined "perspective by incongruity,"[7] a method he hoped would make the familiar strange, for the purpose of fuller recognition. Simply by working through comparison, the historian is invited to construct typologies and theories. This is potentially dangerous, for as John Nerone avers, "communication history displays a galloping theoretical incoherence."[8] If this theoretical incoherence can be frustrating to some

of the more properly professional impulses in media research, it can also be fruit-
ful to think with, and the tendency for comparative new media histories seems well
positioned for generating new ways to think about some familiar new media
practices.

We find this hope spelled out in the chapters in Part III, "Comparative
Approaches." Again, the point is not merely to show that we've been here before.
The point is to create the fuller sense of the history of media that becomes possi-
ble only when considering more than one set of media practices or when revolving
practices around words that have their own multimedia history. Peter Schaefer
("Interface") shows us how a word as familiar as "interface" comes loaded with a sur-
prising story of origin, and more scientific and cultural meaning than we often imag-
ine is at work. Brian O'Neill ("The Long History of Digital Radio") demonstrates
how digital radio in Europe is experienced as both a forward- and backward-look-
ing medium, to some degree stalled as a result of its relation to other contemporary
media. Benjamin Peters and Deborah Lubken ("New Media in Crises") take two
disparate examples—fire alarm systems and distributed computer networks—as case
studies for elaborating the role of newness in media history and for calling our atten-
tion to the social structures around these media. Holly Kruse ("Pipeline as Network")
compares how the oft-ignored pneumatic tube compares with other networked com-
munication, and she addresses the power systems at play in pneumatic tube systems.
Gerard Goggin ("Telephone Media") addresses the histories of the telephone and
how the telephone in its many iterations has bumped up against numerous other
media practices.

Moreover, the consideration of the intersection of "new media" and "history"
should give us an appreciation of how new media today may represent new means
of conducting historical inquiry. As those who work in the emerging subfield of dig-
ital history have already demonstrated forcefully,[9] many contemporary new media
allow us to rethink how we go about the most basic tasks involved in historical
research. This gives us an important reminder of how history itself has always been
performed through a specific set of mediated practices. Contemporary new media
provide new ways to: record, compile, analyze, and share information and culture.

Beyond this, it is important to remember, as Lisa Gitelman says, that "media
are reflexive historical subjects." She continues:

> Our sense of history—of facticity in relation to the past—is inextricable from our expe-
> rience of inscription, of writing, print, photography, sound recording, cinema, and
> now (one must wonder) digital media that save text, image, and sound. . . . Inquiring
> into the history of a medium that helped to construct that inquiring itself is sort of like
> attempting to stand in the same river twice: impossible, but it is important to try, at least
> so the (historicity of the) grounds of inquiry become clear.[10]

In this sense, there is a kind of reflexivity in the inquiries pursued here, as "media" and "history" have more to do with each other than one might at first suspect. This kind of approach may take us a long way from considering media merely as independent variables or as bearers of utopian or dystopian agency in and of themselves. This concern for how new media relate to practices in recording meaning, or to practices in historical inquiry, can be found in John Durham Peters's discussion of how history can be considered as a type of transmission. The historical record is always mediated through and by time, and always involves treating something as the transmission of the past to the present.[11] All of this is reflected in Part IV of this volume, "New Media and Historiography."

This section commences with Meghan Dougherty and Steven M. Schneider ("Web Historiography and the Emergence of New Archival Forms") reimagining the archive as it lends itself to web history, with a focus on the potential for collaborative archival work. Fernando Bermejo ("The Evolution of Audience Labor") shows how new media relate to long-standing practices in audience measurement, with a focus on the kinds of traces we leave behind in new media. Niels Brügger ("Digital History and a Register of Websites") outlines how any web archive might need to be organized before analysis can be performed. Adriana de Souza e Silva and Daniel M. Sutko ("Placing Location-Aware Media in a History of the Virtual") analyze a similar kind of trace, that of geographic location as it relates to well-developed trends in media history. Finally, Simon Popple ("'It's Not Really Our Content'") considers the meaning of web-based archives for cinema history.

Concluding Remarks

History is not new to the scholarly consideration of the media. Some of the scholars and intellectuals who are most closely associated with the study of media (and new media) dealt with media in historical terms. One need only point to Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Lewis Mumford, Elizabeth Eisenstein, and James Carey for examples of influential figures who have addressed the intersection of history and the media.[12] However, just because there are examples of historians of the media who have come before does not mean that it will be easy to stake out space for historical inquiry into the media in the future. Historical inquiry in the field of communication has never really developed institutionally to match the kind of professionalization one finds in, for instance, subfields of history itself. Though there are influential intellectual lodestars such as Innis to guide our inquiry, communication history lacks a clear disciplinary identity. Nerone looks to the lack of a clear disciplinary identity in communication history and surmises that this work "will not gain the respect of other more disciplinary historians."[13] This may be the case for

new media history as well, at least for the foreseeable future. However, this need not be a problem. Strong disciplinary identities bring with them not only solid footing and well-rehearsed epistemological standpoints. They also come with their own blind spots, verification-oriented research projects that offer little in the way of innovation, and potentially stifling conditions for the new media researcher. The history of new media, as found here, partakes of some of the freedom and dexterity that is granted to those on the margins. The emphasis on history here will (we hope) bring the fruits of the historical enterprise into conversation with other disciplines, and with a host of ideas. In this sense, perhaps there is something new here.

This volume develops the intersection of "new media" and "history" in a manner that emphasizes a number of interrelated themes. First, the volume has been developed in an attempt to nurture our awareness of how media operate not only as subjects for historical inquiry but also as the substance of all history. This can be found most obviously in the section dedicated to historiography, but the echoes of this basic insight resonate across the volume. Second, this volume sets a course for an approach to history that is, we hope, less tied to print and writing (silent, visual media) than many other historical approaches. In this sense, the volume is inspired by developments in contemporary new media, with their bundles of sensory outputs. History is not only written and read. It is also seen, heard, and felt. The history of new media will require an awareness of the varieties of media experience. Third, this volume underlines the potential for new media history to take newness seriously. Getting beyond the naïve celebration of novelty is a start, but more important than this is the potential for new media history to invigorate the study of media with ideas and theories that grapple with newness, difference, and change. There is no need simply to test or verify the ideas that have propelled the study of media for decades. The intersection of "history" and "new media" is a place where historical work can demonstrate its powers of invention.

Notes

1. Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 174.
2. Peters, "And Lead Us Not."
3. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New,* 8.
4. Pool, *Technologies without Boundaries,* 3.
5. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 4.
6. For an excellent example of this, see Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind.*
7. Burke, *Attitudes toward History,* 308.
8. Nerone, "The Future," 259.
9. See Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance?"
10. Gitelman, *Always Already New,* 20-21.

11.   Peters, "History as a Communication Problem," 24.
12.   The canonical references here would be Innis, *The Bias of Communication;* McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy;* Mumford, *Technics and Civilization;* Eisenstein, *The Printing Press;* and Carey, *Communication as Culture.*
13.   Nerone, "The Future," 260.

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