

Thoughts on Historicizing New Media

By Craig Robertson

While it may sound somewhat odd, media history can help us understand new media. Media history enables us to step back from current discussion, to defamiliarize what is becoming increasingly familiar, and to recognize that throughout history there have always been new media.

At the moment of their emergence communications media, from the book to the internet, have been presented as mechanisms to “annihilate time and space.” That is, early supporters claim that through the new rapid and efficient transmission of information diverse and disparate people across nations and the globe will be united. In the United States these claims are frequently expressed through the idea of a participatory democracy enabled by media giving all citizens access to all necessary information.

The promotion of new digital media, and the on-going debates about their social and cultural consequences, has continued to make use of the ideas and discourses that have defined the development of media in the US from at least the telegraph in the middle of the nineteenth century. These debates over ownership and distribution, content, use, freedom of expression, professionalism constitute the social and cultural meanings given to technology.

An important strand of media history argues that media are not fixed natural objects, but develop as complex formations of habits, beliefs and procedures. To understand what it meant for old media to be new is to come to recognize that through history the meaning of any new media is up for grabs: its social role, who can make use of it, who will organize its distribution etc. This approach is intended to make us think critically about any argument along the lines of “the internet has changed the world.” Media history teaches us to question what is an important national narrative in the United States – technology as a critical agent of change, that technological advances fuel economic development that produces progress.

Media are not simply understood as hardware, institutions and texts, but as existing within larger cultural practices which form our sense of time and place, define our understanding of what is public and what is private, and how we apprehend what is real.

The history of electronic media is a history of bringing information and entertainment into the home: thus debates around it have always located the emergence of media in on-going debates about what is public and what is private, and the “normal” behavior associated with these places e.g. men, women and children.

Through the twentieth century new media, especially radio and television were understood, or “domesticated” through ideologies of the family and home. As many historians have argued (e.g. William Boddy & Lynn Spiegel) these did not have to be framed in this manner, but articulated through these discourses they revealed the shifting

definitions of what it means to be a modern individual, gender roles, public and private spaces, and citizenship.

Over the course of the twentieth century the tension between the hope that advances in media technology will produce a healthier democracy, and the concern that the commercial organization of electronic media is eroding democratic values became more acute. With the advent of digital media this tension has increasingly been articulated to an expectation that new media should somewhat paradoxically mediate less, that is provide less interruption or interference. The demand for what Paul Duguid calls “transparency” has come to define interactivity as a form of empowerment. As people have the ability to be media producers, we are surrounded by numerous claims about new media that celebrate the perceived progressive aspects of interactivity.