Old Media/ New Media

The term "new media" announces its relativity. It only has meaning in relation to "old media," and, of course, what is old is always also historically specific. The terms involved are not stable and true but qualitative and changing; and yet, they are often employed rhetorically as if there exists a common definition of "digital," "book," "print culture," etc. This paradox renders it vital that we rigorously and repeatedly examine the ways in which "new" and "old" are used.

In her introductory essay to the collection *New Media, Old Media*, Wendy Chun reminds us of "the importance of interrogating the forces behind any emergence, the importance of shifting from 'what is new' to analyzing what work the new does" (2006: 3). Though many scholarly studies trace the impact of old media on new media, the reverse is rarely pursued. Yet, the work of the new is precisely what inspires us to reconsider the old and to recognize the intersections and convergent histories of old and new. Marshall McLuhan implied as much when he provocatively and metaphorically claimed, "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future (1967:74-5). More recently, Lisa Gitelman writes, "When media are new, they offer a look into the different ways that their jobs get constructed as such" (2006: 6). In other words, the designation of "newness" indexes an act of mediation and a shift in perspective from a previous cultural norm. It thus invites investigation into how culture operates and operated.

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich seeks to define "new media"-- meaning the new, digital media-- by identifying five "principles" that distinguish digital media: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, cultural transcoding. He then sets out to trace the development of new media through the convergence of computing and cinematic technologies. Other scholars pursue similar methodologies of tracing the genealogy of new, digital media through its relation to older media forms. For example, Carolyn Marvin's seminal book about the telegraph, *When Old Technologies Were New*, begins "*New technologies* is a historically relative term," (1988: 3, original emphasis). Tom Standage claims that the telegraph is *The Victorian Internet* (1998*)*, and David Henkin (2006) offers a history of the antebellum American postal service that suggests it as a precursor to our contemporary digital social network. Other scholars use the impetus provided by new media to reexamine older media forms and reconsider them anew. Anne Friedberg examines the window metaphor, such as that used in GUI computing, describing it as "the key measure of epistemic changes in representational systems from painting to photography to moving-image media and computer display" (2006: 5). Such an example shows how new media inspire new ways of thinking about older media.

The impact of new media not only promotes studies of individual old mediums but also inspires the emergence of new modes of scholarship. The field of Book History (or

Studies in the History of the Book) is a ripe example. Over the past few decades, Book History has consolidated into a scholarly field around efforts to study the codex as a medium—as a material technology with physical properties and also as an object that mediates cultural process and practices.[1] This form of old media study now has a scholarly journal (*Book History*, founded in 1998) and a scholarly society (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, founded in 1991) as well as many titles that fall under the rubric of "book history." In *Too Much to Know*, for example, historian Ann Blair examines the early history of information overload by focusing in early modern England on "one of the longest-running traditions of information managements—the collection and arrangement of textual excerpts designed for consultation" or reference books (2010: 1). So too has a mode of scholarship called "media archaeology" emerged which seeks to excavate individual technologies and the medial discourses in which they operate in order to challenge a linear historical narrative that describes the shift from old to new media.

Media do not replace one another in a clear, linear succession but instead evolve in a more complex ecology of interrelated feedback loops. "What is new about new media," Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write, "comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (1999: 15). (See REMEDIATION). "Remediation" is evidence of how new media impact old media. To take one of Bolter and Grusin's examples, a television news broadcast adopts an interface-design akin to a website in an effort to update the older medium. Katherine Hayles suggests the term "intermediation" instead of "remediation" to showcase the recursive nature of the feedback loop involved in generating the medial ecology between old and new (2005). Bending the line into a circle illuminates the bi-directional impact of old and new media and exposes the ideological interests at work in claiming newness; or, to return to Chun's provocation, to question the work that newness does.

Contemporary literature provides a case study for examining the impact of new media on old media. As the age of print appears to be passing, with more readers turning to screens more often than to books, the threat posed by digital technologies to that old media of literary culture (the codex) becomes a source of inspiration in contemporary literary arts. The result is a phenomenon that I call "bookishness" wherein the book is figured within literature an aesthetic object rather than a medium for information transmission, a thing to fetishize rather than to use. Thematically, bookish novels depict books as their main characters or objects of desire. Formally, they expose their mediality with die-cut pages and experiments in collage, color, and design. These books expose themselves to be multimedia objects and archives, and they illuminate the codex to be a medium of endless newness. Bookishness is the result of new media's impact on literature's old media, and it is one example of the complex, poetic, and mutually-generative relationship between old and new media.

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[1] For more on the history of the book as a field, see *The Book History Reader*. Eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (NY: Routledge, 2002).

SEE ALSO: history of computers, media ecology, new media, remediation, properties of digital media, reading strategies, relations between media

References and further reading

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