



New media, new audiences?

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New Media, New Audiences?

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What's new about the new media? This apparently simple question is often answered by listing new technological developments. For example, if we consider domestic screen media, the *oldest* screen medium is television which, as terrestrial, national broadcasting, has been thoroughly incorporated into domestic routines for several generations and is only now at the point of substantial change with the advent of digital poly-channel television. Screen media now *current* are the video recorder, satellite television, computer games, teletext, being familiar items in British households for at least a decade.¹ More *recent* are cable television, the camcorder and, most important, the personal computer - all currently being adopted by a growing minority of households, and thus moving from early adopter status towards mass adoption.² Last, and most obviously recognisable as new, are *prospective* technologies such as interactive teletext, multimedia computing, home shopping, and, attracting by far the most interest, the Internet, all of them likely to become widely adopted in the coming decade, subject to a host of economic, technical, regulatory and sociocultural factors. In this paper I argue that if social science is to understand 'what's new *for society* about the new media?' it must locate technological developments within the cultural processes and associated timescale of domestic diffusion and appropriation. While 'what's new for society' represents the scope of this journal, in this paper I shall begin to map some of the issues relating specifically to media audiences.

Beginning most broadly, it is notable that while the western world feels itself on the eve of an information revolution, many social scientists are sceptical of the overblown and ill-specified claims about societal changes which may or may not follow technological innovation. This scepticism is producing three kinds of answers in response to the question, 'what's new about the new media?'. First, 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Critiquing the enlightenment assumption of societal progress commonly lying behind the question, scholars argue that the history of previously 'new' media undermines the utopianism surrounding the new media. Second, 'it depends'. Here critiquing the universalising nature of visions of the so-called information society, the argument is that there are different kinds of consequences for different media and for different social groups, depending on the particular question asked. Third, 'that's the wrong question'. For these researchers, the implicit assumption that the

¹'Familiarity' depends on the diffusion process (Livingstone and Gaskell, 1995): in many developing countries, television is still 'new', and even within Europe there are inconsistencies of definition such that, for example, cable in Germany is relatively old compared with satellite, while in Britain, the opposite is the case.

²Though the relative 'failure' of cable to succeed as a mass medium is a reminder that many new media do not necessarily diffuse to all households.

media are a cause rather than a consequence of social change is too technologically determinist. Rather, social change depends on a complex of social, political and economic processes. The history of technological failures in this century alone demonstrates that which media succeed in dominating the market (and, as a result, everyday life) depends more on their social shaping and contexts of use than on their technological capacities *per se*.

None of these answers, it must be said, responds to the sense of excitement, fear and challenge experienced by those who feel themselves on the edge of a revolution - the public, journalists, policy-makers, pressure-groups, the media and information industry, the government. More worryingly, while scepticism is always salutary, the discourses with which researchers counter the widespread hype surrounding new media tends to become dystopian or backward-looking. These discourses themselves might be more convincing if better grounded empirically, but a considerable difficulty with the new media is precisely that they are not yet here. Researchers cannot research them, users cannot use them and policy makers cannot gauge their significance. Thus discourses of 'what's new' rest less on experience than on extrapolation from the past combined with speculation about the future.

When asking what's new, the implied time scale for 'newness' is not obvious, for the time scale of technological development differs from that of social change. Even at the outset of the diffusion process, by the time a new medium reached the market place much development work has already been completed. Information goods especially may already be technologically out-of-date by the time they go on sale. But their social uses and impacts, whatever these may prove to be, are the result of processes which can only begin when the new entrant to the market becomes available - processes first of diffusion through the market (Rogers, 1995) and second of the 'career' of the new medium within the home (Haddon and Silverstone, 1995). Diffusion itself must be understood as a thoroughly social as well as a market process, for the social meanings and practices which develop around a medium have their own trajectory, and this results from a complex interaction between imagined and actual uses, between cultural representations and individual concerns, between the decision to buy and the domestic practices which subsequently become established around the medium, between the emerging shape of a market and the content developed for that market. And the process of appropriation - of domesticating an unfamiliar object by incorporating it into pre-existing social practices - occurs on several time scales, from the days or weeks in which the initial thrill of newness leads the user to rearrange domestic time and space to experiment with the new toy, to that of generations, in which today's parents must figure out how to incorporate media which played no part in their own childhood into their expectations for their own children.

For media which are technologically new in the late 1990s (e.g. Internet, interactive kiosks, near video-on-demand), research can only explore social meanings, uses and impacts for the early adopters - a highly unrepresentative group of the population. Meanwhile for the majority of the population, we can only study technologically familiar media. And by the time a medium has become a mass market phenomenon, it is already too late to construct comparisons, often discussed but rarely studied, between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Indeed, not only questions of social stratification or knowledge gaps (the so-called 'info-rich' and 'info-poor'), but many other questions of changed media habits, of displacement, or of long-term adoption consequences cannot as yet be addressed for the new media, and some of which may yet fail in the marketplace. If key questions cannot be addressed until late in the diffusion process, the upshot is that a social, rather than technological, definition of new

media must include media which are now rather familiar technologies. This has implications for how research can feed into policy: historians (e.g. Fischer, 1994) may be happy to disentangle the complex relations between then-new media and contemporary historical processes from the vantage point of half a century later, but others (e.g. Biocca, 1992) see the point of new media research as informing the shaping and regulation of current and future technological developments and so can hardly wait for the lessons of history.

Adopting this rather inclusive conception of new media allows a wider view of what's new here for audiences. First, and most simply, we are seeing a significant *multiplication of personally owned media*. 'Old' media familiar to us all are being used in new arrangements of space and time as households come to possess multiple televisions, telephones, radios, etc. Facilitated by the reduction in price for media goods and by the growth of mobile media (e.g. mobile phone, walkman), what's new here is primarily to do with social contexts of use rather than the technologies themselves. These social contexts of use are themselves part of a wider reformulation of the relation between public and private. For example, the traditional notion of 'family television' (Morley, 1986), with its associated hierarchies of gender and generation, is rapidly becoming obsolete, for the very possibility of personal/private television viewing created by multi set homes is transforming the meaning of both solitary and shared viewing.

Second, both 'old' and 'current' media are *diversifying in form and contents*, resulting in local and global, general and specialized television channels, in diverse kinds of computer and video game, and so forth. This diversification itself encourages the multiplication of familiar goods, for as new forms of media come onto the market, families upgrade their existing goods, and thus the older media are passed down, from parents to children, from living room to bedroom. Perhaps most important in social terms is the degree to which diversification facilitates the broader Western trend towards individualisation (Beck, 1992; Chisholm et al, 1990; Reimer, 1995) in which media use is becoming detached from traditional sociostructural determinants and reconstrued within diverse conceptions of 'lifestyle'.

Third, the more technologically radical shift towards *convergent forms of information services*, as media, information, and telecommunications services become interconnected is facilitated by the emergence of the more recent media, cable television and the personal computer especially, as well as by both the multiplication and diversification of media. Much remains to be explored in relation to the blurring of key social boundaries through such convergence (home/work, entertainment/information, education/leisure, masculine/feminine, etc.). And as the structures which hitherto maintained such boundaries rest on, and sustain, traditional authority relations, convergence can be construed as part of a general trend towards democratisation - at least in terms of making visible forms of knowledge and opinion whose domain has been traditionally restricted to higher status groups.³

Fourth and last, the potentially most radical change of all, and one which is still more prospective than actual, is the shift from one-way, mass communication towards more *interactive communication* between medium and user. Technologies currently in development or now coming onto the market (i.e. 'prospective media') include the Internet, e-commerce, interactive games/television and near video-on-demand. Central to these is the

³While the increased accessibility of knowledge may be granted, the public and political consequences of such access to knowledge are less clear.

way in which the notion of interactivity opens up the possibility for each of the processes identified above to operate not only on the medium-as-object but in the very construction of the media text. While the argument for the active audience of traditional media has probably been pushed as far as it can go (Livingstone, 1998), interactive media put such activity at the centre of both media design and media use. To use Eco's (1979) terms, the status of both the 'virtual' and 'realised' world wide web text clearly requires elaboration - for unlike any medium before, the dominant data structure of the Internet is flexible, impermanent, non-linear, hypertextual.⁴ Internet communication clearly opens up considerable potential for reframing the relation between public and private, for constructing individualised lifestyles, and for reframing knowledge hierarchies through various forms of democratic participation.

As the foregoing illustrates, exploration of the relation between what's technologically new and what's socially new generates a new research agenda for media audiences. Audiences are significant for new media research in three respects. First, the 'implied audience' - the audience as presumed, imagined or mythologised - plays a key, if often unacknowledged, role in the discourses surrounding new media (Livingstone, 1998). For example, audiences may be implicitly construed as participants in and beneficiaries of a new democracy or as victims of a new and highly manipulable panopticon. The challenge of applying empirical methods to public speculation, whether utopian or dystopian, is stimulating many researchers to begin the project of mapping new media audiences. This approach takes its starting point, therefore, less from media theory than from varieties of public imagination concerning the audience - are cyberfriendships 'real', are children becoming video games 'addicts', who are the 'information poor', will e-commerce alter the domestic gendered division of labour, how truly participatory are democratic fora on the net?

Second, empirical research on audiences is ever more important for new media research. As audiences become less predictable, more fragmented or more variable in their engagement with media, understanding the audience is even more important for theories of social shaping, design, markets and diffusion than, perhaps, was true for older media. Successfully identifying the audience represents the Holy Grail without which no new medium any economic or social importance can emerge. For many of the same reasons that commercial pressures to 'know' the audience are growing, the academic community too must understand how audiences play a role in both the social shaping of technologies and their appropriation, consumption and impact. Here social researchers can draw on theory and research on the introduction of previously 'new' media, although it is debatable whether new media represent a new domain for old theories or whether new frameworks and questions are required (e.g. Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997; Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996; Morris and Ogan, 1996). Perhaps problematically, because of the historical coincidence of the expansion of social science with the half century of the dominance of television, the grounding assumptions of most media theory make it primarily *television* theory, yet television is a medium very different in key respects from today's new media, especially when conceived as national, mass market, public service television.

This introduces the third link to be explored between audiences and new media. For if new frameworks and questions are required, one powerful reason is that a key consequence of new media technologies is the transformation of the audience itself. As noted above, for the past forty years media theory has taken its prototype medium to be television, deriving its

⁴Although many media have long been amenable to such being used in such ways.

approach to the domestic use of television from radio research and its approach to cognitive engagement with the text from film theory. But the emergence of new, potentially mass market media (Internet, multimedia computing and polychannel broadcasting etc) challenges key assumptions behind conceptions of the (television) audience. One effect is to consolidate recent developments in 'active audience' theory by transforming hitherto rather marginal or marginalised tendencies into the mainstream of media use. Audiences - as users - are increasingly to be understood as plural (i.e. multiple, diverse, fragmented), as active (i.e. selective, self-directed, producers as well as consumers of texts), and as both embedded in and distanced from specific contexts of use. The shift is nicely captured by the questions commonly asked by the confused audience, a shift from the 'what's happening?' of the television viewer to the 'where am I?' of the participant and co-creator of the cyberworld (Skirrow, 1986).

I'll end by returning to the those three answers to the question, 'what's new about the new media?'. Clearly there can be new things under the sun, although they appear in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary manner, and research must be careful to distinguish questions of change from those of progress and questions of technological change from those of social change. Thus there is a certain irony that much of what is new about Internet communication is as old as the hills for communication theory - multimedia communication, hypertextuality, synchronicity and interactivity are all typical of face-to-face conversation, and the expectations of an everyday conversation set tough criteria for mediated communication to match.⁵ Instead, what's new about the Internet may be the combination of interactivity with the features which were innovative for mass communication - the unlimited range of content, the scope of the audience reach, the global nature of communication.

However, 'it depends' is truer than ever. Throughout the age of mass television, attempt after attempt was made to seek general answers to the central question which, not coincidentally, remains largely unanswered, namely what were the social changes brought about by the introduction of television? Given the persistent difficulties, both conceptual and empirical, with grand theories of media hegemony, media effects, mass society, vulnerable audiences and so forth, it may be more productive to build theory from studies of particular media as used by particular audiences or users under particular circumstances. If this has been the conclusion drawn after four decades of researching television audiences then it must apply all the more to newer media. For television has been a medium which has dominated and still does dominate our leisure hours, our national cultures, our domestic living rooms, our modes of family life, all with a consistency and durability of reach and scale with which the media both preceding and following are unlikely to compete. As a result, research on new media will also constitute an assessment of the impact of television. For example, to ask whether the audience is fragmenting is simultaneously to imply that the mass audience was what was significant about television, just as asking whether the Internet user is more active and participatory than the television viewer not only opens up questions regarding Internet use but also implies a particular account of television viewing.

Lastly, the question of what's new about the new media for society must take its agenda and theory from social change rather than technological innovation. This means adopting a wider and less dramatic definition of the new media and their conditions of emergence,

⁵Certainly user trials are showing that, despite the much vaunted innovations of Internet communication, it needs more successfully to emulate the features of face-to-face communication to be attractive.

consumption and consequences, and analysing these over the much slower time scale of historical change rather than technological development. Insofar as new media, as part of broader social changes in late modernity, are now raising new questions for audience research, I have identified three arenas for the research agenda. First, the critical examination of implicit or explicit claims made about the audience across the range of media theory, production and policy. Second, the careful tracing of the ways in which audiences appropriate and consume new media goods. Third, the analysis of the ways in which audiences are themselves become transformed in response to new media and or the changing social conditions of which the success of new media are themselves an outcome. Each and any of these can occupy the pages of *New Media and Society* for volumes to come!

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