

B. AUBREY FISHER MEMORIAL

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LECTURE

The Oldness of New Media

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Introduction

It is a great honor to be invited to remember Aubrey Fisher, who I knew when I studied for my master's degree in this department in 1981 and 1982. We played basketball a few times and though I never had the pleasure of taking a class from him he was always very friendly to me, a kindness I have tried to emulate in my dealings with students. And being at the U brings a flood of meanings and memories. I am a proud graduate of this university, and so are my wife, my parents, my sister and brother-in-law, my maternal grandparents, and countless other relatives. My grandfather served as provost in the 1950s, my uncle as provost in the 1960s, and my great grandfather as president in the 1910s, and the university was founded by my triple great grandfather, so I feel at home in a way that stretches back across the generations. Places hold memories and many rushed back as I walked the campus this afternoon. The thrills of discovery from classes and discussions as I studied in the Department of Communication feel as alive as ever. The memory is less fond of having to retype my 200-page master's thesis to meet the U's formatting requirements, a chore that took two weeks in a Quonset hut north of the Cowles building, a structure I am pleased to see no longer exists. (Of course the thesis was much improved during this involuntary rewrite.) This task would take five minutes today--a story of labor and technologies that introduces my theme.

I left the U in 1982 for my doctoral studies at Stanford with the mission to philosophize mass communication. If it did not sound so pretentious I would call my subject the philosophy of communication. In philosophy the job is to be as basic as possible, so I would plead that you bear with me as I present a few elementary observations about the history of media in fifty minutes. Basic does not mean easy. Indeed, in almost every field of inquiry fundamentals are more difficult to grasp than fine points. Mathematicians speak precisely about the differences between, say, Weyl, Ricci, and Riemann tensors, but don't ask them to define what a number is! Russell and Whitehead tried and made such a mess that most mathematicians since tend to be pragmatists who use numbers without worrying about their paradoxical conceptual foundations. Biologists can likewise explain the Krebs cycle in great precision, but their fundamental topic--life--remains elusive after massive growth in knowledge. The same holds for communication scholars, who can explain what "attribution theory" has to do with the "third-person effect" or how Althusser's concept of the "ideological state apparatus" differs from Gramsci's notion of "hegemony," but woe be unto that scholar who tries to say what "communication" finally is! Fundamentals are often the most challenging of all intellectual inquiries.

Old Media, New Media

My central question tonight is what if anything is revolutionary in “new media”—a vague term encompassing digital or computer-based media from handhelds to cell phones, from Facebook to Google. Over the past decades, we all have been hearing promises about the revolutionary powers of new technologies. A skeptical reaction that there is nothing new under the sun is well deserved. If it’s all so revolutionary, why are the basic problems still the same—bills, backaches, nasty political campaigns, poverty, and cruelty? Life and death in our era seem to chug blithely along despite all the Jetsonian promises. And though digital media have made communication much easier and faster, there’s little evidence that they have made it any better. The right software can give us unprecedented means of literary and musical composition, but who can match what Shakespeare or Beethoven did with ink and paper? Gothic cathedrals were built with simple tools. Smaller means often yield greater art.

Even so, it is hard to shake the sense that something has changed—even though it is hard to figure out the contours of a change we are in the midst of. We can begin by rejecting any simple idea of replacement. New media do not replace old media; they rearrange older functions and sometimes provide them with even more powerful platforms. Despite prophecies of decline, the most fundamental media are still with us. The medium of language, which is unquestionably the greatest step forward in the history of human communication, has become definitive of human nature over the millennia of use. It is natural for humans to learn to manipulate symbols; such capacity seems hard-wired in. Everything uniquely human turns on language—the ability to say “if” or “not,” the act of symbolization that enables the growth of mind and its sharing, and all the consequences of social organization and cooperation that follow from our shared tongues.

Writing

Writing, which is unquestionably the most momentous of all *technical* innovations in human history, is not going away any time soon either.¹ In contrast to language, writing is not natural. A toddler will not ask for pen and paper but will use gesture, facial expression, and the interactive array of oral language. Writing is a difficult, unnatural, and even painful medium to practice, and anyone who teaches university students knows that fifteen or sixteen years of intense training in the art is often not enough to master it. Language is a more or less natural endowment of all humans; writing is a technical accomplishment that requires a long apprenticeship and constant practice.

Let us consider writing at greater length—the mother of all media. A riddle: What is shared in common by a birth certificate, a wedding license, a coroner’s report, a diploma, a

birthday card, a declaration of war, a house sale, a legislative bill, and a death sentence? A signature, of course. This cultural form—somewhere between a word, image, act, and gesture—still rules over life and death in our world. A signature transforms a piece of paper into a legal act.² Nothing binding can be done without it. The signature is a symbol of the enormous power of writing. The introduction of writing had enormous cultural consequences. Whatever culture or society has possessed it has invariably prevailed over others who do not. Writing is a key part of civilization and goes together with such lasting facts as the division of labor, the domination of men over women, and bureaucracy. We all understand Woody Guthrie’s point that some people will rob you with a six-gun, and some with a fountain pen.

The introduction of writing had enormous cultural consequences.

Another way to get at the import of writing is to consider the dolphins, which regularly show up in communication theory as a path not taken.³ There is no good reason to doubt that they, with their large brains and obviously gregarious habits, do not have rich practices of communication and culture. The key contrast between us and dolphins is their lack of hands and their immersion in a medium that permits no permanence of record.⁴ Lasting monuments of any sort are impossible in a marine habitat. There is no way to have a dolphin “world” in Hannah Arendt’s sense of that term, a fixed repertoire of durable *things*, a built environment imbued with historical significance that outlasts any individual’s life.⁵ For dolphins there could be none of what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called “the fixation of meaning,” no guaranteed permanence in culture.⁶ Theirs would be a very different culture than ours: dolphins could have memory but no history; poetry but no literature; religion but no scripture; education but no textbooks; law but no constitution; mathematics but no equations; music but no scores. Writing does not make us human, but it does help make civilization as we know it, for better or worse. Without writing, dolphins could have culture, but they could not have civilization.

Writing, the graphic storage of signs, is enormously diverse in its history and expression. It is not a single practice. It is clearly more than “the painting of the voice” as Voltaire, in his alphabetocentric way, defined it. There are plenty of writing systems that provide no instructions on how to give voice to the marks on the visual surface. Consider the string of marks: “2 x 2 = 4.” The meaning of this set of signs will be instantly understood across the world, but the vocal sounds that correspond to it will vary enormously. “Two times two is four” or “zwei mal zwei gleich vier” or “dos por dos son cuatro.” Written visual signs do not always have an unequivocal acoustic counterpart. The following sign is widely understood by the eye, hugely divergent as spoken to the ear: no smoking, *interdit de fumer, ikke røyke, μη καπνίζετε*, etc.⁷

Chinese, though not perfectly ideographic like arithmetic, shares the condition of being widely understood as written, but with huge differences in how it is sounded in various dialects. Even in English, it is quite inadequate to think of

writing as a system for freezing speech, since written words can be spoken with an infinite range of pitch, pronunciation, volume, speed, and accent.

The remarkable thing about alphabetic writing was its training of the eye to act like an ear. As Goody and Watt put it, “The notion of representing a sound by a graphic symbol is itself so stupefying a leap of the imagination that what is remarkable is not so much that it happened relatively late in human history, but rather that it ever happened at all.”⁸ As far as we can tell, humans were graphic artists from an early point. They drew and painted to represent events and things and for the sheer exuberant joy of it. But language is not things and events but rather sounds, grammars and systems of meaning. Prior to writing, language existed only as a creature of sound, voice, and ears: it was heard and spoken, not seen. The eye was certainly a very important conduit for non-verbal communication--gesture, posture, facial expression--but except for sign language, no visual system except writing has the grammatical structure of a

language. A picture of a cat on a mat cannot decide among such possible interpretations: “The cat sat on the mat,’ ‘The cat will sit on the mat,’ ‘The cat sits rarely on the mat,’ ‘If the cat sits on the mat. . .’” Pictures do not have the same precision of statement as language.⁹

Writing systems that represented words visually were the radical break, not drawings that represented things. Getting the eye to perceive a word is the great breakthrough. As the Spanish poet Quevedo wrote about reading, “Escucho con mis ojos a los muertos”: I listen with my eyes to the dead. The poet listens with his eyes, and holds converse with the departed. Here we are at the heart of media studies, with its classic questions of sensory transposition and the bridging of space and time.

Writing puts together, in various combinations, word, sound, and image. Building on Jakobson and Peirce, John S. Robertson argues that “visual signs are prototypically atemporal, imitative, and immediate, whereas auditory signs are essentially temporal, imputed, and mediate.” Visual perception tends to be all-at-once and auditory perception tends to be one-thing-after-another. With the eyes, we tend to see things and their images, their resemblances, but with the ears, we hear things whose meaning we have had to learn to associate with their sources. When we hear a sound, we turn our head to the source and intuitively ask, Where did the sound come from? But when we see an object, we don’t intuitively ask, What does it sound like? To interpret the meaning of sound is a more conventionalized process, one of habitual association, and we know from psychoacoustic studies that decontextualized sounds, no matter how familiar they may be in everyday life, are often not recognized without their context or accompanying visual stimulus. Radio and cinema sound effects exploit this fact--shaken aluminum foil can pass as thunder, wooden blocks on a table can pass as horse hooves, and in the movie *Titanic*, frozen celery stalks provided the sound of Rose’s hair freezing. Sound

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interpretation requires learning in a way that visual perception doesn’t. This is not, however, to say that seeing is automatic and fully natural; it is to point to the iconic quality of seeing and the symbolic quality of hearing, to use Peirce’s terms. Icons are signs that are connected to their objects by way of similarity or resemblance; symbols are signs that are connected by way of convention, learning, and habit. Humans possess (at least) two highly developed ways of perceiving the world that work in very different ways. The eyes are high bandwidth devices that take in whole fields all at once; the ears are lower bandwidth media that are much more temporally acute than the eyes and more omnidirectional in their surveillance. The eyes catch spatial wholes; the ears catch temporal sequence.¹⁰

Writing did the incredible feat of marrying the two modes. It made space masquerade as time. Writing united visual, auditory, and linguistic processing. “Writing includes both the holistic characteristics of visual perception, and at the same time, without contradiction, the sequential character of auditory perception. It is at once atemporal and temporal, iconic and symbolic. In short, the potential for writing is at the nexus linking the visual and the auditory channels of perception.”¹¹ serially, from one thing to another, and to catch not the images of things but rather the shapes (or even sounds) of words. This is the great sensory-cognitive synthesis of human

history. Writing builds on the fact that vision’s material tends to be lasting, whereas speech’s is necessarily transitory. Indeed, if sounds didn’t disappear, speech and music would be impossible, as sounds would pile up into a muddy soup of brown noise. With writing proper as opposed to a pictographic system, language in its fullness takes graphic form. This is a hugely dramatic feat in human history.

The power to store and transmit across space and time affects social organization, even among those who are not literate. The invention of various forms of writing did not have a huge and instant impact on ordinary life in the form of mass literacy. Many societies--such as ancient Sumeria, Egypt, and China--were “oligoliterate” meaning that writing and reading were the privilege of special castes such as scribes, priests, or lawyers.¹² Writing’s biggest effects were in stratifying society into different classes. Even with the printing press, first appearing in the mid fifteenth century, it was not until the late eighteenth century that mass literacy was achieved in North America (among white men and women) and Northern Europe. Invention is not the same as impact.

There is a huge and fascinating literature on the history of writing and reading. As one would expect with everything we humans do, reading practices are enormously various.¹³ Today we tend to have a reverent attitude toward the written word in comparison to audiovisual media. Good book, bad television. But our high estimate of the cultural worth of reading and writing is not universal in history. New media are criticized and old media are cherished, says Mitchell Stephens.¹⁴ Writing has

long been ferociously criticized for its association with death and fixity or its social isolation and solipsism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was not unusual for alarmed critics to complain that writing isolated people into private, even illicit pleasures. Readers got lost in an ungrounded fantasy world out of touch with real human beings and objects.¹⁵ To read these critics, you could imagine they were talking about internet pornography. In a way, perhaps they were. The lovers Mme. de Staël and Benjamin Constant used to wake up in the morning, have breakfast together, and then retreat into separate rooms to write love-letters to each other. They seemed to think that mediation improved their love.

To Write or Not to Write

The critique of writing is indeed ancient. It is a puzzle that among the world's most influential moral teachers, some refused to write. This is not the case with all ethical founders.

To Moses is attributed the authorship of the whole Pentateuch, a feat whose miraculousness is only burnished by his recounting his own death in its last chapter, and Mohammad transcribed the entire Qur'an as dictated by the angel Gabriel. But we have no record that Confucius, Socrates, or Jesus wrote anything for posterity. All three share the peculiarity that they left no evidence of their doctrine in their own words. Each had an odd, and oddly powerful, way of communicating with subsequent generations. In each case their teaching was recorded, codified, glamorized, or distorted--nobody knows the precise relationship--by their disciples. Socrates we know chiefly through Plato's dialogues, in which he is the hero, though Aristophanes also gives us a comically wacky Socrates and Xenophon a more genteel version. Jesus' words are recorded canonically in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, though apocryphal gospels and other traces of his sayings survive inside and outside the canon of Christian scripture. In his lifetime Confucius had, legend has it, various numbers of disciples (72, 3000, etc.), and what we possess of his teaching, *The Analects*, is clearly a posthumous redaction of controversial fidelity.

What is the significance of the attitude apparently possessed in common by the historical Socrates, Jesus, and Confucius: the refusal to commit their doctrines to writing? There is no doubt that they were all literate. Socrates certainly was on intimate terms with writing and written works, as the *Phaedrus* makes clear, in which Socrates delivers a blistering attack on writing as destroying memory and creating a kind of pseudo-interaction with dead words. As a rabbi, Jesus was versed in the Hebrew scriptures, which he read aloud in the synagogue (Luke 4:16ff), and John 8:8 (a text itself that many biblical scholars regard as a later addition of dubious authenticity) depicts him scribbling on the ground while the accusers of the woman taken in adultery make their case. Confucius spent

much of his life's work as an editor of the Chinese Five Classics. "I transmit," he said, "I do not create" (*Analects*, 7:1). Even if "Spring and Autumn" was "authored" by him, it is presented not as a statement of original doctrine but as a historical redaction whose arrangement presents the doctrine indirectly. Though he was an editor, "Confucius say[s]" and not "Confucius writes" is the phrase by which he is always remembered. Socrates, Jesus, and Confucius were fundamentally oral teachers whose immortality rests paradoxically on the medium of writing. Their collective failure to write was clearly not a question of capacity, but of will. Perhaps they all recognized the hubris or futility of trying to fix the transient or the eternal, to commit the living spirit of thought to ink and paper. Perhaps they rejected the absolute power over life and death possessed by the written decrees of kings and emperors.¹⁶ Perhaps they were too humbled by the pre-existent texts to add to them--the text of "the laws" for Socrates, the Hebrew scriptures for Jesus, the ancient writings for Confucius. None of these figures had any notion of "authorship" as it emerged in the modern European culture of individual expression and copyright.

Indeed, each of their doctrines rejects the idea that an individual can be a source of truth. Whatever their reasons, Socrates, Jesus, and Confucius did not write their thoughts--and via a sort of textual ventriloquism orchestrated by their

disciples they became the moral guides for a great deal of the human family. It must be one of the greatest ironies of history that the medium of writing has delivered us the teachings of people who abandoned their own words to the air or the memory of their disciples. Their sayings, delivered orally in concrete situations of dialogue, were preserved by the phonograph of the written word for abstract situations of dissemination in Plato's dialogues, the New Testament, and the *Analects*. At the most basic level the textual sources for all three figures are riddled with mystery. No one knows precisely what the most central terms or teachings mean, what is a joke or serious, what is a scribal error, or even who wrote the text and why. It is perhaps this "failure" of communication at the heart of all three traditions that makes their lasting influence and resonance possible.

Writing is indeed one of the great human wonders. For millennia it was the sole option for sending culture across the expanses of time (recording) and space (transmission). What was not written disappeared into the air or took root in the fickle soil of memory. To communicate across space, symbolic cargo had to be carried across space except for small-scale transmission media such as towers, pigeons, and signal fires. Postal and messenger systems kept people in touch at a distance, and writing in all its varieties--monuments, scrolls, codices, scripture, libraries, and archives--kept people in touch over the wide prairies of time. Writing had a monopoly on storage. The only way to store music, dance, cuisine, poetry, law, religion, experience, history, genealogy, or property rights was some form

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of inscription. Incessant scribbling--inscribing, describing, prescribing--was our only bulwark against time. In the nineteenth century, something remarkable happened in the history of communication, a rupture in the media of recording and transmission. Three key forms arise, all of which pay tribute to writing in their names: the telegraph, photograph, and phonograph.¹⁷

The Telegraph

The key fact about the telegraph is that it enabled practically instantaneous contact at a distance. Telegraph means distance-writing and all writing, in a way, is distance-writing. The novelist Jack London, in a 1900 essay called "The Shrinkage of the Planet," sounds as if he has been reading the late communication scholar James Carey: "Up to yesterday communication for any distance beyond the sound of the human voice or the sight of the human eye was bound up with locomotion. A letter presupposed a carrier. The messenger started with the message, and he could not but avail himself of the prevailing modes of travel. If the voyage to Australia required four months, four months were required for communication; by no known means could this time be lessened. But with the advent of the telegraph and telephone communication and locomotion were divorced.¹⁸ Carey's argument was similar: the telegraph sundered communication and transportation for the first time in history. The message became separated from its material; communication became ethereal, non-physical.¹⁹ Of course we shouldn't prematurely celebrate the telegraph's ruptures any sooner than we should celebrate those of the internet. It was expensive to use, as limited in its expression as text messaging, and its networks were laid out according to imperial needs. As a vast network of switches, the national computer network in the late nineteenth century was already a kind of proto-computer. (If we could extend "Moore's law"--that computing power doubles every two years--backwards into history, we might retroactively see the nineteenth-century telegraph grid as a nation-sized chip.) The telegraph enabled new media institutions such as the wire services, but it was more an elite medium of business than a popular one of entertainment. Its primary purpose was the management of people and property at a distance. It was more a computational bureaucratic medium than one for sensory enhancement.

The Photograph

Photography, in contrast, was certainly such a medium. For the first time in history, writing had become autonomous from an author's will. You could aim the camera and it would "write" (or at least filter) whatever light happened to fall upon it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. called the camera "a mirror with a memory."²⁰ Such "light-writing" was metaphysically shocking. The philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin said that photography allowed us to see the world with the "dynamite of one tenth of a second."²¹ He was thinking of fast shutter speeds that allowed us to fix what the naked eye could never see and thus push back the frontiers of visibility. This conquest is a central characteristic of our age. Leland Stanford employed the eccentric English photographer Eadward Muybridge to discover whether a horse's hooves ever leave the ground when it runs. In 1878, the question was settled in the affirmative--for the first time in history. (Benjamin was quite conservative in talking about a tenth of a second; by the late nineteenth century, stroboscopic photography had gotten down to ten thousandths of seconds, and today laser photography can capture processes at femtosecond speed--one quadrillionth of a second.)

The still camera allowed for stop action, but motion pictures caught action in its serial flow. (Clearly Muybridge's photographs are proto-cinematic.) The camera was a kind of artificial eye, an enhancement and extender of vision. It enabled a new kind of memory--now dancing, gymnastic exercises, the flight of birds, explosions, and even the electrocution of an elephant could be stored for future generations in their real-time flow without having to be converted into the less vivid, literally time-less medium of written words. Film helped break writing's monopoly stranglehold on cultural storage.

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The Phonograph

So did the phonograph. Usually translated as "voice-writer" from the Greek word *phonē* (voice), we might whimsically but aptly translate *phonograph* as "writing-killer" from the Greek word *phonos* (murder). With the unprecedented ability to record sound, Edison and his contemporaries loosened the written word's grip on control over language. The phonograph was just as indiscriminating in what it inscribed as the camera. They both could memorialize things like sneezes, grunts, and throat clearings in a way that writing--in thrall to the demand to encode its material into symbolic sense--never could. The realm of the writable grew by leaps and bounds thanks to the graphic revolution. Sounds no longer disappeared forever. The voice could be separated from the body and bottled up for use beyond the grave. In a way even more radical than the camera, the phonograph captured time in its continuous flow. Ever since the ancient origins of drawing, visual images have been recordable. An image requires only space, not time. The phonograph was the first time-based medium, and its ability to record acoustic events in their temporal flow is truly revolutionary. We could now play sound backwards, speed it up to make men sound like chipmunks, or slow it down to make women sound like men. The phonograph was a hearing aid that

allowed our ears to overcome time. The manipulation of the time axis of acoustic or optical flows is unknown in the history of communication before the late nineteenth century and is one of the characteristic marks of modernity.²²

In short, the bridging of space and capturing of time are the two great breakthroughs of the telegraph, photograph, and phonograph. These new media rearranged writing, sight, and sound. The durable word was no longer tied to the paper it was written on; the image was no longer subject to the slow and sloppy physiology of human vision or the skill of the artist's hand; and time itself yielded before sound-recording. Modern media since follow in the threefold zone of word, optical, and acoustic processing. The nineteenth century saw the unraveling of the weave that writing once achieved. Where the alphabet once united eye, ear, and word, the photograph, phonograph, and telegraph differentiated them.

The new-old media axis turns on logistical media, and writing once again points the way.

All complex societies have media. Managing time (recording) and space (transmission) are necessarily part of any civilization. But there is another kind of role played by media that we tend to neglect--logistics--and this holds the secret for understanding what we call new (or digital) media today.

Logistical or organizational media are so fundamental they are rarely visible. Their job is to organize and orient, to arrange people and property in time and space. They are rarely content-driven, and Marshall McLuhan's slogan that the medium is the message seems particularly applicable to them. They are often abstract data-processors. Calendars, clocks, and towers are classic logistical media.²⁶ So are names, indexes, addresses, maps, tax rolls, logs, accounts, archives, and the census. Money may be the master logistical medium--a medium, as Karl Marx complained, has no content in itself but has the power to arrange all things around it. Logistical media often arrange things around a zero point: they have the power to set the terms in which everyone operates. Brigham Young's cane served as a logistical medium when it marked out the center spot, the temple, around which the Salt Lake valley ever after, like it or not, would be gridded. Logistical media pretend to be neutral and abstract, but they are often subtly and deeply partisan in political or religious senses. People still debate whether our era is better described as "A.D." or "C.E." and whether the day after Saturday should be called "Sunday" or "first day."

The new-old media axis turns on logistical media, and writing once again points the way. Writing, the seedbed of all media, has a logistical as well as space-binding and time-binding aspect.²⁷ It is a commonplace in the history of writing that many of the earliest forms of writing were designed for bureaucratic purposes of counting and accounting. Proto-cuneiform scripts in Sumeria, for instance, concerned the apportioning of bread and beer for man-days of labor.²⁸ Writing has long been a device of administration and computation as well as cultural storage and transmission.²⁹

For the two or three decades before and after 1950, there was, as noted, in countries like the United States, Canada, England, France, Germany, and Japan the perfection of a system of delivery and content. Starting around 1975 or so, there has been a major crisis in both. In content, the old segregation of channels into expert and laypeople, producers and viewers, has broken down. This is true of much more than media; in knowledge in general, the boundary between official and popular modes has grown more and more frayed.³⁰ In delivery, there has been a fading of a single schedule for all in favor of à la carte viewing and the decline of general interest media. In journalism, some scholars lament the "disappearance of the editor."³¹ In the blogosphere, it often seems that everyone's a journalist and nobody's an editor. We are seeing the democratization of the right to broadcast. We live in the age of "user-generated-content" on YouTube and Wikipedia and blogs--or "loser-generated content," as we might call it, given the stereotype of the people who produce it.³²

The Twentieth Century

The twentieth century saw an expansion of these innovations into institutions and systems of delivering drama to a dramatized society, in Raymond Williams's famous phrase, starting in the industrialized countries of the world.²³ With newspapers, national magazines and national cinemas, radio then television broadcasting, a system arose for programming modern life.²⁴ Broadcasting scheduled us by the hour or half hour (or 60-30 second chunks to advertisers); newspapers scheduled us by the day or half day; magazines scheduled us by the week or month, and cinema scheduled us more or less by the season. The fundamental innovations in recording and transmission happened in the nineteenth century; the twentieth focused on their perfection as arts and as popular systems of delivery and simulation. Genres, narratives, stars, and audiences for diverse media proliferated. In many ways, the dominant form of communication from around the 1920s to the 1980s--few speaking to many via high technology using an industrial mode of production of stars and genres supported by the market and/or state--was quite unusual in the history of the world. In most of the history of communication, the dominant form has not been few to all, but some to some, or few to few, one to few, or even one to none (diaries and blogs).²⁵ Nonetheless, it was in these anomalous circumstances that scholars first started to study media systematically, and it left a stamp on our theories.

Now that this system has crumbled, and we see "new" digital media scurrying around the previous century's electronic mass media like small mammals around hulking dinosaurs, we are tempted to be impressed by the newness of new media. The very expression implies a contrast with what are sometimes called "old media." But we should be clear: what arose in the twentieth century were mass media, not old media. What we call new media are actually much closer to old media as in ancient media.

The Digital Age

New media fit more in the lineage of the telegraph than the photograph or phonograph. They neither promise nor deliver an improvement in sensory imitation. For much of the twentieth-century, sound and picture quality on analog media got progressively better: first they were married in sound film and then came stereo and surround-sound, color, cinemascope, and high-definition. The digital platform has decisively reversed the trend toward better production values. To be sure, computers have become much richer in sound and image than in the days of punch cards or alphanumeric commands but they have not caught up to analog fidelity. Digital media generally sacrifice quality for ease. YouTube marks a degradation of optical and acoustic quality. MP3 files indisputably sound worse than vinyl LPs.³³ Between 2007 and 2008, text messages surpassed phone calls in frequency. Surely these mini-messages, limited to a maximum of 160 characters including spaces, are less articulate than letters and carry less information than telephone calls.³⁴ In terms of expressiveness, “new media” are surely worse. The project of virtual reality claimed in the 1990s to do for the skin what film and sound recording had done for the ears and eyes: provide sensory extensions in space and time. The promise of perceptual enhancement by new media has all but vanished today.

Today the energy of invention is found not so much in recording or transmitting or building better sensory simulations, but rather in ease, accessibility, and mobility. Our key innovations are logistical. Our key communication projects today require massive indexing and the most characteristic communicative act today may be “tagging.” Massive searchable archives are being compiled, some of them public and many of them proprietary, with effects that few have considered.³⁵ No one knows, for instance, how long all this digital documentation will last; paper could turn out to be a more lasting storage medium than digits, and the future historian may find 1908 better documented than 2008. The more ubiquitous something is, the less likely it is to be preserved for posterity. The mass-market potboilers of the late nineteenth century often never made it into libraries and political campaign materials, so abundant amid an election cycle, vanish from the archive. At the height of the mid-twentieth century, the existential fear was the loneliness of communication breakdown; now the much more banal equivalent might be the annoyance of getting “poked” on Facebook. Friends I haven’t seen for three decades are now cropping up in cyberspace. Bits of music heard on the air that once would have vanished forever now can be identified with the song-identifying utility on your phone. We face what might be called the disappearance of oblivion. It’s so difficult to lose anything lately.³⁶ No one, amid this mad rush to index, seems to be worried about its long-term storage.

With all this tagging, I sometimes instinctively start to do a Google search when I can’t find my keys.

Google

Which we should briefly consider. Google is arguably the most powerful media company in the world. It is at least the most symptomatic of our moment. Google is not Time-Warner or M-G-M; NBC, CBS, or the New York Times; Disney or EMI. It produces no content whatsoever—at least no *unique* content. Its ambition is to make available all content, to be a universal library. Google’s genius is logistical: it is a massive index to a massive archive, and its products involve classic logistical devices such as maps, desktops, calendars, language translation, not to mention money, which it seems quite happy to make. It has become an almost indispensable gateway for most of us to the world’s knowledge. Its trademark is the analysis of massive amounts of data.

We should be very nervous when any entity gains a monopoly control over communication.³⁷ Google’s informal slogan is “Don’t be evil” and it doesn’t take a Freud to observe that the commands we lay upon ourselves are usually a pretty good indication of the things we are tempted by. What if Google went bad? Just what is it going to do with all the amassed data in our gmail accounts, that huge traffic of documents which it is privy to? When I feel like scaring myself with nightmare scenes of what could go really wrong in the twenty-first century, I think of what could happen if the divine mind that Sergey Brin, Google’s co-founder, helped dream up—he once said that a perfect search engine would be like the mind of God—turned demonic.

It might seem slightly lame to pick on Google, especially when there are so many other major institutions around that don’t even try not to be evil. (I could name a couple, but I’ll leave that to your imagination.) But it seems to me that power today works as much through logistical as through narrative, sensory, or content means. A whole generation is flocking innocently to new media as empowering “social utilities,” as the ocean of sociability through which they swim, without considering the consequences. I am not concerned that our networked selves are being exposed to bad sorts of messages necessarily, though they are certainly plenty of those to go around in any medium. The concern is more fundamental: what does it mean to live in a hive of constant connection? As communication scholars, we are too in love with ideology, and not enough with accounting; too interested in content, and not enough in mobilization.

A whole generation is flocking innocently to new media as empowering “social utilities,” as the ocean of sociability through which they swim, without considering the consequences.

“Alert Culture”

In a post-9/11 world, power is exercised as much through organization as propaganda. The state and the market, it seems to me, converge here. The state constantly stirs us up to diligence and vigilance through what I call “alert culture.” We are supposed to be watching for, well, we’re not exactly sure what. The public address systems in airports tell us that the Department of Homeland Security has set the alert level at “orange” but this is as empty a signifier as a Facebook “poke.”³⁸ We are to watch out for evil doings and be constantly on tiptoe, but there is no clear ideological content to beware of. Our world is full of alarms and alerts--about weather, travel, transfats, toys from China, creepy internet predators, and other terrors. The market, for its part, has provided us with abundant tools to keep us linked in. Cell phones, PDAs, e-mail, I-pods, Facebook, MySpace, Blackberries--these and similar devices and platforms are always there providing something for our thumbs, eyes, ears, and voice to attend to. Our job is to be agitated, updated, connected, waiting for the event to arrive. (What if it arrived offline?) The state and the market keep administering the jitters to us in small doses. “Attention!” they cry and we step to. Suddenly the existential solitude that so many twentieth-century authors lamented no longer sounds so bad. This is a good thing for the institutions and technologies whose interest it is to keep us plugged in to them.

When I started as an assistant professor over 20 years ago, I noticed that anything life-changing would come through my mailbox. Now nothing important comes through there. Everything comes through the computer. We once rushed to answer the phone; now we plug in to the digital IV-drip. The key fact of power today is mobilization (or perhaps immobilization), not indoctrination. One of the benefits of having an uncooperative back is a constant reminder of the material conditions of computer work--that reading and typing is a form of labor, time spent that could be spent elsewhere. Power in communication is of course partly the power to tell the story--as well as the power to determine who gets to tell it, how it’s told, and who gets to listen. But stories are not the only story: the deeper issue is the configuration of the tellers and listeners and the time spent there, rather than doing something else.

Conclusion

New media are like old media in that their central task is the problem of order, the problem of memory, and the problem of scale. The rise of so-called new media returns us to blatantly political and ethical questions. They invite us to freshly face the institutions that determine our names, weights and measures, stamps, money, holidays, seconds and minutes. Power has always involved computation; digital media emerge out of the oldest need in the book (as it were): the need of the temple to record, the market to transmit, and the palace to organize.³⁹ New media bring back the ancient problem of commanding

loyalty--with a vengeance.

Media are not just pipes or channels. They are our condition, our fate, and our challenge. As the word suggests, media are things in the middle, what is common and

connecting. Altering our anchorage to the signifier is always momentous.⁴⁰ No longer should anyone ever have to spend two weeks retyping a master’s thesis again; history has changed in some key way. But gone forever are the days when most of us knew no such thing as the constant grind of e-mail. None of us chose to live much of our lives in front of the screen; but neither are we willing to give it up. Media studies is a fascinating field because it asks us to face the choices we make with limited time, space, and energy. Media show up wherever humans confront the unmanageable mortality of our material existence, the melancholy fact that memory cannot hold up against time, and the inevitable desire to control these basics. Media are more radically part of our condition than we usually allow. They are the ground, not the figure. They are both basic and difficult. Recording, transmission, organization; labor, work, and action; temple, market, and palace--these basics of our condition always implicate media. The fundamental fact of media studies might be summarized thus: And now abide time, space, and power, these three; but the greatest of these, at least at the moment is power.

Media studies is a fascinating field because it asks us to face the choices we make with limited time, space, and energy.

Endnotes

¹ I borrow the term “momentous” from Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 85.

² Béatrice Fraenkel, *La signature: Genèse d'un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). Thanks to Ben Kafka.

³ My own installments in the genre of dolphin communication theory may be found in *Speaking into the Air* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 260-261, and “Communication as Dissemination,” *Communication As . . . Stances on Theory*, eds. Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 211-222.

⁴ Loren Eiseley, “The Long Loneliness: Man and the Porpoise,” *A Writer's Reader*, ed. Donald Hall and D. L. Emblen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 140-147.

⁵ *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 8. Thanks to Leonard Hawes, my splendid Utah advisor, for teaching me Ricoeur's work.

⁷ Barry B. Powell, *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

⁸ Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5:3 (April 1963): 304-345, 315.

⁹ E. H. Gombrich, “The Visual Image,” *Scientific American* 227 (September 1972), 82-96, here 82-3.

¹⁰ John S. Robertson, “The Actuality and Possibility of Writing,” *The First Writing*, ed. Stephen Houston (2004), 16-38.

¹¹ Robertson, “The Actuality and Possibility of Writing,” 19.

¹² Goody and Watt, 313.

¹³ A nice recent review of the literature is Leah Price, “Reading: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 7 (2004): 303-320.

¹⁴ Mitchell Stephens, “Which Communications Revolution Is It, Anyway?” *Journalism Quarterly* 75 (1998): 9-13.

¹⁵ Leah Price, “You are what you read,” *New York Times*, 23 Dec. 2007.

¹⁶ Deborah Steiner, *The Tyrant's Writ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ The following argument follows Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). In Greek, “graphē” means “writing.”

¹⁸ “The Shrinkage of the Planet” (1900), *Revolution and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 139-157.

¹⁹ James W. Carey, “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph,” *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 201-230. For my critical appreciation of this essay see “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph Revisited,” *Thinking With James Carey: Essays on Communications, Transportation, History*, eds. Jeremy Packer and Craig Robertson (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 137-155.

²⁰ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *Atlantic Monthly* 3 (1859), 738-748, 739.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217-255.

²² Sybille Krämer, “The Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 93-109.

²³ Raymond Williams, “Drama in a Dramatised Society,” *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan O'Connor (London: Routledge, 1989).

²⁴ Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television, and Modern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

²⁵ See my “Mass Media,” *The Media Studies Reader*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

²⁶ See my “Calendar, Clock, Tower,” *Deus in Machina*, ed. Jeremy Stolow, forthcoming. For a full-length treatment of logistical media, see Judd A. Case's forthcoming dissertation at the University of Iowa.

²⁷ The interest in media as bureaucratic “paper-machines” or data-processors is characteristic of recent varied media theory by German-language scholars such as Bernhard Dotzler, Bernhard Siegert, Cornelia Vismann, and Hartmut Winkler.

²⁸ For instance, Jöran Friberg, “Counting and Accounting in the Proto-Literate Middle East: Examples from two new volumes of proto-cuneiform texts,” *JCS* 51 (1999): 107-137. Thanks to Dan Emery for this essay.

²⁹ This point is made nicely by Wolf Kittler, “Aphrodite gegen Ammon-Ra: Buchstaben im Garten des Adonis, nicht in Derridas Apotheke,” *Archiv für Mediengeschichte: Stadt--Land--Fluss*, ed. Lorenz Engell, Bernhard Siegert, and Joseph Vogl (Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität, 2007), 207ff.

³⁰ That our era is marked by “promiscuous knowledge” is the thesis of the late historian Ken Cmiel.

³¹ Elihu Katz, “The End of Journalism,” *Journal of Communication* 42 (1992): 5-13.

³² Søren Mørk Petersen, “Loser Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation,” *First Monday* 13:3 (March 2008). The more pungent sense of “loser,” however, I owe to Ben Peters of Columbia University.

³³ Text messages are limited to 160 characters, including spaces. On poor sound quality, see Jonathan Sterne, “The mp3 as cultural artifact,” *New Media and Society* 8 (2006): 825-842.

³⁴ Not to say that there are no new aesthetic and creative potentials in texting: see David Crystal, *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁵ My colleague Mark Andrejevic considers them at length. See *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007).

³⁶ See Jonah Bossewitch, “Unforgettable in Every Way: Personal and Social Implications of Pervasive Omniscient Surveillance,” <http://pocketknowledge.tc.columbia.edu/home.php/viewfile/18367>.

³⁷ The classic concern of the great media historian Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).

³⁸ Orange seems a happy settlement: “red” would be too alarming, and “yellow” would suggest a government that was insufficiently diligent.

³⁹ Carl Couch, “Markets, Temples, and Palaces,” *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 7 (1986): 137-159.

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 174.

B. Aubrey Fisher

B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Master's and Ph. D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than thirty-five articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including president of the Western Speech Communication Association, president of the International Communication Association, and editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

John Durham Peters

John Durham Peters is the F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. A renowned media historian and social theorist, Professor Peters graduated from the University of Utah with a Bachelor's degree in English in 1981 and a Master's degree in Speech Communication in 1982. He earned a Ph.D. in Communication Theory and Research from Stanford University in 1986 before accepting a faculty appointment at the University of Iowa.

Professor Peters' work focuses on media and cultural history, communication and social theory, and understanding communication in its broad historical, legal, philosophical, religious and technological context. He has written or co-authored four widely-praised books in the last five years, including *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* and *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition*. He has also published dozens of scholarly journal articles and book chapters.

In addition to his faculty appointment at the University of Iowa in 1986, Professor Peters has held fellowships as a Fulbright Professor at the University of Athens, Leverhulme Fellow at the University of London, and visiting fellow at the University of Cambridge. Professor Peters has received numerous awards and recognitions for his exceptional scholarship and teaching contributions, including the Franklin S. Haiman Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Freedom of Expression from the National Communication Association and the Collegiate Teaching Award from the University of Iowa.

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