

Rethinking Media Studies and the Digital Revolution

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By

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PREFACE

This book focuses on a particularly disruptive moment in terms of teaching, learning and research in media studies engendered by a series of fairly rapid shifts and changes in media, communications and culture brought about by Web 2.0 and social media. It was these shifts and changes in media, communications and culture that triggered a series of critical debates within the UK (and of course further afield) as to whether or not media studies was up-to-speed in terms of teaching, learning and research. The first three chapters of this book broadly outline some of the controversies and debates that have emerged in relation to ongoing developments in digital media technologies and practices. Some of these tensions and controversies pre-dated the emergence of Web 2.0 and were already deeply embedded in the development of media studies from the outset. Web 2.0 technologies and platforms simply re-energised critical discussions about the relationship between theory and practice in media studies, the usefulness of teaching media literacy, media effects and the nature and purpose of media education. At the same time, more recent concerns around cultural production, democratisation and audience / user empowerment and the changing media environment also re-emerged as key issues for media academics. The remaining five chapters explore some of these tensions and controversies with reference to specific examples of media technologies, communication practices and cultural change that have interested me personally. The final chapter revisits the main themes explored throughout the book as well as considering some of the more recent challenges facing media studies. Whilst this book has been written with a primarily academic readership in mind it is hoped that it will also find a wider audience and for that reason I have also included a short Glossary of terms at the end of the book as a brief guide for navigating some of the theories and terminology used throughout the following pages.

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Finally, I would like to thank my various co-authors and colleagues who I have had the pleasure to work with on different academic projects over the years.

INTRODUCTION

This book is not an introduction to media studies or another ‘how to do’ media studies textbook. Neither does it provide a comprehensive survey or historical overview of major developments and key theorists in the field. There are plenty of such titles available to students, lecturers, researchers or anyone for that matter who is interested in finding out more about academic approaches to the role of the media in contemporary society. Media studies was developed in the twentieth century in an era of mass communication wherein established media industries and communication systems along with mass audiences for their products occupied the cultural landscape. Media studies is a relatively new field which draws on many theories and approaches from a number of other disciplines as well developing its own. It is perhaps surprising then that with the ongoing transition and developments in digital media, some critics have argued that media studies is already looking tired, that it is very much a product of its time and that it has to develop new theories and approaches in order to remain both viable and relevant as a field of research and as a subject that is widely taught in UK schools, colleges and universities. The main concern of this book then is to examine some of the controversies generated by the impact of digital media on media studies as a field of research and academic study. This theme is explored through a collection of short critical chapters on both media studies as a subject and the role of media in contemporary social life. As such, the essays here reflect on some controversial issues pertaining to media studies as well as considering some contemporary media trends and phenomena but in a way which tries to draw on established approaches and theories as well as acknowledging some of the criticisms and limitations of media studies. Within this context, it is argued that established theories and approaches are still important because they form part of the history of developments in media forms and in media studies. This sense of history (of the media and of media studies) is crucial because it provides the foundations for much current research and teaching and our understanding of the contemporary media and cultural environment.

The central premise underpinning the arguments advanced throughout the following pages is that the development of critical knowledge about the media industries, technologies, products and audiences is of vital importance for enhancing citizenship in modern societies. This is because in the twenty-first century, the media play a key role in social, cultural, political and economic life and that knowledge about how the media operate is a valuable skill to possess. In recent times, one could argue that the case for media studies has never been stronger as claims and counter claims concerning genuine news, fake news, misinformation and disinformation circulate between traditional media outlets, social media platforms, newly established and emerging web-based media, with politicians, journalists, conspiracy theorists, influencers, bloggers, celebrities and activists all jostling for public attention. But some academics have criticised media studies claiming that it has tended to drift, at times losing its direction and analytical focus in a dynamic, complex and changing media environment where, conversely, media organisations, technologies, platforms and products are becoming increasingly embedded in the cultural practices, routines and rituals of everyday life for millions of citizens living in contemporary societies.

Rapid technological changes in the area of media and communications are clearly disrupting many aspects of media production and consumption giving rise to novel modes of communication and social connection. The development, convergence and accessibility of digital media technologies have, in certain respects, challenged many pre-existing assumptions about media and communications and so these technological developments have also impacted upon the study of media, culture and communication. New forms of media culture are shaped in part by a range of factors including political and socio-economic changes, user / audience adoption rates as well as the rapid developments and transformations in digital media technologies. Prior to digitisation and convergence between different media and communication systems, different mediums developed separately each with their own distinctive technological systems and methods of production and distribution and whilst there was some convergence in terms of content (multi-marketing and intertextual relationships, for example) the technologies themselves were more or less incompatible giving rise to different media industries such as the film industry, the music industry and the television

industry. Increasingly, as these once discrete forms of media converge they give rise to new forms of audience and user engagement as well as to new forms of media culture. Undoubtedly, then, communications media are indeed undergoing significant transformations especially in terms of production, distribution, consumption and engagement by audiences and in many respects, there is still a high degree of uncertainty about the potential and future directions of digital technologies, the pace of future technological developments in communications and media and the new forms of convergence they may engender - recent concerns about the rise in Artificial Intelligence in many areas of social life from arts and culture to health and warfare is a prime example. Intuitively, it can be argued that these shifts and changes in the media industries and how they operate require substantial shifts in emphasis in the study of media and communication but, unfortunately, things are rarely that straightforward. The scope and significance of the shifts and changes in media has led to heated exchanges between academics in terms of whether or not new theories and new ways of conceptualising the role of the media are required. Many of the clearly demarcated boundaries between various media sectors, between the public and private spheres of social life, between media producers and media consumers have (arguably) been disrupted beyond recognition. For some, such developments are emblematic of a digital revolution in communications and culture.

The idea of a digital revolution is a contested one. For many, it embodies hopes that digital media will democratise cultural production and empower audiences whilst disempowering large and profit-driven media and cultural industries who dominate the cultural landscape. Through greater connectivity, greater availability of information and the means to access it, peer-to-peer exchange, and user generated content, digital media are held to be re-defining cultural production, distribution and consumption with the lines between producer and audience becoming increasingly blurred. The implications of these transformations in communications and culture are widely believed to be initiating a transition in cultural production with power ultimately being wrested from transnational media corporations who produce information, music, news and entertainment on a massive scale for profit. But the extent to which this democratisation of cultural production is

occurring is debatable. Of course there are numerous examples of YouTube influencers and Instagram stars, people who have become FaceBook famous or social media celebrities, web entrepreneurs and tech start-ups who have made-it-big. But do these developments represent the wide scale democratisation of cultural production and consumption or are they relatively isolated and minor occurrences given the billions of web users globally? Furthermore, the term ‘digital revolution’ is often used in different ways and in different contexts, sometimes quite vague and sometimes difficult to pin down to a precise definition or set of meanings. The sheer volume of statistical information now available to us (be it primary or secondary data) concerning digital media users is of course very useful but simply estimating the number of platform users, selfie takers or smart phones in the world only provides a partial picture of what is going on and it is just too simplistic to infer from the numbers that a digital revolution has taken place. It is not uncommon for hyperbolic claims about social and cultural change and the role of media technologies within this to be made on the back of insubstantial evidence to support them. For example, the widely popular claim that the Arab Spring was a social media revolution has been contested by some academics. This isn’t to say that social media did not play a part in the Arab Spring but attention to history shows us that social uprisings and revolutions predate digital media technologies and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (rebranded X in 2023 by Elon Musk). But the Arab Spring example does alert us to the fact that digital media not only embody new and exciting possibilities but also new challenges, risks and potential threats. The ability to access information, news, products, services and entertainment via the world wide web and digital technologies as well as share and (in some cases) become producers ourselves, suggests that the notion that we are indeed living through a ‘revolutionary moment’ is difficult to resist. But like all new technologies, digital media often have wide ranging economic, political, cultural and social impacts that are sometimes difficult to predict or coherently map - intended and unintended consequences in terms of how people adopt and use them. To that end, issues around media pluralism, democracy, media ownership, power, fake news, misinformation and disinformation, pornography, on-line criminal activities, surveillance, hate speech, data, privacy and regulation have now become key concerns. Many of the

aforementioned issues have long been key concerns of media studies but, surprisingly, media scholars have not always been in agreement about how to approach recent developments in media culture or up-to-speed with ongoing developments in media and communications. Indeed, some of the most cutting-edge theories and research on digital media can be found further afield in other academic fields and disciplines.

Chapter 1 introduces some of the recent debates (but by no means all of them) underpinning media studies teaching, learning and research whilst Chapter 2 looks at the impact of ‘new media’ and some of the ways in which media academics approach new digital technologies which are widely held to be reconfiguring society, culture and social relations. Historically, each new technological development in media and communications has embodied hopes and fears (about the perceived cultural impact) with optimists pitted against pessimists and media studies has reflected this division with theorists either extolling the virtues of new media or warning of the consequences. Chapter 3 continues with these themes and outlines the Media Studies 1.0 versus Media Studies 2.0 debate which emerged partly out of the conflicting positions in relation to new media and technological developments discussed in the previous chapter. Many of the issues raised in this somewhat caustic exchange of ideas and opinions still remain unresolved. Chapter 4 considers two contrasting models of the relationship between media and society - is media content like a mirror ‘reflecting’ society / social reality or does media content ‘affect’ our perceptions and ideas about social reality / society? This forms the backdrop to a discussion of media representations and the formation of collective memories in relation to media coverage of the tragic events of 9/11. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are shorter chapters which briefly consider areas of social media and visual culture (amateur photography, the changing context and meaning(s) of digital images, and ‘selfies’) and the ways in which media studies may enhance our understanding of them but also needs to become more open to other disciplinary insights and approaches. Chapter 8 offers a discussion of the ways in which (arguably) social media continually blur the boundaries between work, leisure and pleasure with a focus on web users who monetise their creative hobbies or leisure pursuits in order to generate an income. Chapter 9 is a concluding chapter that pulls together many of the themes

and issues discussed in the previous chapters as well as considering some of the more recent claims concerning the current and future direction and purpose of media studies.

A central theme linking each of the chapters in this book are the conflicting and often polarising positions in relation to digital media and how these have in turn generated controversies concerning the strengths and limitations of media studies as a field for research and as a subject that is taught in many UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI's). But the purpose of this book is not to make apocalyptic statements about the state of contemporary media research, teaching and learning, or to state a preference or argue the case for a particular version of media studies wherein newer theories are privileged over old theories, or traditional methods are argued to be inherently better than newer methods to researching media, communication and cultural change. What follows is a collection of short essays which hopefully go some way towards making some potentially useful connections between an already established media studies teaching and research agenda but also looking ahead to the pressing concerns of a rapidly transforming media and cultural landscape, suggesting along the way some ways in which media studies might need to adapt in order to stay relevant.

CHAPTER 1

RETHINKING MEDIA STUDIES

Media studies as a field is characterised by a longstanding concern with making sense of the implications, consequences, effects and influences of media and communication technologies, the forms of communication they engender and the impact (positive or negative) on society and culture. This is not surprising as communication technologies for the production, reproduction, dissemination and reception of information, entertainment and education have become central to our understanding of, and engagement with, most forms of contemporary culture and especially popular culture. Media studies in the UK emerged in the twentieth century out of preexisting and well established academic disciplines within the arts and humanities and the social sciences (most notably sociology) as well as more vocationally oriented media training courses (QAA 2019). The combination of various approaches developed within linguistics and English studies such as text based analysis and criticism with sociological concerns in conjunction with social scientific empirical research methods filtered into and influenced communication studies programmes and courses which subsequently morphed into (in some cases) the media studies courses that rapidly began to populate the educational landscape in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK. The emergence of cultural studies in the UK in the 1960s as a distinctive academic strand also had a significant influence on the ways in which media studies has evolved over the years. Media studies rapidly became a popular option with students with many undergraduate and postgraduate courses being offered across UK HEI's and to this day it still remains a relatively popular choice of study for many students entering further and higher education.

Given the diverse academic backgrounds providing the foundations for the development of media studies, it is understandable that the field is by its very nature quite eclectic, consisting of a broad range of conflicting

theories, research methods and approaches. Arguably, this eclecticism is a good thing and is often posited as being one of the strengths of media studies as it provides for a dynamic and vibrant branch of academia consisting of competing theories, concepts, models and modes of research all of which contribute to an intellectually vigorous and rich field. At the same, this eclecticism has also contributed to periodic internal wrangling and controversies over the aims and objectives of media theory and research as well as its status as a discipline or field. To begin with, there is an important distinction to be made between ‘Media Studies’ and ‘media studies’. According to media academic John Corner (1995) in an often cited paper, Media Studies (upper case, singular noun) designates an institutionalised self conscious grouping whereas media studies (studies of the media) is a plural designation referencing a broader range of work distributed across the humanities and social sciences. The point being, “media studies itself has no agreed upon referent. The phrase only gained traction - as a singular, field designating noun - in the late 1960s and 1970s” (Park, Pooley and Simonson 2021:1). Prior to this emergence, “..there were media studies in the plural, but no such thing as a field by that name” (2021:1).

Criticisms of media studies have long been in circulation especially from those positioned outside of the subject who, at best, often have a superficial understanding of what media studies entails. In the UK the familiar accusation that it is a ‘soft’ and ‘non-academic’ subject frequently resurfaces and is quite pervasive in popular conceptions and especially prevalent in media discourses about the subject. It is perhaps not surprising that some media professionals may object to the scrutinising of their professional routines, occupational activities and practices by academics and researchers and are in a powerful position to voice those objections by dismissing the subject as ‘useless’ or ‘worthless’. Senior politicians have also from time to time felt the need to publicly denigrate the subject often in the context of it having no tangible educational value, declining standards in university education and lack of vocational relevance. But media studies has also been heavily criticised by some academics working within the subject and it is these criticisms that have caused considerable debate and with good reason. So, what constitutes media studies as a field is continually under review and subject to criticism, contestation and heated discussion.

In the 1990s, Corner (1995) identified a number of tensions and controversies arguing that the academic configuration of British media studies, the history of the field, the diversity of its object of study and the form of interdisciplinarity this can lead to, produces a number of 'knowledge problems'. Such criticisms, in part, are justifiable and perfectly understandable because the field is quite diverse and fragmented - there are competing schools of thought, different perspectives and approaches meaning that there is no single, unified approach or position to understanding the relationship between the media and society.

For a number of years, there has been an ongoing debate as to whether or not media studies is an established or emerging discipline or an interdisciplinary field (Jensen 2002). This debate has, to a certain extent, been something of a backstage affair while the serious business of 'doing' media studies has occupied centre stage as the subject proliferated across the UK post 16 education sector in colleges and universities. To this day, the debate about the disciplinary status of media studies remains unresolved. Indeed, throughout the pages of this book media studies is referred to variously as a field, discipline or an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary field by different authors. Indeed, this very point is made by Hansen and Machin (2013) who assert that "...much variation exists in how scholars characterise, categorise and describe the field of media and communication research..." (2013:2). These authors maintain that media and communication research is not so much a well-defined discipline as a sprawling multidisciplinary field of approaches and theories and that variations in defining it are themselves symptomatic of its multidisciplinary nature (2013:2). According to Long and Wall (2009 / 2012) media studies is best thought of as a field of study rather than a discipline (with its own traditions, concepts and methods for doing research) which is influenced by other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, history and economics as well as interacting with cognate fields also concerned with the study of communications such as film and television studies, photography, journalism, popular music and of course, newer digital media. Deacon et al. (2007) discuss the twin lineage in media and communications research and make a broad distinction between media studies (rooted mainly in the social and behavioural sciences) and cultural studies (rooted for the most part in

the humanities). Deacon and his colleagues go on to point out that the 'interaction' between these fields characterises media and communications research as an "interdisciplinary space, where a range of existing academic disciplines meets" (Deacon et al. 2007: 2). Part of the problem for some critics, is that media studies "...lacks ontological security and there is no agreement on the subject it purports to study - is it media, mass media, communication?" (Deuze 2021:11). According to Golding (2019) media studies is best thought of as a field (never a discipline) which has a long and fractured history due to its twin origins in both the social sciences and humanities (as mentioned above) whereas Moores (2012) has argued that "...the field of media studies looks more like an academic discipline in its own right" (2012:110). In Moores' view, this emerging disciplinary status has potential limitations in that the field is more insular than it once was in terms of being open and receptive to disciplinary insights and methods across the social sciences and humanities adding that "...many of those who are currently working in the field of media studies ought to be taking its interdisciplinary roots more seriously" (2012:110). Arguing the case for a more prominent role for sociologists within media studies, Benson (2014) suggests that a greater emphasis on sociological theory may provide some balance to what he terms the often vague claims that are made by media scholars: "media studies often imagines itself on the cutting edge. Sociology can help bring it back from the abyss" (Benson 2014:42).

It is also something of a truism that media academics have tended to fetishize new theories and are guilty of "theory chasing" to the point where important insights, developments and debates in the field have been abandoned prematurely (Philo & Miller 1997). For some critics, the rapid take-up and swift move away (in some cases) of various forms of Marxist criticism, versions of structuralism and psychoanalysis en-route to postmodernism leaving behind theories of class, power and ideology in favour of studies focusing on identity, gender and ethnicity often based on smaller-scale ethnographic style audience research focused on audience activities, practices, pleasures and interpretations indicated a swift decline in the social and political relevance of media studies (Philo & Miller 1997). This has arguably led to a situation within media research, publications, teaching and learning wherein "...certain kinds of critical theory go over

better than others: celebrations of “active audiences” and the liberating powers of new technologies are perennial favourites..” (Benson 2014:39).

Many media studies courses and programmes often combine the development of both theoretical and practical skills although the emphasis on theory and practice can vary greatly across institutions and programmes. But the relationship between theory and practice (or production work) in media studies has also been an area of long-standing controversy and particularly so with the advent of digital media. The relationship between theory and practice in media studies programmes and courses has always been an awkward one, with considerable tensions embedded in the linking of the two in taught degree programmes in UK HEI's. In particular, there has tended to be a polarisation of theory and practice within media studies due to a variety of reasons including the tendency to recruit staff with industry experience to teach practice based modules or courses and staff with academic backgrounds to teach theory and research methods modules and courses. Similarly, with a few rare exceptions, media textbooks, readers, and journals also tend to be fractured along the lines of media theory and media production. The bifurcation of theory and practice can occur at individual module level, course level or even at the level of an entire programme of study. So, different programmes of study in the UK vary in the degree of emphasis placed upon the relationship between theory and practice with some media related programmes featuring a high level of media, film or cultural / sociological theory from 100% to 25% with 75% media production (Mann 2011). Moreover, when modules and courses claim to offer a balance between theory and practice the relationship between media theory and media practice is not always readily apparent or clear-cut to students (Grove-White 2003). Indeed, many lecturers (and students for that matter) typically associate the academic aspects of a programme of study with theory-driven modules, lectures, exams, essay / written project types of assessments (Grove-White 2003) whilst practice based courses are often associated with workshops, hands-on sessions, and equipment demonstrations. There are reasons for this situation. Historically, there has been a tendency within media studies to privilege theory over practice. One of the main issues concerning this theory / practice dichotomy is according to Alvarado and Bradshaw (1992) the long-standing academic

privileging of theory over practice, a tendency “..grounded in traditional divisions...between mental and manual labour, education and training, the former belonging more to intellectual activity and to education with its notions of enlightenment, the latter to vocationalism and training” (1992:192). Eight years after this claim, Lindahl-Elliot (2000) echoed similar concerns arguing that the dichotomy is “..the result of an empiricist reduction that has a long history in western culture, one that suggests that theory is to do with the mind and practice with the hands (2000:27). Whilst the dichotomy is at best questionable “it is especially invalid in the case of media production” (2000:27). But in the context of media studies, the dichotomy also has a very specific significance due, in part, to the pervasive influence of the ‘culture industry thesis’ and similar theories which played such an important role in the formation of ‘critical’ perspectives on the media (Connell & Hurd 1997). One of the main issues is the problem of what Alvarado and Bradshaw (1992) term ‘technicism’ - production work that emulates (uncritically) the practices of media professionals. In this view, media and communication technologies are deployed to produce homogenised cultural products and perpetuate ideologies in order to maintain ideological, political and economic dominance. Therefore, any attempts to emulate the techniques and practices of media professionals (or the training of students to do so) is undesirable and falls short of the aims and objectives of a ‘critical’ media studies programme. Vocationalism has always been something of an issue for media studies as a subject because for some academics there is a deep-rooted suspicion that training future media professionals is tantamount to selling-out. The recent growth in digital and new media courses and programmes with a focus on developing the types of technical skills and competencies that students may well need in the digital age are sometimes viewed as simply training future media workers for low paid jobs (in many cases) in the new digital economy or, worse still, training students to be docile digital producer-consumers. But if a media studies programme involving a good blend of both theory and production work leads to employment within the media and associated creative industries this surely should not be seen as such a bad thing. The media industries need more critically engaged practitioners - writers, directors, camera people, researchers, game designers, web-producers and so on who understand how the media work and, most importantly, how to

change media practices and cultures for the better - to improve both media performance and accountability especially in the fields of news and information services but also across the spectrum of entertainment genres as well.

More recently, there has been a call for media studies to be more intelligent and sophisticated and to relinquish faith in fake-expert non-procedures such as semiotics (Gauntlett 2011). Part of the problem with media studies, according to Merrin (2014) is that “..students applying to media courses don’t realise they aren’t coming to study media, they’re coming to study ‘ media studies’. They are coming to study what the academic discipline says about media - media, that is, as mediated by the discipline” (Merrin 2014:4). However, this critical insight is not as revelatory as it might initially seem because as Long and Wall (2012) point out: “..media studies is more than simply the study of media; it is also a set of practices for defining the study of media and organising studies of existing academic studies of the media (Long & Wall 2012:3). This is precisely “..what constitutes media studies, as an academic field...the study of studies of media” (2012:11). Central to the criticisms of media studies voiced by Merrin and Gauntlett is the rise of digital media and the extent to which digital technologies have impacted upon society and culture and the failure (in their view) of media academics to adequately address this in teaching and research. But even as far back as the mid-1990s some academics were already suggesting that media studies needed to ‘rethink its position’ not just in terms of aims and objectives but also in terms of a rapidly changing media and cultural landscape (Corner 1995).

Of course, the digital turn (for want of a better expression) has posed all kinds of dilemmas and issues for many academic subjects taught in Universities precisely because of the entrenched ways in which the UK Higher Education sector has been traditionally organised with its archaic routines and rhythms of academic life - timetabled lectures, seminars, tutorials, reading lists, modules, standardised assessments, exam boards and so on. Poore (2014) argues that “..we find ourselves at a revolutionary moment in history when society and culture are in flux - a moment encountered in the unique products and processes of digital technology. The concurrent shifts in consciousness we are experiencing mean that we need

new ways of understanding..” (Poore 2014:170). The implications of this revolutionary moment in history for University teaching, learning and research is explained in the following way:

“Industrial-model study and research practices were developed in the nineteenth century and have changed little since then. They are characterised by inflexibility, passivity, one-to-many-communication, the notion of the ‘monolithic’ learner or researcher, competition, memorisation, and separation...These practices...emphasise standardisation, homogeneity, uniformity, structure, regimentation, and sequencing, which, in turn, reinforce industrial-style systems based on mass production and continuous flow” (Poore 2014:169).

Such models, practices and procedures for teaching and learning, it is argued, may be useful for preparing students for roles in industry-based economies but everything is changing now. Established models for teaching and learning curtail creativity, collaboration, fluidity, participation, networking, interactivity - the sorts of skills required by the social and cultural shifts driven by new digital technologies (Poore 2014). As will be discussed, these issues have posed particularly difficult dilemmas for media studies.

So, there is considerable debate at the moment about the future direction of media studies, about what should be taught and how best to teach it, what should be retained in terms of theories, concepts, models, methodologies and what can be dropped in light of on-going 'new media' developments. On one level, these internal debates are both necessary and welcome because they represent a healthy and robust subject area that is not afraid to interrogate its own roots / routes. But, of course, too much introspection and internal wrangling can be unhealthy and brings the risk of circumscribing too tightly or ring fencing "some absolute object called media study" (Burton 2010:12). On another level, these debates are also emblematic of the perceived need for media studies to constantly reinvent itself but always playing catch-up with a dynamic and rapidly changing media and cultural landscape.

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CHAPTER 2

MEDIA STUDIES AND NEW MEDIA

The central focus of this chapter is the tendency in some strands of media theory to conceptualise current technological developments and the contemporary digital media environment in ways which are broadly consonant with mainstream neo-liberal and commercial discourses of user / consumer empowerment, revolution and wide-scale social and cultural transformation. A recurring theme in many academic and popular books, mainstream press and television, policy documents, white papers and advertising is that new media are bringing about profound transformations in the forms and structures of economic, social, political and cultural systems. It is widely claimed that we have now entered a new digital age shaped by a new paradigm wherein society and culture have been nothing less than transformed by developments in new technologies for communication. The Internet and cloud computing along with various forms of mobile devices and digital media are held to be central drivers in this societal revolution in communications and information. Whilst different accounts might emphasise different aspects of this perceived 'revolution' there appears to be, with a few exceptions, a broad popular consensus that the new media revolution is, or will be, a fundamentally progressive force for good which will overturn the dominant forms of social organization and social relations that currently exist. These ideas have a long pedigree but gained renewed momentum with the emergence of Web 2.0 and the rapid take up of Internet technology and personal computing in everyday life.

The initial emergence of the Internet and web culture is now often retrospectively referred to as Web 1.0. In the 1990s, technological optimists such as Microsoft's Bill Gates (1996) and MIT's Nicholas Negroponte (1995) sketched out what in their view was seen to be nothing less than a revolution in technology and communications. The inauguration of digital culture was seen as being desirable, inevitable and irreversible. Negroponte

asserted that "like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped" (Negroponte 1995:229). Gates postulated that "we don't have the option of turning away from the future" (Gates 1996:11). Similarly tech-minded entrepreneurs and cultural commentators extolled the virtues of the ways in which personal computers and the Internet represented historically significant social and cultural transformations that would "transform our culture as dramatically as Gutenberg's press did the Middle Ages" (Gates 1996:9). Ultimately, new technologies are believed to be radically reconfiguring established channels of communication, leading to a power shift in the relations between cultural production and consumption.

Digital technology creates more channels of and for communication, produces increased volumes of information, and allows choice and interactive possibilities for users, consumers and producers resulting in the break-up and fragmentation of mass, centralised broadcast media and communication systems. Negroponte (1995) referred to the "harmonising effect of being digital" (1995:230) and suggested that the inevitable technological transition from analogue based media to digital media embodies four powerful qualities which will ultimately both liberate individuals and reconfigure social relations. These key qualities reside in the "decentralising, globalising, harmonising, and empowering" (1995:229) capacities of the new technologies. The Internet and personal computers were held to be central to this process. Interactive technology enables ordinary people to access, produce, store and disseminate vast quantities of information. The technology would re-connect the disenfranchised, bringing alternative voices into the public sphere, producing an informed citizenry and a more democratic society. For Gates, "the interactive network will be the ultimate market" (Gates 1996:6). Gates enthused that in the information society "product and service providers will see what buyers want a lot more efficiently than ever before, and consumers will buy more efficiently" adding that "I think Adam Smith would be pleased" (Gates 1996:207). In this view, the liberating potential of the Internet (and the information society) is grounded in the ideals of the free market where consumers and producers are electronically networked in a system of production and consumption for goods, products, information and services.

With the emergence of Web 2.0, these ways of conceptualising developments in digital media certainly gained a new momentum. The term Web 2.0 is closely aligned with the 'cloud' metaphor in relation to the Internet and denotes a more complex, dynamic and interactive user experience. Basically, Web 2.0 services are web-based software systems which enable users to socialise with friends and family, store and edit photos, upload videos, listen to and remix music amongst other things (Wikstrom 2009). The emergence and rise in popularity of social networking media, User Generated Content platforms, and mobile connectivity has, without a doubt, significantly impacted upon the ways in which we now understand and relate to media and communications technology. According to Grossman (2006) in a hyperbolic article written for Time Magazine dedicated to web-users all over the world, Web 2.0 is all "about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world but also change the way the world changes" (Grossman 2006).

New and more powerfully interactive digital technologies are allegedly reconfiguring human communications and various terms such as the information society, the virtual revolution, the network society, the information revolution and so on are frequently invoked as a means of defining this new age. Alongside such claims, it has also been widely asserted that the new digital age requires new ideas and new forms of knowledge and that the 'old' ways of thinking and knowing are no longer adequate for the transitions under way. Similar assertions have reverberated across the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, recent developments in media and communication technology and the notion of the network society are widely conceptualised now as being "the dominant paradigm of social change" (Mattelart 2003:2). The essence of this dominant paradigm for social change, as Sholle (2005) points out, is that a fundamental shift will take place wherein "...the information revolution will democratise all parts of society, create infinite diversity and satisfaction of all needs, demolish oppressive political institutions, and bring about an economic revolution in which everyone everywhere will have unlimited access to information and thus the ability to produce their own products (knowledge replaces the means of production as the centre of capitalist relations)" (Sholle 2005:137).

This is what Sholle (2005) refers to as the 'mainstream view' of new media and the information revolution. Interestingly, some elements of this mainstream view of new digital media have also filtered into media studies. The transformational power of new media technology is restated with staggering frequency in contemporary media theory. For example, commenting on the digital revolution Kaul (2012) asserts that: "today, the digital communications revolution is also changing the social landscape, with the power to free millions of people from the marginalization that comes from having no voice in global affairs. Power now rests with the people – and people now expect to be heard as a right" (Kaul:2012).

Critics have argued that much of this rhetoric surrounding the Internet and Web 2.0 is "framed by a narrow technological determinism which limits or ignores the impact of political, economic or cultural factors" (Williams 1996:19). The two basic problems with technological determinism as a mode of explanation is that it firstly removes social relations from the equation and analysis and secondly, it ascribes powers and characteristics to technology as properties that are intrinsic to the technology itself. Basically, technological determinism levers technology - its development, implementation, and effects out of the social context and relations in which that technology is embedded (Wayne 2003). It is crucial that this new media mythology is deconstructed and that more critical frameworks are introduced for understanding digital media. Burnett & Marshall (2003) propose that "the web has been structured into particular narratives and one of the dominant tropes of those narratives has been the revolutionary transformation story" (Burnett & Marshall 2003:21). Pervasive notions of a revolutionary societal shift towards a network society and the democratic promise of the Internet and World Wide Web need to be balanced with an understanding that broader social-structural and economic forces are clearly playing a decisive role in the formation and possible trajectories of this perceived societal transition. The trend for some media theorists to get enthusiastically entangled in the democratic promise and transformative potential of new, interactive media has not gone unnoticed. Commenting on what they term new media studies, Curran and Morley (2007) suggest that whilst recent developments in digital media, convergence and cyberspace are indeed important areas for media studies "it is nevertheless clear that