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## new media & society

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THEMED SECTION

# What's new about new media?

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## INTRODUCTION

We begin this first issue of the journal with a question. It is a question which has no single answer. Yet, in so much of what we write and say, the answer is assumed and it is assumed even in our own journal's title. The new is *new*. The technologies that have emerged in recent years, principally but not exclusively digital technologies, are new. They do new things. They give us new powers. They create new consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress.

It is not difficult to identify the utopian, nor indeed the dystopian, in all of this. It is not difficult either to see how often the desire for or fear of change overwhelms its analysis. It is easy to be seduced by the simplicity and the significance of novelty. It is easy to misread the signs. Novelty is, however, at this point, our problem. And we have asked, as a way of launching the journal, a number of new media scholars to address it, and to provide a uniquely provocative intervention in the debates which surround it. The new is no simple matter. Technology and society do not coincide. History undermines ontology. Revolutions are usually more rhetorical than real.

To ask the question '*what is new about new media?*' is, of course, to ask a question about the relationship between continuity and change; a question that requires an investigation into the complexities of innovation as both a technological and a social process. But it is a question which also requires an interrogation of some fundamental presuppositions in social science as well as a confrontation with some of its enduring paradoxes. In this sense we have to begin our answer with old theory and with familiar but necessary preoccupations. We have to enquire into the matter of determination, and of the status of 'the technological' as a category. We have, for example,

consequentially, to enquire into the nature of power, and the degrees of freedom both to shape and to resist technology. We have to discuss communication, information and mediation as processes. We have to think symbolically as well as materially. We have to confront history and historiography, theory and methodology, both in the context of adjudicating between evolution and revolution, and in framing our judgements about cause and effect. And we have to engage with specific discourses, in media theory, in the social studies of technology, in their recent efforts to comprehend the tortured interfaces between institutions, technologies, texts and uses.

Do new media create new meanings? Do they enable or disable social and cultural change? How are we to disentangle the various components of media and technology change as they affect, or are presumed to affect, organizations, the political process, global commerce, everyday life? What is this space called cyber?

And we have to address these questions, as the contributors in the following short essays do, rigorously, so that we are not blinded by excess. New media pose new analytic challenges, but also reinforce old ones. It is not as though, indeed, we can claim to understand fully new media's *prehistory*. The supposedly distinct characteristics of new media: digital convergence; many-to-many communication; interactivity; globalization; virtuality, are arguably, with the possible exception of the specifically technical, not new at all. Face-to-face communication is simultaneous and interactive and does not need a mouse. Globalization is prefigured in both cinematic and televisual culture. And any entry into electronic space has always presupposed and required a physical space as both its beginning and end point. Quantity, certainly, turns into quality in the matter of communication. This is true not just for the Internet but for all media networks. It is a simple law of any and every attempt to communicate.

The interventions which follow, Marshall McLuhan might have called them 'probes', raise many, but by no means all, of the issues which now confront us in our enquiry into new media and new media's novelty. They range widely, and there are different kinds and timbres of voices to be heard. Together we hope that they will begin to set an agenda; one, among many, which the journal will certainly continue to address and one which we hope will have as wide a resonance as it is possible to have in this emerging field of new media studies.

The essays temper enthusiasm with critique, and critique with appreciation and understanding. New media technologies, in their supposed novelty, have to be tested not just against the old, but in the context both of the past and present, against the social and the human. Virtual space has to be seen as an expression of the real, not only, or necessarily, as its transcendence. The power that we know to be exercised within global

capitalism cannot just simply be ignored once we enter the new media age and venture into cyberspace. Knowledge is still grounded in experience. Language is still a political and not just a social fact. The new media offer choices and create dilemmas for us as users as well as theorists. Technological change is not divorced from ideology, and ideologies, as masks and disguises of material interests, remain even in the innocence of the Internet. Indeed our preoccupation with the necessary interweaving of technology and capital has arguably blinded us to the significance of investment in human capital, to the realization that technology is as much if not more about skills and competence, literacy and access, as it is about investment and interfaces.

The new media, indeed, affect and involve us fully as social and political as well as economic beings. And in questioning their significance the bottom line might be found in use, and in our capacity to mobilize their potential for social and political good. That the new media have the remarkable capacity to transform existing institutions is not in doubt. Likewise not in doubt is the equally remarkable capacity for vested interests to mobilize against, or appropriate, such potential for conventional or conservative ends. There are, however, theoretical and practical and policy-making spaces in this complex cyber-world for those who have thought about and analysed new media and the implications of media change to intervene.

Novelty cannot therefore be assumed nor taken for granted. It is never simple and rarely uncontradictory. Novelty in the media is a matter of content as well as technology and organization. Novelty is, therefore, the problem. This is why we have begun with the question that we have.

## Underdetermination

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**The question of the new** requires a historical problematic, a temporal and spatial framework in which there are risks of setting up the new as a culmination, telos or fulfillment of the old, as the onset of utopia or dystopia. The conceptual problem is to enable a historical differentiation of old and new without initiating a totalizing narrative. Foucault's proposal of a genealogy, taken over from Nietzsche, offers the most satisfactory resolution of the problem because it attempts to see each emergence in relation to a field of forces and because it configures each in relation to its own systematicity. In this way the new emerges out of the past but also in a disruptive relation to it. The new is simultaneously legitimized as a historical