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Looking Backward: Media History from the Perspective of Facebook

Over the last decade, the emergence of so-called 'social network' media and platforms (a.k.a. Web 2.0), like MySpace, Wikipedia, Flickr, YouTube and, of course, Facebook, has led to the common notion that we are facing a crucial shift from (old) mass media to (new) social media communication. While it is obvious that there are essential differences between the new social media and classical media of mass communication such as newspaper or television, the implied distinction between mass and social media also effects a conceptual impediment. For it suggests that contemporary social media are not mass media while in turn older or conventional mass media - or for that matter any media except the new social media - are anything but social media. In order to turn this conceptual impediment into a central asset for the retrospective reflection on the inherent social character and function of all media, recent historical approaches have insisted on understanding all media as preeminently 'renewable' social tools used essentially for the formation of social communities and networks, the establishment of public identities or personas, and the nourishing of debate cultures and discursive communities.

When people talk about media today, they mostly talk about the new 'social' media. MySpace, Flickr, Wikipedia, and, above all, Facebook, have become obvious symptoms of the most recent and allegedly most radical change in our use of, and engagement with, current media technology and communication devices. Commenting on the exponential growth in the number of internet users joining social network sites (SNS) over the last years, and especially in reference to the tremendous mass appeal and success of Facebook as a social network, a recent paper on social media and business strategies thus observed: "Social Media represent *a revolutionary new trend* that should be of interest to companies operating in online space—or any space, for that matter. (Kaplan 2010: 59, our emphases)

On closer inspection, the 'new revolutionary trend' appears neither new, nor revolutionary, since assessments like the one quoted above had already become commonplace during the late 1990s, when the concept of the 'network society' gained general discursive dominance in media and communication studies. As the author of one of the many volumes dedicated to the subject declared in 1999:

With little exaggeration, we may call the 21st century the age of networks. Networks are becoming the nervous system of our society, and we can expect this infrastructure to have more influence on our entire social and personal lives than did the construction of roads for the transformation of goods and people in the past. (van Dijk 2006: 2)

Yet the widespread emphasis on the newness of contemporary media networks and communication structures – particularly in conjunction with their alleged inherent 'social' function – has some significant disadvantages for the critical historical study of media emergence, i.e. understanding the 'new' media of the past.

In particular, it tends to obscure or even exclude important historical perspectives on the specific development, genealogy and 're-mediation' of traditional or established media through the rise of new media. The insistence on the newness of contemporary media thus makes it difficult, if not impossible, to approach the historical development of modern communication technologies, as well as the changes and shifts these technologies have and may have effected, as an ongoing process of social and cultural negotiation rather than a history of ruptures and 'revolutions.' What is lost, in effect, is a fundamental sense for the contemporaneity of the media of the past and their particular social impact and function. In his magnificent study of the U.S. postal system as a cultural system in the 19th century, David Henkin thus rightfully remarks:

It has become commonplace – almost to the point of being unfashionable – to describe electronic mail, faxes, video conferences, automated banking, and other communications media of recent vintage as aganet in a millennial refashioning of current sensibility and subjectivity. New technologies, we often observe, have altered our experiences of time and space and unsettled the boundaries separating persons, communities, and nations. Against the backdrop of this particular strand of cultural self-consciousness, older forms of communication can appear quaint and even reassuring. (Henkin 2006: ix)

As a consequence, the discursive dominance of the 'new media' since the late 1980s has also helped to encourage a more intense interest in the specific historical conditions and genealogies of the permanent 'newness' of media technologies and their social and cultural use. Carolyn Marvin and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, for example, have insisted early on in their own ways on investigating the particular cultural and social conditions which gave rise to, and in turn were identified with, the newness of particular media and technologies. In a second step, John Bolter and Richard Grusin's influential reconceptualization of the relation between established (conventional) and emergent (new) media as processes of 'remediation' (Bolter/Grusin 1999), proved especially encouraging, and more currently scholars like Lisa Gitelman, David Henkin and Jonathan Sterne, among others, have helped to carve out the contours of a new media history (Gitelman 2006 and 2004; Marvin 1988; Schivelbusch 1986; Sterne 2003). As Benjamin Peters has recently observed, what characterizes this new media history above all, is an understanding that "it is not necessarily true that a medium need be new only once: ... media are renewable and they tend to renew themselves in the gaps, silences and white spaces left by the media that displaced them." (Peters 2009: 22).

If from this particular historical perspective the media are 'always already' new, they are certainly also 'always already' social. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine that any new media technology could actually bypass the negotiation of its (potential) social and cultural function and become implemented through its sheer existence.

The essays in this collection share the fundamental belief that it is the social (and by extension the cultural) potential which essentially drives both the discursive and practical negotiation of media – and it may be exactly this intense negotiation which actually identifies the media in question as 'new.' Consequently, the contributions to this volume engage in the discussion of the social and political character of media throughout American history – from the emerging public sphere of Republican culture to the massive transformation of conventional print culture in our time – as significant examples and telling moments within an always already 'new' media history.

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