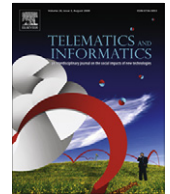




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On living in a techno-globalised world: Questions of history and geography

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ABSTRACT

The article surveys perspectives on technological change and globalisation which might be seen as 'media-centric' in respect of their assumptions about the extent to which media technologies themselves are necessarily the driving force of cultural and political change. It argues for the need to situate contemporary forms of technological 'newness' in historical perspective, if we are to avoid a narrowly foreshortened form of 'presentism'. It also offers an alternative, 'contextualist' view of how we might analyse the ways in which particular technologies are mobilised in different cultural contexts and considers how, rather than focussing on 'universalised' models of technologically driven change, we might develop a comparative forms of analysis informed by anthropological and comparative perspectives on technology use.

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1. Introduction

My starting point is that much of media and communication studies, as presently constituted, suffers from a drastically foreshortened historical perspective, the absence of which is all the more critical now, as we enter the world of the digital media. Thus I argue that media studies needs to place contemporary developments, such as the constitution of cyberspace – with which much contemporary work is concerned – in a much longer historical perspective. As we now enter an era of digitalisation, technical convergence, individualised and interactive media systems, all these issues become all the more urgent. As [Spigel \(2004\)](#) has put it, the more we speak of futurology, the more we need to take a longer historical perspective on these issues. In this context we must neither be 'suckered' into believing all the hype about how much the new media are going to change the world, *nor* being too cynical by insisting that we have 'seen it all before'. The key question here is how to see contemporary changes in media cultures in historical perspective.

We are often told that, under the impact of the new technologies of our globalised age we live increasingly in a borderless world, characterised by unprecedented rates of mobility, and by the experience of time–space compression, resulting from the speed of communications and transport links. To this extent, we are offered an image of brand new world of 'all at once-ness', which is remarkably similar to Marshal McLuhan's 1960s image of the 'global village' of 'instantaneity'. New technologies and global cultural flows now transgress the boundaries around our nations, localities and homes, in so far as the media continually flood us with images of hitherto unknown people and places. However, we should not mistake these media's 'reach' for their 'power'. They may be almost ubiquitous, but theirs is often a rather 'thin' presence, diluted by local contexts of reception. Thus global cultural forms still have to be made sense of within the context of local forms of life.

In some versions of the story of globalisation, we are offered what I would characterise as an abstracted sociology of the postmodern, inhabited by an un-interrogated 'we', who 'nowadays' live in an undifferentiated global world. Moreover, the presumption is that our lives are increasingly determined by the effects of the 'new media'. From my own point of view, this is particularly problematic, as the technologically determinist nature of the claims made for the (seemingly) 'automatic'

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effects of the new media fly in the face of the last 30 years of audience research, which has demonstrated the very complex ways in which different media technologies are, in fact, interpreted and mobilised by their users. It is curious that the discussion of new media often returns us to an outmoded discourse of ‘automatic’ media effects, whether from a dystopian or utopian point of view. My argument is that what we need is a perspective on how a variety of media technologies, both new and old, are fitted into, and come to function within, a variety of different cultural contexts.

That kind of ‘contextualist’ approach to questions of technological change is defined by Bryce (1987) as one in which, rather than starting with the internal ‘essence’ of a technology and then attempting to deduce its ‘effects’ from its technical specifications, one begins with an analysis of the interactional system in a particular context and *then* investigate how any particular technology is fitted into it.

Clearly, no technology has straightforward impacts – not least because one has to begin with the question of which people (differentially) see the relevance (or irrelevance) of any given technology to them and how they ignore, or mobilise and use it, in the specific cultural context of their own lives. This approach evidently shares much with the anthropological concept of consumption as a form of ‘domestication’ (or indigenisation) of technologies – by which the objects are effectively ‘customised’ by being fitted into local patterns of use. This emphasis is also similar to that of the ‘circuit of culture’ model developed by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Open University (du Gay et al., 1996), which likewise argues that context is no ‘optional extra’, which we might study at the *end* of the analytic process, but rather, is best seen as a ‘starting point’ – which has determining effects on both production and consumption.

2. Grounded theories of technology in context

In relation to the broader questions of technology and context, my general point concerns the need to focus *not* on digitalisation in general, or on cyberspace in the abstract, but rather on the particular types of cyberspaces which are instituted in specific localities, under particular cultural, economic and political circumstances. This is to follow the example set by Miller and Slater (2000), in their study of the internet in Trinidad – as a way of studying how the worlds of the virtual and the actual are differently integrated across the globe in specific contexts. To take a further example of the importance of *how* a particular technology is instituted in a particular context, elsewhere Slater examines the contrasting cases of two villages in western Africa. In the first village, a large amount of ‘aid’ money was acquired and a customised hall was built to house some of the latest, high-speed-modem computers, in a purpose-built, fully air-conditioned environment. Unfortunately, the hall was built in a slightly out-of-the-way location, which did not connect well with the customary pathways along which the local villagers travelled, and so this powerful technology was rather underused. In the second case, a returning Western ‘volunteer’ left behind, in the village he’d worked in, a clapped-out laptop with a dodgy modem, giving it to the owner of a local cafe, who set it up on one of the tables in the back of his bar. Although this was a much less powerful piece of technology, the cafe where it was sited had, directly outside it, the bus stop and the taxi rank where the local people from the other villages around passed through, on their way to market. As a result of it ‘fitting’ much more effectively with the established communications systems of the community in which it was sited, this less powerful technology had much more consequential effects than the purpose-built computers in the air-conditioned environment in the other village.

For these kind of reasons, I am very much in favour of returning to the classical definition of communications, which would re-incorporate the study of physical movement within its remit. Thus, rather than focussing exclusively on the transmission of messages, which is what we tend to think of these days, when we say ‘communications’, we might better consider how these questions can be articulated with questions of transport. This would then be to incorporate the study of the movement of people, and commodities, and technologies alongside that of information – and contemporaneously, place the study of the emerging virtual realms alongside that of the material world (cf. Morley, 2011).

3. Theories of techno-globalisation; questions of regionality and periodisation

Theories of globalisation often emphasise the role of communications technologies in the process of time–space compression and de-territorialisation. In this model, the virtual world is sometimes then argued to have so thoroughly ‘replaced’ the physical world that geography is declared to be dead. However, all of this is evidently based on rather simplistic ideas about the transformative effects of digital technologies. Coming, as I do, from a cultural studies tradition which prioritises ‘grounded’ theory and emphasises specificity in empirical investigations, I find myself unsympathetic to the kind of abstracted ‘One-Size-Fits-All’ analyses of globalisation-thru-technology which dominate the field today.

Rather than generalist schemes, which try to reduce the whole of history to one Big Story, we may perhaps be better served by some differentiations between the stories and perspectives of a variety of regions, areas and periods. However, if we are to attempt to produce a more concretely regionalised perspective on globalisation, there is a difficulty with the definition of the units of analysis to be used. In this context, we shouldn’t simply take geographical ‘areas’ as the units of our cartography (nor presume that, within each one, we will find only one set of exclusive or ‘dominant’ properties). Rather, we should take the relevant cultural, political and economic forms as the basic units of analysis and then look to see where they are to be found, without assuming that they are ‘naturally’ bound to any particular geography.

The further problem concerns just how *new* all this global mobility and technical change is. Edgerton (2006) notes that we are often told that we are entering a new historical epoch, in which change takes place at an ever increasing rate, as result of

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