A HISTORY OF COMMUNICATIONS

A History of Communications advances a new theory of media that explains the origins and impact of different forms of communication – speech, writing, print, electronic devices, and the Internet – on human history in the long term. New types of media are “pulled” into widespread use by broad historical trends, and, once in widespread use, these media “push” social institutions and beliefs in predictable directions. This view allows us to see for the first time what is truly new about the Internet, what is not, and where it is taking us.

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Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet

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I suppose it would be fair to say that I began writing this book in 1989, when I had the good fortune of working for Professor Albert Lord just before his death. Professor Lord, together with his colleague, Professor Milman Parry, had, many decades earlier, revolutionized Classical scholarship by proposing that “Homer” was not a writer, but an oral tradition. In a series of landmark studies, Professors Lord and Parry showed that the traces of oral composition – in this case, singing – could be seen in the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Honestly, it was all lost on me. I was just there to keep Professor Lord’s office uncluttered and sort his mail. Since his office was already uncluttered and he sorted his own mail, I was often left with free time. I used it to look through Professor Lord’s library. In it, I found several books devoted to the study of the media and their effects by Marshall McLuhan, Jack Goody, and others. Having nothing better to do except work on my dissertation, I read them and was rather taken away. These early communications theorists made all kinds of fascinating claims about the impact of the media on, well, everything. I didn’t know whether they were right or not, but I decided I could use their sexy ideas to make my own pedestrian research seem “theoretically informed,” which, to that point, it was not. The result was a series of articles that, thankfully, have passed from obscurity into still deeper obscurity.

Thereafter, I thought nothing of the media until, by another lucky stroke, I landed a job in it at *The Atlantic Monthly* in 2002. I was part of a small team that the owner of the magazine, David Bradley, had given the humble task of preparing the storied magazine for the twenty-first century. You will not be surprised to learn that the thing principally on our minds was the Internet and the question principally on our
lips was “What will it do?” I was immediately reminded of my lazy
days in Professor Lord's well-kept office and the reading I had done
there. Upon quick review, I concluded that the early media theorists
had left me – or rather us – singularly unprepared to understand the
Internet. What wisdom did they have to impart about, say, the birth
and explosion of Wikipedia? None that I could see. More recent media
theorists proposed that the Internet was incomprehensible by the lights
of older theories because it was new. They said that we had never seen
anything like the Internet in world history, that it “broke all the rules.”
I suspected that these theorists didn’t know very much about world
history or the supposedly shattered rules. With this in mind, I began to
try to understand the Internet historically; not as something brand new,
but as the most recent iteration of something very old – the appearance
of a new medium. It had, after all, happened before. First we spoke.
Then we wrote. Then we printed. Then we listened to the radio and
watched TV. And now we surf the Internet. Each of these media was
different from the others, but all of them were of a piece – tools that
we used to send, receive, store, and retrieve messages. The Internet, it
seemed to me, was not so much brand new as a variation on an ancient
theme.

The book before you is the result of my attempt to discover the ways
in which that theme has varied with successive media technologies.
Whether I’ve hit the mark is for the reader to judge. My only hope is
that Professor Lord would smile on my effort to understand something
that was so close to his heart for so long.
It has become customary in acknowledgments to provide a long list of people who contributed to the project at hand. Alas, I have no such list because I researched and wrote this book largely in solitude. Still, there are people to thank, people without whom this book would not exist. They include Craig Kennedy, who handed me a review of a book by Jack Goody about two decades ago; Matt Kay, who got me a job working for Albert Lord, also a long time ago; the “Ninjas” at The Atlantic Monthly, with whom I investigated the “new media” in the early 2000s; Scott Stossel, also of The Atlantic Monthly, who helped me write an article about Wikipedia in 2005; my agent, Bob Mecoy, who encouraged me to write a book about Wikipedia and who, when I spent several years not doing so, stuck with me; my colleagues in the history department at the University of Iowa, who patiently waited for a book that was “done” to be done; my editor at Cambridge University Press, Eric Crahan, who had outsized faith in this outsized project; and, most of all, my wife, intellectual companion, and mathematician extraordinaire, Julianna Tymoczko, who, were this a math article, would be credited as a co-author. This book is dedicated to her.

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