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978-0-521-17944-7 - A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet

Marshall T. Poe

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## 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.

Marshall T. Poe, Associate Professor of History at the University of Iowa, is the author or editor of several books, including *A People Born to Slavery: Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography* (2000), *The Russian Elite in the Seventeenth Century* (2004), and *The Russian Moment in World History* (2006). He is the co-founder and editor of *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* and founder and host of “New Books in History” (<http://newbooksinhistory.com>), as well as a former writer and editor for *The Atlantic Monthly*. Professor Poe has been a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton University), the Harriman Institute (Columbia University), and the Kennan Institute (Washington, DC).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521179447](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521179447)

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First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Poe, Marshall.

A history of communications : media and society from the evolution of speech to the Internet / Marshall T. Poe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00435-1 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-17944-7 (pbk.)

1. Communication – Social aspects. 2. Digital media – Social aspects. I. Title.

HMI206.P64 2010

302.209 – dc22 2010031501

ISBN 978-1-107-00435-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-17944-7 Paperback

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## PREFACE

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

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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.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.

Marshall Poe  
May 27, 2010  
Iowa City