
Media technologies are difficult to situate historically without the device(s) in question reflexively mediating their examination. Lisa Gitelman reminds us of this throughout her book Always Already New as she pieces together the link between two “new” media inventions in two very distinct time periods, almost a century apart. The “newness” of media is a central theme, as communication technologies must always be historically positioned as new media, directly connected to their respective eras and surrounding cultures. The text outlines the similarities between the invention and development of sound recording in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Internet in the late twentieth century—both media of inscription having somewhat parallel chronologies of invention and audience appropriation. In Gitelman’s words, the book “uses the case of recorded sound to open the important question of how media studies might begin to historicize digital media in a sufficiently rigorous way” (p. xi).

The book was conceived as the prosthetic limb of a 2003 essay compilation entitled New Media: 1740-1915 (Gitelman & Pingree, 2003), of which Gitelman was co-editor. In her preface to Always Already New, she expresses her initial desire to expand on developing methods of new media history in a consistent, comprehensive single-authored text, inspired by concepts and theories encountered editing chapters of New Media.

Gitelman selects two easily relatable and identifiable inventions, performing a comparison on the basis of their cultural absorption, representation, content, and necessity, as well as the way each has evolved the meaning of “text.” In effect, what Gitelman performs is an “archaeology,” by choosing to tell the story of digital media “into history, not the other way around” (p. 11), rejecting notions that these objects exist as characters in an ongoing narrative. Each account is separated into two chapters, a method that works seamlessly, through relevant demonstrative tangents, to gift-wrap the book’s line of argument for the reader. In each account, the first chapter recounts the origins of the medium, its intended use by its inventor(s), and the manner in which it was exhibited to the public. “Media and their publics coevolve,” says Gitelman, alluding to the reception of recorded sound “as party to the existing. . . logics of writing, print media, and public speech” (p. 13), creating initial difficulty for publicity of the new invention to gain momentum. The second chapter of each account addresses a second phase: that of the social and cultural appropriation of uses and their functional transition from public to private realm. An important distinction lies within the positing of social and economic structures as decentralist, working to transform media technologies from large, expensive public machines to mass-commercialized, personalized, domestic, and affordable items with vastly improved storage capacity. This is as true of the computer mainframe’s reincarnation as desktop PC as it is of the nickel-in-the-slot phonograph’s development into living-room phonograph.

Gitelman brings forth her most salient arguments in the latter segment of each historical synopsis. She plays with the words “publics” and “users,” noting that publics are made up of users but not all users are included in the public sphere. Publics are the masses—consumers of media technology—while users are those “who help to define new media in crucial ways” (p. 60), using those media to forge and mould cultural norms while remaining detached, “both as mirrors and receptors for the ideological formations of the public sphere, yet. . . not themselves necessarily ideological” (p. 60). She uses this distinction to posit that “gender and cultural differences were built into [the technology] from the start” (p. 60). For example, in the case of sound recording, the female voice (not to mention the
violin) was very difficult to reproduce, for it would create a high-pitched squeal on any phonograph record. This enabled phonograph companies to apply the fidelity of their playback of female vocalists as a basis of comparison in advertising their products.

The Internet has drastically altered the concept of publishing and the meaning of the word “document.” The new medium has influenced the existence of an entire list of new publication formats, such as CD-ROM, commercial online databases, e-mail, FTP, and HTTP. Issues of authorship and chronology are discussed as the “whoness” and “whenness” of documents and publications. Publishing is now possible by accident, and to publish something is an instantaneous and effortless reality for anyone with access to the Internet. Gitelman’s emphasis here is on positioning publishing on the Web as an event in “a continual, continuous present that relies more on dates of access and experiences of ‘WELCOME’ than on any date of publication” (p. 145). Ways of saving culture as data, new media’s purpose as reconstructive instruments of the “postindustrial and postmodern” (p. 155), and the advent of the electronic document call into question once again the ever-presentness of media in the establishment of “order.” While the question of media’s role in the larger world order is not addressed in the book, Gitelman puts forth her account of how the history of media is very much involved in the “emerging ‘order’ of public life and public memory” (p. 155).

As an extension of the exercise of seeing all media as once-new media, Always Already New applies this concept to the actual newness and inescapability of the Internet, a history undergoing continuous reflexive and self-perpetuated construction. However, the strengths of the book are ever-so-slightly curtailed by its brevity, making it dependent on its sibling New Media for discursive reinforcement. The abundance of new and challenging concepts, virtually stuffed into such a small space, only allows for brief, surface-level examinations. This is not to say that the text is not written in a conclusive manner; but, upon arriving at the final page, one notices that the conclusion is short and fails to draw out the cast of characters (theories/ideas) for one final bow. On a positive note, the technologically deterministic tone of the author puts her in a category with McLuhan in the pursuit of the meaning of media technologies, their implications for users and publics, and the way in which they shape culture and sensory experience. The book’s imaginative dimension is coloured by topical allusions to notions of class, race, gender, and the private/public (domestic/professional) dichotomy. For this reason, Always Already New is a valuable addition to media-history literature and an enlightening read as a summary of ideas relating to new technologies and their effects on social phenomena.

References

Riccardo Mauricio-Cardilli
Concordia University