
In the fall of 2012, I received a copy of the 2011 edition of New Media: An Introduction to write a review. This was perfectly timed, as I had recently decided to use it for a course I was teaching the following semester, and this would give me a good feel for its value as a pedagogical text. As happens much more often than I would like to admit, the semester ended, another began, and the text ended up buried under apparently more pressing materials. After a gentle reminder several months later from the review editor, I went over my notes, read through the text again, wrote, and finally submitted my review. One of the key themes that I had addressed in that original review was the idea of the rapid changes that take place in digital media, and how this makes currency a significant issue in texts on this topic. To drive the point home in a very real way, the editor contacted me again to say that a new edition of the text would be out before the review I had written would be published. We agreed to shelve the review and wait for the new edition. After having gone through the new edition, I can see that the first review is still incredibly relevant and so much of it will still be discussed here, while addressing the changes that have been made, many of which have dealt with some of my earlier concerns.

To those of us who came of age in the late 70s and early 80s, it is difficult not to look back incredulously at the rapid innovation in and adoption of technology, like video game consoles, home computers, Internet use, cellphones, and other now ubiquitous forms of new media. I vividly remember when the notion of the local video arcade gave way to this mystical idea of a gaming console that would shift the public gaming space into the privacy of our homes. In retrospect, I see how Atari, Intellivision, and ColecoVision fundamentally altered my ideas of public and private spaces, of community, and of entertainment, and how these constantly changed with new platforms and new techniques of use. I am certain that I never realized the importance of it at the time, as I was so immersed in it that it seemed just a natural progression and a part of everyday life. Almost all aspects of our young lives were directly tied to these emerging technologies, and as we look back on the past 30+ years of these advances, we are better able to critically assess their implementation and their social ramifications. The textbook New Media: An Introduction (Second Canadian Edition) by Terry Flew and Richard Smith offers a similar, more recent look at the changing world of technology, and, with a strong historical setup, brings it to the present within a Canadian frame. Originally an Australian text written by Flew and adapted to its Canadian context by Simon Fraser University professor Richard Smith, it has both positive and negative aspects to its use as an undergraduate text in Technology or Communications Studies, but its important positive contributions easily outweigh the negative ones.

In the preface to the first Canadian edition, which is only a couple of years old, Smith notes that this is “a topic that is subject to constant change” (p. xi) and, as such,
is an incredibly difficult discussion to remain current both with regard to the technologies discussed and the theories applied. In the preface to the new second edition, he also notes that these changes are not solely in technology but also in their uses, as “new media is, by its very nature, extremely malleable and fluid in how it is used” (p. vii). In the same way that new media is separated by what came before it by the active participation of the consumer/user, the text itself is set up to afford readers the opportunity to research topics further by providing useful websites and additional readings at chapters’ ends, as well as providing discussion questions, class activity ideas, and topics for debate. Not only does this allow the reader/student to travel on their own to appropriate sources for potentially updated statistical data, but it also provides a framework through which the chapter components can be discussed or disseminated in a pedagogical setting. The latter may be the key strength this text has for use in the classroom. Encouraging students to engage with the information at a level of deeper inquisition through these same media is, in and of itself, a very telling example of how these technologies can function and how quickly the data in this field can become out-dated.

The new version of the book published in 2014 addresses one of the major concerns I had with the first edition (and a concern that is generally applied to all texts in this field): some of the examples or technologies discussed can appear long past their prime. For instance, in the first edition, the discussion around mobile phones points to Canada’s own Research in Motion (RIM, makers of the BlackBerry) as “one of the leading manufacturers of smartphones” (p. 85). Most certainly just a few years ago RIM was considered as such, but, times have changed. Now, RIM is struggling amid an increasingly competitive mobile market and is fighting to keep what little market share it has left. The new 2014 edition has not only addressed this, but it has done so rather deftly. Within the same discussion of mobility as in the first edition, the updated version notes that at one time many Canadians would have had a phone made by a Canadian company, RIM, and discusses why the BlackBerry was as successful as it was. It then notes the reversal in fortunes and the uncertain future. Rather than simply adjusting a couple of sentences and moving on, however, Smith includes a full boxed off “case study” on the following page that goes in-depth into “Canada’s smartphone” and discusses the BlackBerry’s history in terms of economics, convergence, social media, software, politics, and even as a potential signifier of taste.

On an increasingly positive side for Canadian undergrad students, couching these mobile discussions in our nation’s context by discussing how Telus, Bell, and Rogers (and their subsidiary brands like Fido, Koodo, and Virgin) are set up and how Canadian regulations frame their businesses really helps to put a familiar and practical face on what can be a daunting subject, theoretically if not logistically. The introduction of the WIND Mobile and Mobilicity players into the Canadian market demonstrates to students how Canadian policy is conceived and implemented, as well as applied, in the real world. This is one of the text’s strongest points.

Yet, considering how suddenly things can change in this area of research and study, the text does incredibly well to remain relevant to larger discourses on the participatory nature of new media, the always-shifting notion of our “creative industries,” and the links to the economic and political order that underpin a larger global economy in
knowledge. In my estimation as a Canadian educator, this edition’s inclusion of even more salient Canadian examples and case studies makes the text significantly more accessible for Canadian students in this subject area and addresses an apparent dearth of similarly focused texts. This was the primary reason that I chose it for a 4th year course I was teaching on “Issues in an Information Society.” I had my students prepare a weekly reflection on their chapter readings, and I will confess that I was somewhat surprised by their dismissals of the text as “old.” If anything, this allowed us to frame our class discussions in such a manner as to highlight how the history and use of new media technologies have led us to the (momentarily?) current “read-write-web” iteration and what this could mean in the future.

I suspect that in the same way that my complete immersion in the changes of the 1980s obfuscated much of the socio-political contexts of these changes and developments to me, my students’ direct integration in their new media world and its ubiquitousness has given them blinders. Lamenting what they saw as “stating the obvious,” it presents the opportunity to question our students about why or how we have come to feel this way about the technologies that surround us. For this reason, I feel that this text is an important one, as it can potentially lift the veil of naturalness that exists around new media, at which point we can finally begin to critique it in the manner that Flew and Smith do.

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