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New Media

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New media refers to content accessed through some digital device, though the definition is always evolving and somewhat problematic in its nature. This entry discusses the “newness” of new media; the convergence of technology, communication activities, and industry in daily life; the consumption and production practices of digital users; and how these phenomena and activities link to informal learning in digital spaces. The pervasiveness of new media in modern society shapes the acquisition and dissemination of content in both subtle and overt ways.

Conceptualizing “Newness”

At various points, the printing press, radio, and television were “new,” as all offered innovative ways of communicating and accessing content. Obsolete and obscure inventions were also once new, despite the tendency to privilege older media that remains significant to society today. A danger of conceptualizing new media is taking for granted that there is some abrupt before and after when it comes to technology, that society did not have something and then suddenly it did, when in reality the development is much more fluid. That is not to say that there are no dramatic societal changes because of an invention, but both the printing press and the computer had predecessors, trials and failures, and iterations over the years, and continue to evolve.

The power of labels must be considered and whether new media has replaced or is an evolved form of preexisting media (though the lines between the two blur). A mobile phone has altered considerably from the earliest telephone in capabilities and form, yet both are “phones.” Then, there is the sound player—the phonograph, 8-track tape player, Walkman, CD (compact disc) player, iPod, and so on—which essentially serve the same purpose, that is, to transmit sound. One could argue that the iPod and phonograph are more distinct physical forms given their relative sizes and portability, ease of use, and access to sound, but, then, one could argue the same for the oldest telephone versus the mobile phone.

Newness is equally, if not more so, about function as it is about form. The computer has essentially “replaced” the typewriter for everyday written communication because it is faster, easier, and does *more*, yet neither the typewriter nor the computer has yet rendered pens and paper obsolete as some once speculated would occur. A market for typewriters also endures, even though it is more of a niche market.

Convergence of Old and New Media Forms

Even with the complexities of newness, a notable aspect of digital devices in the 21st century is how effectively they incorporate preexisting media forms directly into them. Television is no longer new, but YouTube, Hulu, and Netflix are. Similarly, on the same device used for Netflix and YouTube, radio programming (be it music or topical discussions), books, and news articles can be accessed via Pandora, Spotify, Google Books, Project Gutenberg, digital versions of magazines and newspapers, and so on. New media today can thus be thought of as a convergence of previously distinct analog media from different families (phones, TV, sound players) into digitized content now found on a singular digital device. Yet this definition is more nuanced than it might initially seem, for convergence has critical implications for understanding information acquisition and technology usage in society at large.

Amazon sells books, music, and electronics, along with a bevy of goods and services. The Kindle has evolved from being just an e-reader to a tablet that also grants access to apps,

films, television shows, and the Internet as the Kindle Fire. The bookseller Barnes & Noble developed the Nook in turn and partnered with Samsung to produce its own competing tablet. Apple has Macs, iPods, iTunes, iPads, Safari, the Apple Watch, and Apple TV just as Amazon has its Fire TV. Companies whose origins are not even in the Internet or computers (e.g., Sony, Samsung) now have tablets and laptops, smartphones and smart TVs, and other products that converge digitally.

In the past, even when companies diversified in the products and services they offered, those products and services were usually separate from one another (a phone was a phone, a camera a camera, a television a television). Today, most of a company's products increasingly perform similar functions. A phone can be used to surf the Internet, take photos, and listen to music. A tablet can make phone calls and allows its user to read books and articles. Devices are also able to connect to one another—laptops to monitors/TVs, phone and iPods to laptops.

Traditional media institutions such as CNN (Cable News Network) or NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation) also have multiple social media accounts. Museums have apps. Universities connect with current and prospective students via digital devices. Movie studios debut trailers on both YouTube and traditional television shows and frequently have video games, apps, and websites that link to their films. Product tie-ins are not new, as novelizations of films, toys based on film characters, and breakfast cereal advertisements featuring film characters occurred before the pervasiveness of the Internet and new media culture. Nevertheless, the rise of digital devices in everyday life and the convergence of technology, media, and communication have changed how companies operate and interact with their consumers.

A common feature of digital platforms/spaces is some form of feedback, be it comment sections, ratings and reviews, a like button, or emojis—new media have led to a culture of the every-person opinion where there is an expectation for regular consumers to be able to express their thoughts about a topic or product. Whereas audiences and consumers were once considered more passive receptors of information, there has been a general trend away from conceptualizing them as such and toward conceptualizing them instead as active consumers and media engagers.

Goodreads, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Amazon reviews, bloggers, vloggers, and so on compete with professional reviewers and publications, which has in turn led to magazines, newspapers, and other traditional institutions increasing their digital presence, especially via social media. But as amateur opinion gains traction, the line between professional and amateur/private citizen points of view blurs, especially when bloggers and vloggers turn their once hobby into a revenue-generating enterprise and have thousands, if not millions, of followers online. New media is intrinsic to the convergence culture that has developed, which, as Henry Jenkins notes, is not only the convergence of media content across multiple platforms but also the increasing participation of audiences in media as active producers and consumers. Just as movie studios have their officially produced tie-ins, fans generate their own fan fiction, art, fan-made music videos, as well as reviews and analyses around their favorite characters and stories. They are *prosumers*, the term coined by Alvin Toffler, who consume *and* produce media content. Amateur cultural production existed before the Internet, but digital technology has allowed it to flourish like never before.

New Media and Learning in Informal Spaces

Convergence and the rise of prosumers, particularly in relation to fan-related activities, are important in understanding informal digital spaces. As new media makes the distribution of content faster and more connected than before, so are audiences more connected to one another. Informal learning communities where people gather digitally around a common interest and/or endeavor give rise to networks where information is shared and knowledge collectively constructed outside traditional institutional bounds. New media today aids in bringing together like-minded people, including video gamers, fashionistas, writers, and visual artists, in spaces where they can become savvier about their chosen interest while acquiring and refining multiple skills.

For example, fan fiction communities serve a variety of purposes depending on the needs of individual participants. English language learners have been shown to use these spaces as a means of improving their facility with another language while they also construct cross-cultural identities. Many participants in fan fiction sites see themselves as part of a community where they can work together to improve as writers through the continuous production of material and through the feedback they receive and give in turn, which further helps them build relationships among members of the community who are inclined to participate in these relationships. Not everyone is; some merely want to read and enjoy fanfics with no personal input. One of the benefits of informal communities is that there are multiple entry points and participation levels for individuals who each come to a space with different background knowledge and experiences.

Informal history communities, as another example, may form around a historical television show or novel, or another dramatic work that inspires its fans to not only discuss the characters and story of the drama that interests them but also learn more about the “real” era and figures (or in the case of pseudohistorical fantasy like *Game of Thrones*, the historical eras that inspired the setting and characters). Some participants may be or have been history students, while others detested the subject in school. Yet through the connectedness of new media and the ability to access a range of content online, young and old from different countries can now share sources; argue their perspectives on events, issues, and professional historians’ interpretations; and sometimes acquire the disciplinary skills that educators advocate for students to learn in formal environments. Discussions of contemporary life and issues trickle into these communities too. The backgrounds and biases of participants can result in clashes over how they view an author, historian, or filmmaker’s depiction of gender, religion, race, and/or politics in a work; these polarizing views must then be negotiated by the community.

New Media Challenges

Though informal spaces provide opportunities to learn, misinformation can be as easily spread as accurate knowledge. Social media in particular are useful for making a large audience aware of an issue quickly, such as with the Ice Bucket Challenge for Lou Gehrig’s disease or listing places of shelter for those in the midst of an emergency. But sometimes information that is retweeted or reblogged is later revealed to be inaccurate, or it turns out that the author of the blog post or tweet had only partial understanding of a situation. This can result in serious consequences, such as when someone who is misidentified online is subsequently unfairly targeted. While some communities are increasingly adept at verifying sources of information, the vastness of the Internet and the relative ease of posting means that there is a lot of content to sift through on a regular basis.

Digital culture has seen the rise of aggregators that collect content and provide snapshots or

headlines for users on a product or topic. Sites such as Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic for reviews, Expedia and Kayak for travel prices, or Facebook and Flipboard for news articles and opinion pieces all attempt to tackle the issue of information overload by streamlining. On the one hand, these sites provide easy access to a range of opinions. On the other, users are allowing the technology to dictate what they see and perhaps what they will subsequently value. Due to the increasing customization of digital sources, users may be less exposed to a variety of perspectives despite the wealth of content on the Internet. Determining credible information and what to read or listen to is both a challenge and skill in itself.

See also [Blogs and Blogging](#); [Convergence Culture](#); [Digital Media and Learning](#); [Joint Media Engagement](#); [Mobile Devices](#); [Participatory Culture](#); [Social Media and Social Networks](#)

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