



COMMUNICATION THEORY

MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

DAVID HOLMES



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Media, Technology, Society

David Holmes

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For Elena

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PREFACE

A theory of communication must be developed in the realm of abstraction. Given that physics has taken this step in the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, abstraction should not be in itself an objection.

N. Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 12

What follows is an interdisciplinary communication theory book which sets out the implications of new communications technologies for media studies and the sociology of communication.

The cluster of texts which came out over the last decade dealing with computer-mediated communication (CMC), virtual reality and cyberspace has significantly established new theoretical domains of research which have been accepted across a range of disciplines. The current book proposes to integrate this literature in outline and summary form into the corpus of communication studies. In doing so it explores the relationship between media, technology and society. How do media, in their various forms, extend the social, reproduce the social, or substitute for other aspects of social life?

Most books dealing with communication and media studies invariably address traditional concerns of content, representation, semiotics and ideology. Whilst including an appreciation of these approaches, the current book makes a contribution to theoretical analysis of media and communications by charting how the emergence of new post-broadcast and interactive forms of communication has provided additional domains of study for communication theory, renovated the older domain of broadcast, and suggested fresh ways of studying these older media.

In doing so, this book advances a critique of the 'second media age' thesis, which, I argue, has become something of an orthodoxy in much recent literature. It rejects the historical proposition that a second media age of new media, exemplified by the Internet, has overtaken or converged with an older age of broadcast media. Yet at the same time, the value of analytically distinguishing between the most significant architecture that is attributed to the first media age – broadcast – and that which is attributed to the second media age – interactive networks – is upheld. The basic dualism between broadcast and interactivity structures the main themes of the book. To the extent that individuals in media societies experience changes in the means of communication as a 'second media age', we are compelled to re-examine the postulated 'first media age' in terms of

medium or network form rather than simply content or 'text'. The sense in which this distinction is made should not be confused with questions of form versus the content of narrative, where content is what a text says, and the form is how it says it. Rather, a non-textual distinction is being made here. In doing so, a sociological appreciation of broadcast can be arrived at rather than a media studies or cultural studies perspective, which is invariably grounded exclusively in either behaviourist or linguistically centred approaches to analysis. However, insofar as this book is 'sociological', sociology is not being opposed to communication and media studies; on the contrary, a central argument of the book is that emergence of new communication environments has more or less forced traditional media and communication studies to be sociological. For this reason the current volume is very interdisciplinary (between communication, media and sociology), but this has less to do with the perspective adopted than with changes in how media are experienced.

These recent changes in media infrastructure have necessitated a shift in the order in which communication theory is treated. For example, information theory, which often prefigures semiotic analysis of media, is introduced in the current textbook as instructive for the second media age, where it more appropriately belongs with analyses of the Internet. In fact, in seeing just how relevant information theory is to CMC rather than broadcast, it is surprising how significantly it came to figure in studies of broadcast in the first place. At the same time, the book tries to incorporate most of the traditions of twentieth-century communication theory in order to locate their relevance to studying the sociological complexities of contemporary convergent communications.

Through this argument the distinction between medium and content, media and messages, is persistently returned to. On the scaffold of these distinctions the book also presents a central argument about the difference between communicative *interaction* and *integration*. With the aid of recently emerging 'ritual' models of communication it is possible to understand how the technical modes of association manifested in broadcast and interactive communication networks are constitutive of their own modes of integration. Thus it is possible to identify media-constituted communities in broadcast communities and so-called 'virtual communities', which is to argue that such networks do not so much 'mediate' *interaction*, as facilitate modes or levels of *integration* to which correspond specific qualities of attachment and association. It is also to argue that media-constituted communities aren't merely a continuation of older face-to-face or geographic communities by technical means (the mediation argument) but are rather constitutive of their own properties and dynamics. Of course, such 'levels' of integration are not isolated but co-exist, in ways which are outlined in successive chapters (particularly Chapters 4 and 5). A third major theme that is explored is the urban and economic context of media-constituted communities, the way in which dependence on technical-communicative systems facilitates expanded

commodification and rationalization of cultural life: spheres which could never have been so influenced before the emergence of these systems.

It is not only the second media age text which is to be reappraised in developing the book's themes but also some classical texts on the sociological dynamics of broadcast as well as key readers pertaining to frameworks of 'media studies'. Where this book differs from 'media studies' texts is in integrating the significance of 'cybersociety' into the general corpus of communication theory. It does so by way of a critique of the second media age orthodoxy which imagines a new era that is derived from yet another progress-driven 'communications revolution'. At the same time, the discourses of 'telecommunications convergence' are critically assessed for overstating a technologically reductive distinction between 'broadcast' and 'interactivity' in order that they can be portrayed as undergoing 'convergence', again at a solely technological level.

To turn to the chapter composition of the book: the introduction establishes the rationale guiding the organization of the book: the contrast between broadcast and network forms of communication. The predominance of semiotic accounts of media is criticized as unwarranted, distracting attention from the techno-social dimensions of media environments. At the same time, a linear model of progression from a first to a second media age is found to be too simplistic to address the complexity of contemporary media formations. The linear model is premised largely on an interaction approach to media culture, which in this chapter is counterposed to the more fruitful analyses that are made possible by 'integration' models. A variant of the linear second media age perspective is the 'convergence' thesis, which presupposes two media forms (of broadcast and interactivity) not historically, but technologically. These themes, of first versus second media age, of a multiplicity of form versus content, of 'convergence' as a product of medium dichotomization, of interaction versus integration, are announced as guiding the development of the whole volume.

Chapters 2 and 3 are stand-alone expositions of theories of 'broadcast communication' and 'network communication', respectively. These chapters introduce key theoretical perspectives that are relevant to understanding broadcast and network communication. In addition, an historical and empirical discussion of broadcast in the context of urbanization and the rise of industrial society is presented, whilst in Chapter 3 the major innovations which underlie the second media age thesis are considered. Chapter 2 reproduces much of the 'classical' literature on media (e.g. theories of ideology) whilst also recasting it within the macro-framework of the techno-social medium approach (e.g. Althusser's often difficult theory of 'interpellation' and 'ideology-in-general' is re-explained as an effect of the structure of broadcast. Chapter 3 attempts to formalize the still very young perspectives on cybersociety and proposes to give them a sense of definition as a way of ordering the current burgeoning literature. In doing so, it identifies a 'second media age' perspective, a CMC perspective, convergence perspectives and

the reclamation of older perspectives (McLuhan, Baudrillard) whose relevance to cyberculture is arguably greater than it is to media culture.

Chapter 4 considers the interrelation between broadcast and network mediums¹, and argues that they are quite distinct in their social implications but are also parasitic on each other. In this light, what is called 'convergence' is really an outcome, rather than a cause, of such parasitism, a consequence which is mistakenly seen to be only working at the level of technical causation, or predestined historical *telos*. But this distinctively broader meaning of convergence can only be arrived at if correspondingly broader meanings of network and broadcast are deployed, to spheres not confined to media and communications. In the context of such criticism, media technologies, whether they be broadcast or interactive, increasingly reveal themselves as *urban* technologies, which are constantly converging with the logics internal to other urban technologies (the shopping mall, the freeway). For example, the argument that virtual communities restore the loss of community that is said to result from the one-dimensionality of the culture industry does not contrast virtual and 'physical' communities, which can be done by looking at the dialectic between media culture and urban culture. Raymond Williams' under-regarded concept of 'mobile privatization' is explored as a departure point for the way in which media extend social relations on the basis of private spatial logics.

Finally, the economic complementarity of broadcast and network mediums is established. Life on the screen is one in which individuals are, if they so choose, able to live a culture of communication without the spectacle and advertising fetishes of broadcast. However, in an abstract world of communicative association this new mode of 'communication as culture' itself provides a market for communication products, both hardware and software, that is growing on a scale which is rapidly catching up with the political economy of broadcast.

Chapter 5, 'Interaction versus Integration', critiques various models of interaction (instrumental views of communication, transmission views, 'mediation' views) as not being able to adequately address the socializing and socially constituting qualities of various media and communication mediums. In doing so it turns its attention toward the promising body of theory which can be gathered under the heading of 'ritual communication'. This comprises works such as James Carey's *Communication as Culture* and is informed by anthropological perspectives and New Media theory. An argument is made for the need to develop an understanding of 'levels' of ritual communication: face-to-face, mediated and technically extended. The advance that John B. Thompson makes in this regard in *The Media and Modernity* is a useful stepping stone, but one that is based on interaction rather than 'integration'. Integration formulations (Meyrowitz, Calhoun, Giddens) are then explored in order to demonstrate the short-falls of the interaction model as well as to sketch a model which can begin to attend to the complexity of both broadcast and network forms of communication processes.

Chapter 6, on telecommunity, appraises the significance of the concept of community in media culture in two ways. Firstly, how do 'communities' arise that are said to be constituted entirely by technical mediums? Secondly, why is it only recently, after over a hundred years, that there has been a radical renewal of thinking of community? With regard to the first question, the idea of a virtual community is explored, but in relation to the much neglected idea of broadcast communities, which, if anything, offer more powerful forms of integration than do their cyberspace counterparts. Whereas in broadcast communities there is little or no interaction with others in embodied or quasi-embodied form, there is a high concentration of identification and the constitution of community by way of extended charismatic affect. Thus, both kinds of community can be characterized as virtual in the way in which they privilege relations with media and mediated association.

In its emphasis on the priority of techno-social mediums over content, the volume draws on the recent wave of publications that have dealt with the Internet and communication theory. At the same time it attempts to chart the relationship between traditional and new media without exaggerating the impact of the latter. Not only does broadcast remain central to modern media culture, but it makes possible, in co-dependent ways, the social conditions which underpin cyberculture, from its first steps to its last.

Note

- 1 Whilst the term 'media' might normally be considered the plural of medium, in this book I make the distinction between media and mediums which is not restricted to a singular/plural distinction. In using 'mediums' I am trying to retain a strong sense of media as environments, rather than as either 'technologies' or institutions. Denoting 'mediums' as 'media environments' or 'media architectures' facilitates insights drawn from medium theory which cannot be served by the term 'media'.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION — A SECOND MEDIA AGE?

In the last few years ... widespread talk of 'cyberspace' has brought new attention to the idea that media research should focus less on the messages and more on communication technologies as types of social environments. (Meyrowitz, 1999: 51)

In an essay, 'Learning the Electronic Life', written just before the 'widespread talk of cyberspace' that accompanied the so-called 'Internet Revolution' of the 1990s, James Schwoch and Mimi White (1992) set about to describe a typical day's activity for their American family – from waking up, to putting in hours as teachers in the education sector, to trying to relax in the evening.

At first light they relate how they are woken by the baby monitor which links their room to their son's. Next thing they are heating up the rice cereal in a microwave. While their boy is in the playpen, James and Mimi commence some exercise in front of the TV with remote control handy.

Out of the house and, if not a walk-to-work day, into the car, lowering the garage door with the automatic opener as we drive away on errands. Stop at the bank – or rather, the nearest automatic teller machine to get some cash for groceries and shopping (done with cash, checks, and credit cards, with access to the first electronically verified by a local computer network, the latter two verified at point of purchase by a national computer network) – and upon returning home, check the phone machine before going off to the office or upstairs to the study to work on the computer. A typical work day can include not only personally interacting with students and colleagues, but also interfacing with long distance telephone calls, photocopies, printouts, hard drives, programs, modems, electronic mail, floppies, audio and video tape, and once in a while a fax. If we do not work into the evening, a typical night may well include (along with returning phone calls) radio listening, recorded music (albums, tapes or compact discs), broadcast television, cable television, or videocassettes. The most probable result, of course, is some combination of the above choices, with too many TV nights degenerating into an uninspired channel-hopping via remote from the comfort of the couch. In the background the baby monitor provides the sound of sleeping baby, a sound that accompanies us into bed each evening. The cycle, with a slight degree of variation, begins anew the next day. (Schwoch and White, 1992: 101–2)

Schwoch and White describe these interactions as 'an unremarkable series of events' about which 'few stop to marvel at how quickly and unthinkingly certain aspects of technology – telecommunications based on the electromagnetic spectrum and various wire-based telecommunications networks such as the telephone – become part of our everyday experiences' (102). Their very prosaicness, they argue, is what makes them so important and powerful, because it is in our interface with these technologies, the human–technical interface, that an entire pedagogy of technical competence is fostered, a pedagogy which becomes almost buried in the thousands of discrete habits and routines that both help us, connect us and imprison us in the information society.¹

People who live in information societies not only encounter and 'use' information and communication technologies; rather, increasingly, their modes of action are enframed by these technologies. They are not so much tools as environments. Since Schwoch and White published their essay, over a silicon century (seven years) has passed, in which time a range of interactive communication technologies have come become meaningful in our daily life. We could add to their scenario the emergence of digital, optic-fibre and packet-switching technologies which have made the Internet possible, and the normalization of satellite-based communications and information devices like satellite phones and global positioning systems (see Dizzard, 2000). More often than not, we are not even aware of the extent to which these technical systems precondition the simplest of activities – an ignorance which was aptly epitomized by the trillion-dollar anxiety over the millennium bug, the dreaded Y2K.²

But this lack of awareness does not signal that we have become 'overloaded' with information, images or technology, as subscribers to the 'saturation' thesis suggest.³ Media saturation tends to encourage a view of some order of unmediated experience, which is menaced by impersonal scales of intrusive media. In this book, we will see that, in fact, attachment to media can be very personal and as meaningful as embodied relationships, and that appreciating the strength of these attachments requires a broadening of the concept of 'cyberspace'.

The exponential explosion in webs of CITs (communication and information technologies) has, at a phenomenological level, shifted the orientation many of us have to 'objects' to an extent that can change our sense of otherness.⁴ As face-to-face relations are replaced by 'interface' with technological 'terminals' of communication, electronic devices acquire a life of their own. Outside our own bodies the world fills with objects that are also animated, an animation which might compete with the human – as suggested by Sherry Turkle's notion of the computer screen as a 'second self' (Turkle, 1984). Whilst the non-human might be competing with the human, individuals themselves increasingly find that they are part of contexts in which they are 'objectualized'.⁵ Studies that have been conducted on these phenomena show high degrees of attachment to media and communication technologies, whether this be people's need to have a television on in the

background even if they aren't actually watching it, the near desperation that many Internet users have in downloading their email, or individuals who find security in having a mobile phone even if they use it only seldom.

But of course, behind our surface contact with this system of objects are definite social relationships, relationships which new communication and information technologies enable to be *extended* in time and space (see Sharp, 1993). At the same time, however, the particular way in which they are extended can also be considered a relationship itself, which is capable of acquiring an independence from the function of extending 'pre-technological' or pre-virtual relationships, even if they somehow might take different kinds of reference from these relationships.

What this book proposes is that these electronically extended relationships are constitutive of their own dynamics, dynamics which can be studied beyond the bewildering array of object technologies which, in their very visibility, render the social relation largely invisible.

In particular, the social dynamics that will be analysed on the basis that they *can* be analysed as part of this technologically extended sphere of social integration are broadcast integration and network integration. By the end of this volume, I aim to show that these kinds of integration are ontologically distinct – that is, distinct in external reality, not just theoretically distinct – whilst at the same time mutually constitutive.

Communication in cybercultures

The technologically constituted urban setting which Schwach and White describe is increasingly typical of contexts of everyday life which preside in the processes of modern communication. Communication does not happen in a vacuum, nor does it happen in homogeneous contexts or simply by dint of the features of a natural language, but in architectural, urban, technically and socially shaped ways.

This book explores the interrelation between these contexts and the character of a range of communication events. It is about the contexts of communication in so-called 'information' societies as well as the kinds of connection that these contexts and the communications themselves make possible. The urban and micro-urban realities that can be described in the everyday experiences of James and Mimi are integral to the understanding of contemporary communication processes. Is there a relationship between the increase in the use of CITs and the increase in the number of people living alone in America, Australia and Britain? Is there a logic which links the privatization of public space like shopping malls and the dependence on broadcast and network mediums?

In the last ten years, the convergence between technologies of urban life and new communications technologies has been remarkable. It has

even led some commentators to argue that the privatizing concentration of so many context-worlds, be they electronic, architectural or automobile-derived, is what really amounts to 'cyberspace'. This convergence is perhaps nowhere more powerfully represented than it is by the Internet, which is itself a network as well as a model for 'cyberspace' relations.⁶

It was in the final decade of the twentieth century that the emergence of global interactive technologies, exemplified by the Internet, in the everyday sphere of advanced capitalist nations dramatically transformed the nature and scope of communication mediums. These transformations heralded the declaration of a 'second media age', which is seen as a departure from the dominance of broadcast forms of media such as newspapers, radio and television. Significantly, the heralding of a second media age is almost exclusively based on the rise of interactive media, most especially the Internet, rather than the decline of broadcast television. Empirically, some have pointed out how certain *technological forms* of mass broadcast have waned or fragmented in favour of 'market-specific communication' (see Marc, 2000), although this is seldom linked to the rise of extended interactive communication. Rather, what is significant for the second media age exponents is the rapid take-up of interactive forms of communication. Whether this take-up warrants the appellation of a second media age, which can so neatly signal the demise of a 'first media age', is contested in this book. Certainly, the second media age thesis points to and contains insights about definite changes in the media landscapes of nations and regions with high media density. But the conjunctive as much as the disjunctive relationships between old and new media are very important.

Nevertheless, the arrival of *what is described* as the 'second media age' has two important consequences: one practical and the other theoretical. The extent and complexity of these practical consequences, which this book outlines, concern the implications which 'the second media age' has for contemporary social integration. The theoretical consequence of the second media age is that it has necessitated a radical revision of the sociological significance of broadcast media as addressed by traditions of media studies.

The overstatement of linguistic perspectives on media

Under the influence of cultural studies, European traditions in media studies have, since the 1970s, typically focused on questions of content and representation rather than 'form' or 'medium'. This is perhaps itself a reaction to the preoccupation which 'process' models developed in the United States had with 'media effects' and behavioural epistemologies.⁷

Analysing media content – the employment of perspectives on language, beginning with Marxist conceptualizations of ideology, followed

by the influence of ‘semiotics’, ‘deconstruction’ and ‘New Criticism’ – was conceived as a matter of studying the meaning of texts and discourse and the way in which the ‘mass’ media influence cultural values and individual consciousness. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, differences between these approaches to studying texts were debated around the problem of social reproduction and how dominant discourses of a ‘dominant ideology’ were related to broader social form.⁸ Under the umbrella of the linguistic paradigm, media studies has also concerned itself with ‘media’ over ‘medium’ – with the textuality of writing, still and moving images, music and speech – more than with the institutionalized adoption of these media in broadcast and network settings.⁹ Together with the related discipline of cultural studies, media studies has been a discipline which has invariably confined questions of identity (individuality and ‘the subject’) as well as questions of power, ideology and community to the great model of language and the frameworks of understanding that have derived from the influence of the ‘Copernican revolution’ in the humanities inaugurated by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the turn of the twentieth century (see Chapter 2).

With the exception of a few theorists writing throughout the period of the dominance of media studies such as Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord and, to a certain extent, Jean Baudrillard, there was very little attention given to questions of form and medium.¹⁰ It was as though the fascination with the content of ‘the image’ and the discourses surrounding it had somehow concealed the very modes of connection which gave them circulation. Some areas of communication studies, in particular positivist and behaviourist perspectives,¹¹ have examined the interactive processes which are deemed to exist between two speakers – and dyadic models of communication analysing the relation of sender, receiver and message abound (see Chapter 2). However, the social implications of the actual structures of communication mediums (network and broadcast) have received relatively little attention (save exceptions such as the above).

From the early 1990s onwards, a few years after the Internet began its now infamous exponential growth, the theoretical necessity of analysing the social implications of communication ‘mediums’ had become paramount, if not unavoidable. It was as though, by the turn of a key, there had been a transformation in the opportunity to understand the integrative dimensions of media that aren’t subordinate simply to linguistic derivatives. It was as if media studies had been waiting for an historical object – the Internet – in order to acquire the appropriate lens for understanding communication as medium.¹²

The consequences of this theoretical period of change were that, firstly, some of the early ‘medium’ theorists like McLuhan and Innis began to be, and are still being, reclaimed (see Chapter 3). Secondly, new distinctions are being made to reflect the renewed importance of distinguishing

between 'form and content' such as 'ritual' versus transmission accounts of communication. The understanding of communication as 'ritual' is a radical paradigm shift from the hegemonic status of 'transmission' views of communication, which all but saturated communication theory for the most part of the twentieth century. Put simply, ritual views of communication contend that individuals exchange understandings not out of self-interest nor for the accumulation of information but from a need for communion, commonality and fraternity (see Carey, 1989). Following this approach, transmission models of communication, on the other hand, view communication as an instrumental act – the sending and receiving of messages in ways which individual actors are largely in rational control of.

The latter model of communication, which has in the main dominated communication theory, has been critiqued, either implicitly or explicitly, by philosophers of language who have attacked the identitarian, essentialist, 'logocentric' and 'phonocentric' underpinnings of such a model (see Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Kristeva, Lacan). The project of Jacques Derrida, for example, has been to criticize the idea that language affords a stable stock of meanings for which it is the job of any particular communication to convey. To characterize communication in this way, as '*a transmission charged with making pass, from one subject to another, the identity of a signified object*' (Derrida, 1981: 23), is to make all kinds of metaphysical investments in the derivation of meaning and the privileging of communication agents as rational, autonomous selves. These assumptions are radically criticized by Derrida and we will return to them in trying to understand the way in which he claims they are tied to variations in contexts of communication. At the same time it will be possible to see how Derrida's work is also celebratory of a second media age, because the latter's apparent open-endedness unmasks the 'metaphysics of presence' that is able to operate in the more restricted (but never totally) contextual setting of broadcast forms of communication.

However, for the most part, whilst philosophical 'deconstructions' of essentialism are instructive, they have also, it is argued, been overstated. Instead of only examining the way meaning works within texts, this book will focus on how technological infrastructures of communication also need to be examined for an understanding of forms of connection, social integration and community. These material changes, it is argued, also offer a challenge to essentialism, and make it harder to sustain. Hence the need for communication theory which can not only challenge the 'media studies' paradigm, but also show how it is coming to be recast. At the same time, however, media studies, as a theoretical domain concerning itself with the first media age and as harbinger of 'content analysis', remains relevant to the fact that broadcast and the nature of spectacle in modern society are integral to social organization in advanced capitalist societies.

The first and second media age – the historical distinction

The commitment to the idea of a 'second media age' is one that had been gaining ground by the middle of the 1990s with an array of texts – some utopian, others pessimistic concerning the rise of Internet culture and the concomitant demise of broadcast or 'media' culture. Such literature, exemplified by the publication of Mark Poster's book *The Second Media Age* in 1995, has exhibited either a kind of enthralled fascination with the liberating social possibilities of new technology, or, conversely, has encouraged us to rethink what older technologies mean for social processes. But the idea of a second media age had been gaining ground during the 1980s in embryonic form within rubric notions of the information society which was somehow different from simply 'media society'. Indeed the discipline of 'media studies' has become far more ambiguous as its object of study has been made much more indeterminate by the transformations that are currently underway. The term 'media' itself, traditionally centred on the idea of 'mass media', is addressed in the United States by the discipline of 'mass communications'. But media studies (and mass communication studies) in its traditional form can no longer confine itself to broadcast dynamics, and in contemporary university courses it is being subsumed by the more generic scholarship of communication studies – where the accommodation of the distinction between first and second media age is able to be best made.

However, the formalization of the distinction between these two kinds of era has, I would argue, received its greatest momentum in the wake of the domestic take-up of the Internet from the early 1990s. Since that time we have seen a plethora of literature taking over bookshop shelves dealing with everything from technical guides to interactive computing to numerous interpretive texts about the influence the Internet will have on our lives. It is also implicit in a range of journalistic writings in the mid-1990s including Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1994), George Gilder's *Life After Television* (1994), Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* (1995) and the corporate musing of Bill Gates in *The Road Ahead* (1996), but also in other, more critical texts like Poster's, Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), Pierre Lévy's *Cyberculture* (2001) and various collections like Steven Jones' *Cybersociety* (1995) or David Porter's *Internet Culture* (1997), culminating in the compilation of readers by the late 1990s (Bell and Kennedy, 2000; Gauntlett, 2000; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort, 2003). Not surprisingly, a 'new media age' had also come to feature in numerous texts regarding media policy, in claims that broadcast was rapidly dying and that regulation of digital media forms presented the only remaining policy challenge (see, e.g., Steemers, [1996] 2000). At the same time the heralding of a 'new Athenian age of democracy' by Al Gore, and Third Way political advisers in Britain, became very audible.¹³

By the end of the 1990s the second media age thesis had rapidly become an orthodoxy, and entered the mainstream of New Media thinking.

In Australia, for example, Trevor Barr's account of the Internet, 'Electronic Nomads: Internet as Paradigm' (Barr, 2000), exclaims: 'The Internet's extraordinary growth and global reach of the platform in recent years, the passion of its adherents and its maze of unresolved issues all qualify it as a paradigm shift' (117). Whilst wanting to specify whether or not the Internet will offer 'promise or predicament at the dawning of a new communications era' (144), Barr maintains:

An inherent strength of the Internet is its anarchy compared to the established modes of ownership and control of traditional media: there are no direct equivalents to the 'gatekeepers' of content and form which characterize the major media of the past few decades, the press and broadcasting. Everyone who has access to the Net can become their own author, expressing their own sense of identity to other Net users scattered throughout the world. (143–4)

Even non-specialist media thinkers like Manuel Castells (1996) have taken up a version of a second media age thesis as a critique of McLuhan, arguing that the onset of cable and digital television audiences has brought about more personalized and interactive media culture: 'While the audience received more and more diverse raw material from which to construct each person's image of the universe, the McLuhan Galaxy was a world of one-way communication, not of interaction' (341).

It is the 'interactive society' which has replaced such a world, according to Castells, in the wake of a symbolically transitional period of 'multi-media' which has given way to a 'new system of communication, based in the digitized, networked integration of multiple communication modes' (374). Castells claims that only within this integrated system do messages gain communicability and socialization: All other messages are reduced to individual imagination or to increasingly marginalized face-to-face sub-cultures. From society's perspective, *electronically-based communication (typographic, audiovisual, or computer-mediated) is communication*' (374).

Castells is saying that whilst non-electronically based communication may still exist, it is progressively losing its status. This makes access to the 'interactive society' a crucial question, as the world becomes divided into the 'interacting' and the 'interacted':

... the price to pay for inclusion in the system is to adapt to its logic, to its language, to its points of entry, to its encoding and decoding. This is why it is critical for different kinds of social effects that there should be the development of a multinodal, horizontal network of communication, of Internet type, instead of a centrally dispatched multimedia system, as in the video-on-demand configuration. (374)

These characterizations have not changed much from the arguments of the early to mid-1990s. Early second media age thinkers, Poster, Gilder,

Rheingold, Negroponte and Lévy, are quite coherent in expressing the way in which they claim that the Internet (and interactive technologies in general) enables quite a radical departure from prior forms of social bond. For them the Internet is redemptive in the way it is said to liberate individuals from centralized apparatuses of information, be they state- or corporate-controlled, as exemplified by television. George Gilder (1994), who prides himself with having predicted the demise of television and the birth of the telecomputer as far back as 1989 (101), singles out television, 'the Cathode Ray Tube' and the wireless technology of radio as instrumental in the formation of a pervasive medium empire, the "'master-slave" architecture' of 'a few broadcast centers' that 'originate programs for millions of passive receivers or "dumb terminals"' (26). By contrast 'the much richer, interactive technologies of the computer age' will enhance individualism and creativity rather than mass culture and passivity (23, 32). For Negroponte (1995), decentralization is a major feature of what he calls the post-information age.¹⁴ In providing an alternative to the homogenizing structure of broadcast communication, the Internet is said to offer almost unlimited democratic freedom to track down information, to correspond with thousands of other enfranchised individuals and spontaneously form virtual communities which would not otherwise be possible.

For Lévy (2001), the Internet is a 'Universal without Totality' (91–103), creating a knowledge space where, '[a]s cyberspace grows it becomes more "universal" and the world of information less totalizable' (91). But one of its most important aspects is that it provides an alternative to mass media, to 'communications systems that distribute organized, programmatic information from a central point to a large number of anonymous, passive and isolated receivers' (223).¹⁵

This model of decentred association is said to be seductive for thousands of consumers who have access to the Internet insofar as it spectacularly overcomes what is seen to be the tyranny of the first media age – broadcast media. Where broadcast media are characterized as a relation of the one to the many, as one-way, centralized communication, they are said to be fragmentary of (geographic) communities in denying interactivity and homogenizing cultural form.

For Poster and Rheingold, who are examined more thoroughly in Chapter 3, an analysis of the architecture of cyberspace relations shows – they claim – that the newer, extended electronic public sphere defies the kinds of instrumental and monopolized centralized control that have traditionally been accompanied by practices of normalization and regulation wrought by broadcast (Rheingold) and the culture industry (Poster). This view persists in much of the second media age literature despite the fact that the Internet has itself become a frontier of monopoly capital.¹⁶

Compared to broadcast forms of media, the Internet is said to offer free-ranging possibilities of political expression and rights of electronic assembly which encounter far fewer constraints, whether technical, political or social. The celebrated democratizing character of the Internet is

Table 1.1 The historical distinction between the first and second media age

First media age (broadcast)	Second media age (interactivity)
Centred (few speak to many)	Decentred (many speak to many)
One-way communication	Two-way communication
Predisposed to state control	Evades state control
An instrument of regimes of stratification and inequality	Democratizing: facilitates universal citizenship
Participants are fragmented and constituted as a mass	Participants are seen to retain their individuality
Influences consciousness	Influences individual experience of space and time

rooted in its decentralized technical structure. Based on ‘packet-switching’, a technical network system developed by Rand Corporation in the 1960s, messages, images and sounds on the Internet are always sent in a fragmented fashion by way of multiple routes. This principle was Rand’s solution to information held in a database being destroyed in military conflict. Information is always on the move, fluctuating between decipherability and indecipherability and indeterminate in its mobility. Because of this the Internet cannot be controlled either technically (by hackers or programmers) or politically (by states or corporations).¹⁷ In the twentieth century, which was characterized by the control of broadcast apparatuses by governments and corporations, the Internet was also popularly seen to represent an unlimited technical medium for the reconstitution of a ‘public sphere’. As Table 1.1 suggests, the public sphere enabled by the second media age restores a two-way reciprocity that is otherwise seen to be denied by one-way communications of broadcast. In addition, the constituency addressed by broadcast is constructed as, and so regarded as, an undifferentiated and largely indeterminate mass, whilst on the Internet the individuality of communicants is redeemed.

In this historical typology, the periodization of an ‘age’ or era of interactivity – the digital age, the age of the Internet or the second media age – is almost always contrasted with a dark age of mass media.¹⁸ It is a particular expression of an historicist discourse on technology which fetishizes the new and accentuates any differences there might be from the old.¹⁹

The critique of broadcast is remarkably coherent, whether it be from liberals concerned with public choice and free speech (like Gilder, 1994; Negroponte, 1994; and Rheingold, 1994) or from those employing Marxist frameworks (post-Frankfurt School), or postmodern concerns for the rhizome (as in Deleuze) or the shadow of the silent majority overcoming the simulation machine (Baudrillard, 1982).²⁰

Celebrants of the Internet herald its claimed democratic and redemptive virtues either as being able to re-establish lost communities through interactivity or as making possible new kinds of community that transcend

modern forms of state control. To quote from Poster (1997), who is working from a broadly postmodernist point of view, the Internet connotes 'a democratization' of subject constitution because 'the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications' (222). This is to be contrasted with the broadcast media as a medium of centralized, unilinear communication: 'The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, film-making, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production' (222).²¹

Further, insofar as the electronically produced space of the Internet displaces institutional habitats, it breaks down hierarchies of race, gender and ethnicity (see Poster, 2000: 148–70). By allowing the construction of oppositional subjectivities hitherto excluded from the public sphere, the Internet's inherently decentralized form is heralded as its most significant feature – allowing the collision and superimposition of signifiers and semiotic worlds in which the some sense of an authoritative meaning – a *logos* or a grand narrative – can no longer be sustained. This, Poster argues, allows the Internet to subvert rationalized and logocentric forms of political authority, which has imbued the European model of institutional life since the Middle Ages. As cyberspace identities are experienced in much more mobile and fluid forms, the public sphere enlarges in the midst of state apparatuses but, at the same time, acts to undermine statist forms of control. This tension is partly played out in those state-originating anxieties concerned as much with the encryption of information against cyber-terrorism as with the use of communications technologies in surveillance.

Broadcast mediums and network mediums – problems with the historical typology

The conviction that we are coming to live in a post-broadcast society, envisaged in the claim that the Internet is going to eclipse broadcast media, is one that has been made by journalists and cyber-theorists alike. The idea that an entire communicational epoch can be tied to key technologies – print technologies, broadcast technologies or computerized interaction – is central to making the distinction between the first and second media age. The distinction is relative rather than absolute, as we shall see, owing to the fact that the significance of the interaction promised by the second media age is defined almost exclusively against the said rigidity and unilinearity of broadcast.

At an empirical level, the distinction between the two epochs is supported by statistics regarding the rapid take-up of interactive CITs, to