

The Times of Communication History

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In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills wrote that conferences on the state of the field ought to consist of scholars describing the problems and blockages in their research, rather than standing up and declaiming their finished work.² Following his suggestion, I want to discuss some problems I have encountered in my own writing and reading of media histories across disciplines. We are fortunate to be working at a time when the history of communication—broadly construed—is a concern that cuts across many different academic fields. Yet all work bears the marks of its generation. And our generation seems to have settled into two habits worth reconsidering: writing history in the short to medium term; and presentism as a justification for writing and thinking about the past, both near and far.

Fernand Braudel broke historical time into three dimensions: the event (the short term), the conjuncture (the medium term), and the *longue durée* (the long term).³ Although his scheme is far from perfect, it is heuristic. For the most part, recent histories of media have argued over short and medium term matters; there remains a good deal of consensus regarding the *longue durée*. This consensus offers a variety of accounts of

¹ <http://sternetworks.org> | jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca My apologies for the light citation in this piece. I am away from my library and can't give proper page numbers or look things up.

² C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

³ Fernand Braudel, "History and Social Science," in *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

modernity as the turning point in communication history. In the previous generation, writers like Marshall McLuhan posited the invention of the printing press as the key turning point that separated antiquity from modernity. For them, the press occasioned a kind of sensory transformation to a literate, visual culture that would lead to the rise of science, reason, enlightenment politics and eventually capitalism.⁴ We are intimately familiar with the oral-literate-electronic triad, which pops up everywhere from introductory textbooks to the latest high theory. Although some of us are likely to still cite any number of continental philosophers who buy into this fiction more or less whole cloth⁵, few currently-writing historians of communication would subscribe to so simple a narrative if it was offered to them as a fresh proposition. One can imagine the objections (or at least I can, since I have made them⁶): Essentialist! Technologically Determinist! Racist! Eurocentric! And yet these epithets, though satisfying in a cathartic way, beg the

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, "Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath," in *Explorations in Communication, an Anthology*, ed. Edmund Snow ed Carpenter, Marshall McLuhan, and ed (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

⁵ Foucault and Derrida, two of my favorite writers, seem to repeat the litany without much reflection. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973), Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). For a fuller account of this tendency in French thought, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). It is worth noting that the German tradition, more directly influenced by Innis and McLuhan, modifies its account of modernity but not what preceded it. See, e.g., Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone-Film-Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Several more recent works by authors like Bernhard Siegert appear to deal with earlier periods but are not yet available in English. Other writers have simply registered pleas against generalization, which leaves earlier generalizations intact. See, e.g., Siegfried Zielinski, "Media Archaeology," *CTheory*, no. gal11 (1996).

⁶ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

intellectual questions that lie behind the impulse to gesture to the *longue durée*. Even in its most poststructuralist guise, historical writing remains a narrative field. There may be deeper or more complicated explanations, but the persistence of the modernity story could also simply be for a lack of alternatives.

So, instead of simply pointing out others' shortcomings, allow me to present some of my own. In *the Audible Past*, my initial way out of the mess was to make two moves: first, I noted that "modernity" was an operative term in the discourses of the historical actors I was considering. Since "how they were modern" was an open question for middle class and elite urban populations in the 19th and 20th centuries, I couldn't avoid the term. Second, I abandoned the racialist history of the senses posited by the so-called Canadian School (or Toronto School if you're in Quebec) and moved outward to more social-historical definitions of modernity from writers like Marshall Berman and Mattei Calinescu. This allowed me to paint a broad historical frame and to achieve some analytical distance from my sources so that I could claim my own periodizations without simply parroting whatever my sources said about their time. This second strategy appears to be quite common in current historiography. Very few communication histories cover periods of 100 years or longer, and those that do tend to partake of the modernity story in order to pursue some other goal.⁷ The problem is that while we have subjected relatively recent history to fairly rigorous rewriting, previous generations' grand narratives about *what the modern age replaced* remain largely untroubled and intact.

⁷ E.G., Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication*, trans. Susan Emmanuel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

To put it another way: if the span of media history in human history amounts to approximately 40,000 years, we have yet to really seriously reconsider the first 39,400 years. Although this sounds antiquarian and esoteric in orientation, it is not. Ideas about orality and literacy, for instance, are largely gleaned from Greek philosophers' writings about the historical importance of writing. Although those texts are hallowed in the academy and still confer (perhaps too much) prestige upon those who quote them in a clever fashion, taking them at their word about the importance of writing, or about the relation of writing to speech is similar to picking up a *Wired Magazine* and proclaiming that it is an empirical description of the social significance of computing over the past half century. Anyone who quoted *Wired* in such way would, I hope, receive some strong criticism from mentors or reviewers. Yet it is a myth that 50-year old readings of the Greeks (and Christian theology, though that is another story) are our only mode of access to antiquity. Fields like classics, archaeology, urban history, art and architectural history and the history of musical instruments are undergoing major changes in how they do their work, approaching historical evidence in new ways and dealing with the theoretical developments of the past half-century. It is perhaps time to engage or re-engage with the critical strains of these fields. The payoff for doing so would not be to simply correct errors or fill in gaps in the record. On the contrary, our most popular bases for critique of the so-called modern age rest on a wide range of assumptions about a detechnologized, pastoral past from which it differs. To tell a different story about the deep past would change the cherished narratives from Habermas, Foucault, Marx and others with which we prop up our critiques of modern (there's that word again) media institutions and from which we build our implied or explicit normative models that form the bases of those

critiques. But to even begin asking these questions, we need to imagine a media historiography that can operate in the space of centuries and millennia, and not just decades.⁸

This raises the second problem that we need to overcome as historians, which is presentism. When Hayden White wrote in his “Burden of History” that the responsibility of the past was to the present, it was a radical and politicizing move, because it argued that histories are responsible for the descriptions they render, and that the narratives they present are never given in a neutral space.⁹ But today it is almost impossible to pick up a media history of any time period or location other than our own without some pained reference to how a past conjuncture sheds light on our changing contemporary digital mediascape. I’m sure some actually do, and I am sure that some of this is simple marketing. How else are you supposed to get people interested in the past? But often, presentism is actually a very depoliticizing move, for it presupposed that we can in some simple way assess the historical importance of our own conjuncture ahead of time (that usually hasn’t worked out so well in other times and places); and it assumes a very narrow range of concerns as to what media history can actually be *about*. Much as I have benefited from my encounter with the history of technology (and I would recommend spending some time with that literature to anyone who supposes that communication technologies are automatically “special cases” in technological or

⁸ Braudel posits a connection between temporal and geographic scale—that the longer term requires a broader geographic focus while the short term implies shorter focus. While we can see that pattern roughly in some media histories, we should be careful. Deep historiography would no doubt require undoing some of the Eurocentric conceits that still subtend our field, but contemporary work, especially on questions of infrastructure or policy, must also sometimes be expansive in geographic scale.

⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

cultural history), the presentist move at the moment is perhaps too narrowly focused on the gear. Here, we actually are believing *Wired* to some extent.

Media history can be about any number of important questions, and the weight of the reference to the present is perhaps too much for it to bear. Instead, a more politicized historiography would begin with concrete questions that it seeks to answer, and those may just as easily be philosophical or normative questions as they are questions about whether iPhones are really all that revolutionary or whether the current wave of deregulation is or isn't just like some earlier stage of capitalism. Presentism demands that historians know ahead of time why their histories matter, which ultimately banalizes the work.

Perhaps the strongest pull in this direction comes in that emergent field of New Media History. After balking at professors who would end “contemporary history” courses around 1960 (my sincere apologies to Professor Kliger in “Humanities of the Modern World, Part V” for thinking bad thoughts behind his back), I now realize they actually understood something. The weight of the present presses down most heavily on the near past. We think we know it better and have more direct access to it as intellectuals. But it is possible that this is not so. In my own current project, which is a 90-year history of the mp3 format, I constantly run up against the weight of the pre-constructed: from audiences whose questions are shaped by press coverage to industry players who have a clearly political agenda for my history that is not my own. For me, the mp3 matters not because of the current debates around sound quality or file sharing (though I offer comments on both) but because it points backward to the ways in which the development of 20th century telecommunications institutions—especially the Bell

monopoly—guided research into what it means to hear and what it means to be human. The first challenge I face in presenting this material to new audiences is to introduce doubt where there is none, absence where there is imagined presence. These problems are particularly acute with the recent past, but they also point to the predicament of the field in general. We live among our media, so we assume we know what they can and do mean because we tend to generalize from our own limited sense of our experience.

But it is the historian's responsibility to explore other possible meanings and connections. Because direct experience is so distant from the historical document, historiography has often managed without it. Death, distance, difference are the basic conditions of possibility for historical meaning. Perhaps this is a plea for some of the "distance" valued by previous generations of social scientists (without giving up on the current generation's commitment to politics). We may turn to the past for answers to questions that trouble us, but that does not mean that we should be so predisposed to start those inquiries with that which is closest or most known to us. Media history still carries Hayden White's burden: it is still responsible to something beyond itself, otherwise it lapses into positivism, cumulativism and "history for history's sake." Perhaps this is still a kind of presentism enterprise. But it is at most an allegorical presentism, one that refuses the easy isomorphisms that currently justify so much work. The power of good historiography is to dismantle the obvious and to present non-obvious conclusions about the past. We should be equally wary of the obvious or easy justifications for our work, for they concede too much.

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