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Media evolution and cultural change

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British colonial personnel first recorded the history of the state of Gonja in northern Ghana at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, the Gonja explained the origin of the seven divisional chiefdoms of their territory by recounting how their founding father, Ndewura Jakpa, had traveled down from the Niger Bend in search of gold, becoming chief of the state after conquering its indigenous peoples, and placing his seven sons as rulers of seven territorial divisions. Yet, when the history of Gonja was recorded again sixty years later, following some territorial shifts, the story of origin had changed. Jakpa's family, as told at that time by the Gonja, had shrunk to only five sons, conveniently matching the then current five territorial divisions. As anthropologist Jack Goody and literary historian Ian Watt (1963) claim, such "automatic adjustments" of history to existing social relations were accomplished relatively easily by the Gonja because they functioned within an oral rather than a written tradition. Once the talk and memories of seven Jakpa sons faded, there were no written artifacts to contradict the new narrative of five sons. The spread of writing in a culture, argue Goody and Watt, has "consequences" that cannot be reduced to the content of what is written.

We human beings often distinguish ourselves from animals by pointing to the complex manner in which we communicate. Yet, most scholars have been hesitant to explore the intricate ways in which changes in the forms of communication—such as the addition of writing to oral societies, the addition of printing to scribal societies, the addition of radio to print cultures, and the subsequent wide use of television, the internet, and other electronic media—may encourage new forms of social organization and undermine old ones. Even in the field of media studies itself, the primary focus has been on the safer and simpler view of media as relatively passive conduits that deliver "messages." Most media research has focused on topics such as how audiences perceive and respond to media content or how political and economic forces shape dominant media messages. Content-focused research has led to many significant findings, but it has ignored larger questions about the ways in which changes in media, apart from messages, may alter the textures and forms of social life. At the same time, individual scholars from a variety of fields—including history, anthropology, literary studies, the classics, political economy, and legal studies—have tackled these larger questions. I have called their approach "medium

theory" (Meyrowitz 1985: 16; 2009). I use the singular "medium" to highlight their focus on the distinct characteristics of each medium (or each type of media) and how those characteristics may encourage or constrain forms of interaction and social organization.

Medium theory can be divided into microlevel and macrolevel questions. Microlevel medium theory explores the consequences of the choice of one medium over another in a particular situation, such as initiating or ending a personal relationship, applying for a job, commanding troops, or interacting with one's children. Macrolevel medium theory explores larger questions about the ways in which changes in media have influenced modes of thinking, patterns of social organization, status differences, value systems, collective memory, and even the physical layout of the built environment. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the work of medium theorists. Then I outline four major communication/cultural phases as conceived of by macrolevel medium theory. And, finally, I describe a few key limits of the medium-theory perspective.

The medium theorists

The idea of studying media in themselves gained prominence in the 1960s with the publication of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1994 [1964]). McLuhan's provocative puns and aphorisms helped to make him a media celebrity, with many passionate adherents and many savage critics. Most scholars fell into the latter camp. Indeed, the negative assessments of McLuhan's style of argument and bold claims have, unfortunately, tended to diminish, rather than increase, scholarly work in this area.

The history of medium theory, however, is much deeper and broader than McLuhan's work. Socrates (469–399 BC) was perhaps the earliest medium theorist. He argued that written communications were profoundly different from spoken ones. Writing, claimed Socrates, would alter humans' use of their memories, decrease interactive dialogue in favor of extended monologues, and lead to new forms of communication that were not tailored to specific local audiences. Socrates' negative assessment of these changes is mostly out of step with Western thought concerning the positive virtues of literacy. That evaluative disjuncture, combined with the irony that Socrates' critiques of writing survive only because his most famous student, Plato, wrote them down in the *Phaedrus*, has tended to mute appreciation for the basic accuracy of Socrates' descriptions of the differences between two forms of communication.

About nineteen hundred years after Socrates' death, the inventor of printing based on movable type, Johannes Gutenberg, expressed awareness of how different printing was from writing and how the religious information monopoly of the Catholic Church was being threatened as a result. The slow copying of texts by religious scribes was no match for the speed and accuracy of the printing press. In the closing inscription for a religious encyclopedia in 1460, Gutenberg boasted that it "has been printed and accomplished without the help of reed, stylus, or pen," that is, without the help of the Church's scribes. Gutenberg also hinted that his own invention was operating in the service of God, "who often reveals to the lowly what he hides from the wise" (quoted in Steinberg 1974: 19). Gutenberg's assessment of the potential impact of printing on the hierarchal control over religious information was made manifest by Martin Luther and his followers in the early sixteenth century. They employed the new communication technology to

circulate the Bible and religious commentaries and critiques in the "lowly" languages of the people, thereby orchestrating the first mass-media public-relations campaign and splitting the Church through the Protestant Reformation.

In the nineteenth century, an implicit medium-theory perspective underlay the birth of the field of sociology, whose founders understood that the influences of machines of mass production (the "media") could not be reduced to an inventory of the products (the "content") produced. Rather, they argued, the new means of production had to be measured in terms of new forms of social relations, such as urbanization and bureaucratization.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Scottish scientist and urban planner Patrick Geddes (1904) advanced the idea that interactions between social processes and the environment (both natural and constructed) brought about social change. Lewis Mumford (1934), a disciple of Geddes, explored the impact and mythology of "the machine," including the impact of the printing press. In the 1930s, gestalt theorist and film enthusiast Rudolf Arnheim (1957) articulated a medium-theory argument to defend the motion picture as an art form against critics who said that film was merely a mechanical reproduction of reality. In his *Materialtheorie*, Arnheim argued that "artistic and scientific descriptions of reality are cast in molds that derive not so much from the subject matter itself as from the properties of the medium—or *Material*—employed" (1957: 2).

In the 1930s, Canadian political economist Harold Adams Innis began to explore how his research on the fur trade and on the pathways and waterways that shaped the flow of staples could be extended into an exploration of the flow of information through different media. Innis' interest in economic monopolies led him to theorize that the characteristics of some media (such as very complex writing systems) supported hierarchal control over information, whereas other media forms encouraged more egalitarian communication systems. He also argued that different media were biased toward either lasting for a long time ("time-biased" media such as stone carvings) or traveling easily over great distances ("space-biased" media such as papyrus and paper), and he linked these contrasting biases to the differences between cultures that maintained stability over time in limited territory and empires that controlled large territories but were less stable and long-lasting. In two dense books written shortly before his death, *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis drew on these and similar insights to rewrite the history of civilization from the perspective of the impact of media on cultural forms.

Innis' theories of media were among the influences that led literary scholar and budding media theorist Marshall McLuhan to turn away from his analyses of advertising content (1951) to the study of media themselves. McLuhan played down Innis' concerns with political power and monopolies, however, emphasizing instead the ideas that different media altered the balance of the senses and changed patterns of perception and thought. Writing and printing, argued McLuhan, gave tribal peoples an "eye for an ear," in that writing emphasized the lineality of visual perspective over simultaneous, multi-sensory experience. Although McLuhan personally cherished literature, his dispassionate scholarly assessment was that electronic media were making print "obsolescent." He meant this not in the sense of ending book publishing or reading, but in the sense of electronic patterns undermining the "Gutenberg galaxy" of print-inspired forms, such as linear thinking, nationalism, standardization, fixed identity and narrowly defined "jobs," assembly-line mass-production and mass-education, cause-and-effect thinking, and fragmentation of knowledge into distinct disciplines. McLuhan tried to embody the changes

he envisioned by using non-linear "probes" and trans-disciplinary arguments to investigate media and cultural change. Such approaches did not sit well with many of the guardians of literate modes of thinking and academic disciplinarity. With his often-misunderstood pun "the *medium* is the message," he chided media researchers for being too focused on media content and paying insufficient attention to the influences of each form of media, including the "change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan 1994 [1964]: 8). In an electronic age, McLuhan argued, we often become "discarnate" beings whose communications are increasingly disembodied. McLuhan also claimed that electronic media were "retribalizing" the new generation and encouraging humans everywhere to become emotionally involved in affairs happening around the world in the electronically facilitated "global village."

Innis and McLuhan are unique in terms of their boldness of argument and the breadth of world history and human experience that they attempt to analyze. But many other scholars have offered more focused explorations of aspects of media evolution and cultural change. The shift from orality to literacy has been explored by J.C. Carothers (1959), Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1963), Eric Havelock (1963), and Walter Ong (1982). They suggest that literacy fostered new forms of social organization, modes of consciousness, conceptions of "knowledge," and individuality. Robert Logan (1986) argues that the phonetic alphabet, more than other writing systems (and particularly when amplified through printing), encouraged the development of abstract thinking that led to codified law, monotheism, formal, logic, and science—in short, the main hallmarks of Western civilization.

H.J. Chaytor (1945) and Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) have explored the consequences of the shift from script literacy to print literacy. Chaytor argues that printing altered the psychological interaction of words and thought, created a new sense of "authorship" and intellectual property, reshaped literary style, and fostered the growth of nationalistic feelings. Eisenstein's massive study of printing supports Chaytor's claims and also presents detailed evidence and argument that the printing press revolutionized Western Europe by facilitating the Protestant Reformation and the growth of modern science.

The spread of electronic media has led to a surge of interest in medium theory. Building on his careful analyses of earlier communication shifts, Walter Ong (1967) argues that electronic media create a "secondary orality" that retrieves some aspects of the "primary orality" of preliterate societies, while also being distinct from all earlier forms of communication. Historian Daniel Boorstin (1973) compares and contrasts technological revolutions with political revolutions, and he describes how electronic media level time and space and reshape conceptions of history, nationality, and progress by "mass-producing the moment" and creating "repeatable" experiences. In my role-system version of medium theory (Meyrowitz 1985), I argue that electronic media tend to reshape everyday behaviors associated with group identity, socialization, and hierarchy by undermining print-era patterns of what different types of people know about, and relative to, each other. Electronic media, I claim, foster changes in roles by providing more shared access to information, breaking down the distinction between our public and private spheres, and weakening the age-old connection between physical location and social experience. Ethan Katsh (1989) details how electronic means of storing and processing information undermine print-era notions of legal precedent and monopoly over legal knowledge. Digital media, according to Manuel Castells (1996), facilitate the global dominance of "the network," an ancient form of connection that once could exist only on a small scale. In a medium-theory approach to changes in international relations,

Ronald Deibert (1997) reviews millennia of history to show how the "chance fitness" between the characteristics of a new medium and particular pre-existing social forces helped to bring those "media-favored" processes from the margin of society to the center. Deibert then demonstrates how the era of hypermediation is similarly facilitating major shifts in world order toward "de-territorialized communities, fragmented identities, transnational corporations, and cyberspatial flows of finance" (1997: ix). Mark Poster (2006) scrutinizes the cultural consequences of the unprecedented relations between humans and information machines. Among the many scholars studying the social ramifications of mobile media is Rich Ling (2008), who describes how mobile communications reshape the patterns of social cohesion and foster what he calls "bounded solidarity." In his *New New Media*, Paul Levinson (2009) details how blogging, Wikipedia, YouTube, FaceBook, and other media in which consumers are also producers are altering the texture of social and political life. This work extends Levinson's (1997) earlier analyses of the ways in which the development of new media throughout history has interacted with human decision-making and planning.

Although the above theorists would not necessarily consider themselves to be members of a common intellectual tradition, their work, when assembled into a single narrative, presents a surprisingly coherent and consistent view of the ways in which the use of various media of communication may contribute to large-scale cultural change. In the next section, I provide an outline of four communication/cultural phases as conceived of within medium theory. I have space here to present only broad sketches of each phase, stripped of nuance and qualification. Yet, the general exercise offers a preliminary sense of the promises and challenges of this perspective.

Cultural phases *à la* medium theory

Traditional oral cultures

In oral societies, sound and speech dominate as the forms of interaction. The culture's history, philosophy, and mores must be stored in memory and conveyed orally, supported by embodied action, song, dance, and ritual. This living storage system and biological delivery process tie members closely to each other. To facilitate memorization and transmission, cultural content is often put in the form of rhythmic poetry and mythic narratives that consist of familiar stories with formulaic actions and stock phrases. Because oral communication requires physical co-presence, oral cultures have few if any means of interacting with the experience or thinking of those who do not share the same time/space arena. Such societies are "conservative" in the sense of working hard to conserve what they already know and are. People from other places are perceived as profoundly "strange." Moreover, the modern notion of the "individual" as the prime social unit has relatively little chance of developing. Members of the society tend to have very similar cultural experiences and knowledge. Novel ideas and complex original arguments can gain little traction because such concepts are difficult to remember (even by the people who develop them) and almost impossible to pass on to many others who have no means beyond memory through which to store them. Indeed, extreme individual creativity would be a potentially destructive force.

Because human beings naturally develop the abilities to utter and understand speech, oral societies have relatively few status distinctions, which would require different sets of

social information and experience. Nomadic oral societies are particularly egalitarian, since they have limited opportunities to separate people of different ages, genders, and other categories into different information systems based on physical segregation. In oral agricultural societies, however, ties to locale make distinctions in status more feasible, since rudimentary separations of physical spheres allow for some segregation of male/female, child/adult, and leader/follower experiences and roles. Yet, even settled oral cultures find it difficult to isolate members into many different spheres. Children as a group can be partially separated from adults as a group, but year-by-year age distinctions are difficult to support.

In oral societies, words are not objects to be viewed or held, but time-bound *events*, much like thunder or a scream. It is difficult for a person to escape spoken words and other sounds in the way that one can look away from visual objects. (Humans have eyelids, but not earlids, and sounds come from all directions, not just from in front of us.) The shapes of the built environment in oral societies tend to mimic these circular contours of sound and hearing. In oral societies, both dwellings and villages are usually round. Oral peoples are always at the center of their communication world, with few opportunities or perceptual tools to stand back from it and analyze it.

The transitional scribal phase

The development of writing begins to change the structure of oral societies. Since writing is not a "natural" human ability, writing systems segregate those who can read and write from those who cannot. Different stages of mastery of writing and reading foster different levels of authority. Moreover, different types of writing systems have different influences. Writing systems that have many complex symbols support greater distinctions in status, whereas simpler writing systems encourage more egalitarian social roles. Additionally, pictographic writing systems (where each object or idea has its own "meaningful" symbol) sustain concrete thinking, whereas phonetic systems (where meaningless symbols represent each sound) tend to promote more abstract thinking.

At first, writing is used to record what was previously only spoken (poetry, dialogue, formulaic myths, etc.). In the long run, however, phonetic writing in particular tends to break down the tribal cohesion of oral societies because it offers a relatively simple way to preserve prose and construct extended strings of connected abstract thought that would be almost impossible for oral peoples to develop, memorize, or transmit to others.

Writing splinters and unites people in new ways. As writing spreads, people who live in the same places begin to know and experience different things, while those who read the same material begin to feel connected to each other regardless of their locations. Yet, the complexity of learning to read and write, combined with the initial scarcity of written materials, means that fledgling literate modes of social organization compete with powerful and enduring oral modes and have limited impact until the development of movable type and the printing press. Indeed, readers of early written texts have difficulty reading without speaking the words aloud.

Modern print culture

Although the Chinese developed the art of printing long before Gutenberg's fifteenth-century invention in Germany, the Chinese ideographic writing system, with thousands of different characters needed even for basic literacy, retards the impact of printing in

that culture. In the phonetically alphabetized West, however, the growing availability of printed materials helps to reorganize social structures based on new patterns of shared and unshared communication. Conceptions of "them" versus "us" change. Literate readers and writers engage with ideas that their illiterate neighbors (and their own young children) cannot hear, speak, or remember, and different readers and writers develop different individual "perspectives." By allowing easy access to social information apart from face-to-face interaction, printing encourages retreat from the surrounding oral community and from extended kinship ties and greater isolation of the nuclear family. Yet, printing also bypasses the local community in the other direction with the development of larger intellectual, political, and religious units. The Protestant Reformation is facilitated by making the Bible and religious commentary and critique widely available in the vernacular, thereby bypassing the Catholic Church's monopoly over direct access to the word of God and to the paths to eternal salvation. The new patterns of sharing and not sharing religious texts foster new patterns of religious unity across vast distances and eras, along with growing disunity among those in the same places at the same time. "Strangers" are increasingly present in one's own midst.

Printing in the vernacular also permits readers to see on a printed page the larger "reality" of what were once only local voices, and this encourages the development of nationalism. Readers feel an abstract unity with all those who share the same language, wherever they may be, rather than feeling connections only to those who share the same concrete local space. Connections based on face-to-face loyalties—such as feudal ties based on oral oaths—yield over time to nation-states based on printed constitutions and other political, social, and legal documents that literally "constitute" the shared conceptions, customs, and laws of the nation.

Unlike the verbal events of oral societies, printed texts encourage the experience of words as objects, spatially fixed on a page. In oral interaction, even a delay of a few seconds in response can seem rude and inappropriate. With print, in contrast, a reader can stare at words, read them at his or her own pace, turn away from them, and re-read them. Most significantly, a reader is able to think about words before forming a reaction to them. And formal written responses can be revised and self-censored multiple times before being shown to other people. Utterances, in contrast, cannot be taken back or erased. These characteristics of reading and writing facilitate the growth of internal dialogue, introspection, and individualistic thinking. Moreover, literate persons' physical, social, and mental positions are no longer exclusively at the center of oral events; they can stand away from the communications of others and develop a more distant, refined, reflective, and individualized "point of view."

Print encourages modes of thinking and social organization that mimic its physical forms. "Rationality," highly valued in a print culture, is structured like the letters of type: step-by-step abstract reasoning along a continuous line of argument and analysis. In a print culture, the simultaneous, overlapping events and expressions of oral interaction must compete with a one-thing-at-a-time and one-thing-after-another world of linear thought. In place of "outmoded" views of human life as involving repeating cycles of nature, society comes to be seen as striving for constant linear development, improvement, and "progress." Visual and linear metaphors pervade modes of discourse: Do you see my point? I follow your line of thinking. "Circular reasoning" is dismissed as deficient.

As the quantity of information explodes in a print culture, features exclusive to print are used to manage the overload—page numbers, alphabetized indexes, cross-referenced

category systems. Print's emphasis on sequence and on the segregation of one thing from another encourages the separation of topics and approaches into different disciplines, along with the ranking of material within each discipline in terms of degrees of mastery. Distinctions in "levels" of reading are seen as tied to natural differences in social identity and status. Modern conceptions of "childhood" and "adulthood" are invented in sixteenth-century Europe, and their spread follows the spread of literate schooling. Schools increasingly segregate children into year-by-year groupings based on different stages of reading skill and step-by-step access to adult information. Distinct literatures for each sex foster greater distinctions in gender roles. Leadership in print societies is based on distance and inaccessibility, delegated authority, and tight control over public image. Roles in businesses are structured via printed organizational charts with narrowly defined job descriptions in rectangular boxes connected by fixed "lines of authority."

New patterns of perception and thought are echoed in the built environment. Habitats evolve from round dwellings in round villages with winding paths to right-angle structures in linear rows on straight streets in grid-like cities. Outdoor marketplaces with non-linear arrangements evolve into stores with straight rows and labeled sections. Production of goods moves from holistic crafting to fragmented steps on assembly lines. Print-era classrooms are constructed with chairs bolted to the floors in rows that resemble the evenly spaced letters and words fixed on a printed page. Such arrangements of classrooms, offices, and other spaces generally discourage informal oral interactions, even among those in the same space.

Social passages—such as birth, aging, mental decline, and death—are increasingly denaturalized and removed from the center of community and family life and placed in isolated institutions. The physical and social membranes around such institutions thicken and harden as print culture matures. The school, hospital, prison, military barracks, and factory become highly distinct settings with restricted access and distinct rules and roles. The people within a single chamber of a single institution (fifth graders, assembly-line workers, bank tellers, etc.) are increasingly viewed as standardized interchangeable parts, while those in one institution (or in one subdivision of an institution) and those in another institution (or in another subdivision of the same institution) are increasingly seen as very different from each other. The world comes to be seen as naturally layered and segmented, with a distinct place for every thing and for every body, and with every thing and body in its designated place.

Postmodern global electronic culture

As with earlier communication shifts, the use of electronic media takes time to spread and saturate societies before having significant and visible influences on social forms. Indeed, the harbingers of a new media era, the telegraph and telephone, come into use as print culture is reaching its full power, with the push for universal literacy and the dominance of print-encouraged forms of thought and social organization.

In the long run, however, electronic media such as radio, television, the computer, the internet, and mobile devices undermine many features of print culture. They therefore have their most dramatic influences in the West, where the patterns of print culture became so pervasive. Electronic media retrieve some key aspects of oral societies, including the dominance of sensory experiences and the near-simultaneity of action, perception, and reaction. On radio and TV, the word returns as an event, rather than as an object. Unlike print media, which fostered new means of sharing knowledge,

electronic media tend to facilitate new forms of shared experience. Yet the secondary orality of the electronic era differs from pre-literate oral communication in multiple ways. Electronic interactions are not subject to the "natural" limits of time or space. Electronic communications can travel across great distances at the speed of light and they can be preserved beyond the lifetimes of the communicators. Electronic media also bypass the stages and filters of literacy. A child does not need to watch television shows or surf the internet in a particular order in the way that children typically need to read simple books before reading complex books. As a result, children are now routinely exposed to topics that adults spent several centuries trying to hide from children. Even those women who are isolated at home are able to observe closely the "male realms" of culture—business, war, sports, politics—that they have, until recently, been told are off-limits to them. Articulate, street-smart members of a studio audience (or radio listeners who call in) are often able to run circles around a talk-show guest with a Ph.D. or high political status. Electronic experiences thrust all of us among people with whom we have not shared the same literatures, territories, or even languages. As electronic patterns of interaction and experience diverge from the neat lines of print-supported sequences of ranks and hierarchies, there is a decline in the influence of political parties, unions, gender- and age-specific activities, organizational charts, and government and school bureaucracies. Digital media facilitate seemingly random patterns of collaborative and quickly shifting neo-feudal ties irrespective of territorial borders and traditional social groupings. "Wiki" formations, based on the power of open peer collaborations, change the notion of "authoritative" knowledge.

Unlike written and printed words, which emphasize ideas, many electronic media highlight feeling, appearance, and mood. Political and other figures in the public realm are increasingly judged by "dating criteria," in addition to "résumé criteria." That is, rather than primarily asking "What has he accomplished?" or "How well educated is she?" the public is also very concerned with the questions "What's he like?" and "Do I like her?" Even analyses of statements in televised political debates now tend to deemphasize print-era questions such as "Is it true or is it false?" with increasing attention to electronic-era questions such as "What impression does it make?" and "How does it feel?"

Along with the enhanced focus on feeling and emotion and other criteria of evaluation that require no special training, information implosion leads to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, an appreciation for generalism, and the growing sense that everyone has the right to his or her opinion (whether "informed" or not!). The extended single "story line" yields to less linear forms in jokes, literature, and drama. And those who claim to be able to tap into the holistic thinking of the right side of their brains are now often praised as "advanced," rather than being dismissed as unsophisticated and primitive.

As with earlier changes in media, the shape of the built environment evolves to mimic the forms of electronic information flow. Classroom desks are unbolted and often set in circles and there is more mixing of the ages. Office walls are torn down and replaced with semi-open cubicles that let in sound from all directions. Management consultants suggest "quality circles" to improve productivity. Many once marginalized populations are "mainstreamed." The fanciest stores no longer have grid-like rows, but are arranged more like unpredictable pathways in oral villages. The membranes around institutions become more permeable. Birth and death are brought back into many homes at the same time as many birthing and hospice facilities welcome the whole family into spaces

that are decorated to look like home bedrooms. Even those places that remain unchanged in appearance change in function. Sending a child to his or her room no longer serves as a punishment based on ex-communication from social interaction if the child's room is connected to others through radio, television, mobile phone, and computer. Similar changes in the relationship between physical place and social "place" occur for prisoners, minorities, the poor, and others in once informationally remote locations. There are more similarities between people in different locations and institutions, just as there is an acceptance of greater diversity and idiosyncrasy within the same places and institutions. Greater sharing of information and communication options increases demands for (and often tensions over) more equal roles and opportunities in the local, national, and global arenas.

Medium theory in perspective

The grand scope of macrolevel medium theory, as illustrated above, makes the theory difficult to test using typical "social-scientific" methods. This perspective is also susceptible to criticism for relative lack of attention to exceptions and variations within cultures, from culture to culture, and from one era to another. Or, put differently, a great deal more medium-theory work could certainly add needed detail and texture. Even in an electronic age, for example, some boundaries are blurred while others are reinforced; many institutions become more porous, yet others become more defended; and previously marginalized populations are mainstreamed unevenly and incompletely.

Such unevenness of change may be the result of many factors, including the coexistence of many different forms of communication within a culture, which obscures the differences among media. People in literate societies continue to speak, and those in electronic cultures still read, write, and use print. Technological convergence similarly complicates medium-theory work. Mobile phones, as one example, are now also typewriters, mail systems, news sources, voice and music recorders and players, alarm clocks, calendars, photo and video cameras and viewers, global positioning systems, and other devices.

Additionally, most medium theory has focused too narrowly on changes among the middle and upper classes in Western societies. Moreover, in trying to call attention to largely neglected dimensions of media experience, medium theory often commits complementary sins: it gives insufficient consideration to the influence of media content and media production variables and to the political, social, and economic forces that shape the development of new media and constrain the uses of media and the "stories" that are told through all of them (Meyrowitz 1998, 2006, 2008). In this chapter's opening illustration, for example, Goody and Watt (1963) are no doubt correct that the Gonja would have had a more difficult time "forgetting" about two of their founding father's sons had they relied on written rather than oral history. Yet even literate and post-literate cultures have manifested amazing feats of amnesia. Consider, as just one of many possible examples, how the stories in the corporate-owned American news media about the threats posed to the United States by the theocratic government of Iran rarely mention the CIA's role in overthrowing a democratic secular government in Iran in 1953, the US backing of the dictatorial Shah of Iran for twenty-six years, or the US's encouragement and military support for Saddam Hussein's bloody invasion of Iran after the popular Iranian revolt against the Shah in 1979. Similarly, many Americans' narrative

of the origins of the American nation include only fuzzy and incomplete images of how much the country's Founding Fathers relied on African slave labor in support of their lifestyles and their revolution in the name of liberty.

Medium theorists wisely explore the under-studied role of media as distinct social environments and information systems. This perspective is essential to understanding one of the variables that influence the evolution of cultural forms. Yet medium theory is best used to supplement, rather than displace, other explorations of media, including analyses of the role of media as "disinformation systems" and as tools of both collective memory and collective amnesia.

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