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WHAT IS NEW MEDIA?

Defining New Media Isn't Easy

By Bailey Socha and Barbara Eber-Schmid

Introduction: What isn't new media?

New Media is a 21st Century catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound. In fact, the definition of new media changes daily, and will continue to do so. New media evolves and morphs continuously. What it will be tomorrow is virtually unpredictable for most of us, but we do know that it will continue to evolve in fast and furious ways. However, in order to understand an extremely complex and amorphous concept we need a base line. Since *Wikipedia* has become one of the most popular storehouses of knowledge in the new media age, it would be beneficial to begin there:

Wikipedia defines New Media as:

"... a broad term in media studies that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. For example, new media holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. Another important promise of new media is the "democratization" of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content. What distinguishes new media from traditional media is the digitizing of content into bits. There is also a dynamic aspect of content production which can be done in real time, but these offerings lack standards and have yet to gain traction.

Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, is an example, combining Internet accessible digital text, images and video with web-links, creative participation of contributors, interactive feedback of users and formation of a participant community of editors and donors for the benefit of non-community readers. Facebook is an example of the social media model, in which most users are also participants.

Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive.^[1] Some examples may be the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. New media does not include television programs, feature films, magazines, books, or paper-based publications – unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity."

As a consequence of the quick embrace of New Media by business, causes, communications, and a multitude of others, the question of "what is new media?" did not receive an official or standardized response. Instead, responses to this question have often entailed a series of hackneyed keywords or empty phrases whose effectiveness is yet to be determined. The question of new media isn't a question that merely indexes new toys and tools. Rather, there is a qualitative question that lurks beneath the shining surface of the screen brandishing the images we associate as products or elements of New Media. A good question to ask instead of "what is new media?" is "what *isn't* new media?" To be sure, there are some definite signposts to guide the twenty-first century user's query.

The term "new media" seems to escape its very definition. Loosely, new media is a way of organizing a cloud of technology, skills, and processes that change so quickly that it is impossible to fully define just what those tools and processes are. For example, the cell phone in the late 1980's could be thought of as part of new media, while today the term might only apply selectively to a certain type of phone with a given system of applications, or even more commonly, the content of those apps. Part of the difficulty in defining New Media is that there is an elusive quality to the idea of "new." The very prospect of being new denotes an event just beyond the horizon, something that has only just arrived and which we are just beginning to get our hands on. Perhaps in searching for a suitable characterization for this network of tools and ideas is the idea of limitless possibility. Limitless possibility for communication, for innovation, and education is certainly a fundamental element that shapes our conceptions of new media usage from now on.

Nevertheless, in seeking a definition of "New Media" we need some basic tenets that can help us get a better positive understanding of what New Media is beyond what New Media isn't. New media can be characterized by the variegated use of images, words, and sounds. These networks of images, sounds, and text data are different from old media formats such as hardcopy newspapers because of the *nesting characteristic*.

Nesting is a way of organizing of the presentation of information according to subjects while paying secondary attention to context. In the place of context, nesting (most commonly seen in text or image hyper-linking) is a format that fosters organization in a way in which elements interact with one another instead of simply following a straight order. This new organization of data does not require a "back story" and each interactive element of information stands alone. New media requires a non-linear interpretation, since many sources are often oriented around the same subject-center, but are not always collated. At the end of the day all this means is that one of the primary characteristics of new media is that it is freed from the linear restrictions of older formats such as newspapers, books, and magazines.

Perhaps this conception of new media is only part of the whole picture and the skeletal outlines of a much more profound discussion. We recognize that many online interfaces enrich university and office experiences, making nested and comprehensible write-ups, drop-boxes, and support-based chat centers. The first thing that anyone using "new media" in the twenty first century realizes is that the technology and capability for innovation does not necessarily determine its usefulness or it's potential. Of course, that all rests on the shoulders of the user, or does it?

New Media = Digital Divide?

New media has had a profound effect on three of the most essential categories of society in the twenty-first century: economics politics, and the exchange of ideas. Of course, the scope of this article is limited in its ability to name the types of changes that are a product of new media, let alone a sufficient treatment of each category. However, it is important to sketch a brief schematic life of new media in the Information Age.

Economically, new media is the globe's commercial skeleton. Fiber optic wiring networks between the world's cities connect one to another to another.... Not only does this simple fact make global finance and trade a physical reality, since data networks between firms and investors are universally accessible, but it also impacts the possibilities and conceptions of so-called "old commercial" enterprises while giving rise to new ones. Every time a customer goes online to shop for that rare book title, or that overstocked iPod, or even the digital camera from a



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large retail store available down the block, *new media* is on both sides of that transaction. New media is not only the product but helps to mould the process of electronic commerce.

This means that manufacturing and production are largely focused on making the hardware that supports new media, while "softer" enterprises like news agencies, programmers, and artists adapt their crafts to the flows of the electronic current. If it seems abstract, that's because it is. New media processes and communications add another dimension to the business and consumers' practices we were already use to.

Perhaps the most interesting part of new media has to do with the restructuring of research, global economics, social interaction, and the currents of writing and dissemination of all information that have accompanied its emergence. Web and blog-writing in particular are not particularly revolutionary or ground-breaking because it changes the way people use language or construct basic sentences. It is ground breaking because it allows people to structure and nest information into documents differently. In today's average web/blog post, news articles, op-eds etc. are not only entries in mixed media (photos, writing, video) format, but they are organized according to hyperlink organization.

Hyperlink organization is one of the definitive features of new media, and its implications run deep as well as wide.. Nesting, which is frequently in the form of hyperlinking, requires extensive interpretation and research. This organizational since old media representation often asserts an artificial context into an article or media piece in order to provide continuity. In nested new media, hyperlinking fosters the ultimate citation resource-apparatus. In traditional reporting found in a print newspaper, scholarly research article, or encyclopedia, information and references are contained within the body of the text. There are certain citations and allusions, but for the most part, the sweeping or narrow nature of the text depends on the structural organization of the piece as well as the reader's contextual understanding of a given subject.

It is well known that data organization differs greatly in twenty-first century new media. Take for instance, the single most influential tool in casual research and data-storage: *Wikipedia*. It is virtually impossible to search an article that is published on *Wikipedia* without coming across a hyperlink to another page of data; in fact, it is more accurate to say that it's difficult to come across an entry with fewer than ten hyperlinks. In addition to the classical mode of citing sources at the end of a document with trusted texts and data, *Wikipedia* exemplifies a style of information technology that is based on the interconnectedness of ideas and events.

Here it is important to note one way that "new media" may not actually be all that new: During the French Enlightenment, the authors of the famed *Encyclopedie* created a system of footnotes that referred to certain other entries. The subtle structure of such an organization underlies a profoundly partisan representation of facts and images. The same is largely true in hyperlink writing. While the content that is mentioned and presented within an article may be empirically accurate, it is important to note that the selection of sources and outside connections may still be highly subjective. This quality makes research a more shaded and complex enterprise and sometimes even enriches the reader's understanding of a given issue. [i]

A note on data-collection

We need to note that new media is also characterized by an astonishing and uncharted level of personal experience/exposure. Online companies and sites can track the content of personal emails and site visits in order to target advertisements on users' sidebars and preferences.

There are websites whose sole purpose is to compile and share personal data with web surfers. One example is *Speokeo.com*, a website that uses publically cached information (phone numbers, family members, emails, addresses, even shopping trends) and shares them, albeit sparingly without a membership, to all those who wish to search.

Concerns over privacy in new media are legitimate: the biggest concern is whether or not to be concerned. Perhaps in the fog of shared and linked information across social sites, business networking, as well as email messages and publically recorded data, personal privacy for those who work with new media technology may be a thing of the foggy and distant twentieth century. In reality, there is one all important caveat: Don't write or reveal anything on line that you wouldn't want the world to know!

Social dimensions

There is indeed something about new media that is defined by its capability to reach outside of stagnant information pools. Perhaps the term new media is more apt to describe the network of networks that overwrites traditional relationships in exchange for new ones. In many ways, traditional media outlets now rely on new media sources for data and information. One recent article from the French newspaper *Le Monde* charted the evolution of political blogs across Europe in order to assess emerging trends and opinions in the region. What this signals is twofold: not only does new media enable the average person to engage in political, cultural, social, and economic action, but it also suggests that old-style reporting and data outlets are secondary and not primary sources for many. New media is an enabler and the new primary source.

The exchange of ideas and images are is of primary importance in considering the potential for new media. Not only are political horizons widened but so too are artistic and educational ones. Today, there is a tremendous ability for individual users who write, paint, report, educate, etc. to make connections to one another in a way that might allow them to circumvent the conventions of institutional and closed opportunities.


One thing is very clear: New Media is experiencing the growing pains of "the Wild West." New Media itself is neutral new technology evolving all the time. It is up to the user as to whether it is good or bad.

Conclusion: rhetorical questions of potential

So much of what defines new media is subtle, unrestricted, and not standardized. But is that good or bad? Just what determines the information and communication traffic across mobile phones, fiber optic wires, and online encyclopedias? Where is *new media* really going, and are we, as users, constructing the destination or are we blindingly falling into its clutches through necessities and paradigms?

Perhaps the potential of new media is a function of its intermediate development and our social, political, and economic transition within and outside of it. Either way, it remains to be seen whether or not it really is up to us to define the digital frontier. Regardless, new media and new media communications is continually evolving and as a result, its definitions evolves as well.

[i] "Governance, Organization, and Democracy on the Internet: The Iron Law and the Evolution of Wikipedia" Piotr Konieczny, *Sociological Forum*. Vol. 24, No. 1 (Mar., 2009), pp. 162-192.



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