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The changing social landscape

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Part One: The Changing Social Landscape

Introduction

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Putting New Media into Context

Rather than beginning with an account of the latest media technologies, as often seems tempting, and then attempting to unravel their consequences, this part of the *Handbook* sets the scene by starting with questions of society, social problems and social change. The metaphor of the 'landscape' which underpins this part was chosen for its breadth and openness in guiding the identification of where and why certain questions arise regarding the social shaping and social consequences of new media across a variety of disciplines or research domains. It argues that media are always embedded in a social landscape, which precedes, shapes, contextualizes and continues after any specific technological innovation. While the social shaping argument is addressed more directly in Part Two of this volume, this first part asks less how the technologies came to be as they are and more how they are used in different conditions, often by well-established social institutional forms. Indeed, a consensus is emerging within the maturing field of new media studies that it is imperative to put new media into context, to locate them within the social landscape, and tomap the changing media environment in relation to the human activities which, in turn, structure that environment. Such an analysis, through its stress on a multiplicity of contextualizing processes, is intended effectively to undermine any simple account of the supposed impacts of technology on society.

In this introduction, I draw out some of theassumptions and debates which underpin the different positions jostling – productively, I believe – for attention on the subject of new media and the changing social landscape. One must first note that any mapping of 'the social landscape' is inevitably partial. The seven chapters included here were selected so as to represent both the disciplinary diversity (communication studies, sociology, political science, social psychology, education, cultural studies, etc.) and the multiple levels of analysis (from macro-level theories of the information society through

meso-level accounts of community to the micro-level analysis of interpersonal communication) with which the changing social landscape is currently being researched. Across the chapters, a variety of conceptions of the relation betweentechnological and social change are evident,ranging from what might be termed a cultural determinism to a qualified or soft technological determinism, and from those which identify a dramatic change in the social landscape to those which are highly cautious about any evidence for social change. The authors in this part agree, however, that technologies must be contextualized within the historical and culturally specific conditions of their development, diffusion and use, and so each tendsto take the terms of their analysis from the social landscape rather than from features of the new media themselves.

The social 'landscape' is, however, itself a far from neutral metaphor. In recent cultural geography, the tendency to conceive of landscape itself asnatural and given has been strongly challenged, for landscapes are themselves culturally constituted through a set of historically specific material and discursive practices (Barnes and Duncan, 1992). Thus, the landscape metaphor draws us forever back to society in seeking an account of new media. For landscapes containing new media are busy, contested, peopled landscapes, drawing new media into the contestation of the major contours, thenavigable paths and the beneficial and harmful directions to be taken. Appadurai (1996: 33–6) usefully unpacks the landscape metaphor into five dimensions of global cultural flows which together construct the imagined worlds in which we live. These he identifies as ethnoscape (the shifting landscape of persons, identities, diaspora), technoscape (the fluid, networked configuration of technologies), financescapes (the disposition of global capital), mediascapes (the distribution of information, images and audiences) and ideoscapes (the ideologies and counter-ideologies which link images and ideas to the power of states). His purpose is to highlight the disjunctures between economy, culture and politics that arise from the interaction among these flows. This focus on interaction means that, for our present purposes, addressing social, cultural and economic questions about the new media cannot be restricted to the mediascape or technoscape, but must encompass all these and doubtless yet other flows, according to a dynamic rather than a static conception of the social landscape.

This contextual orientation is both stimulating and yet somewhat problematic in practice; indeed its very attractions also pinpoint its disadvantages. First, the key terms – landscape, context, ecology, environment – are both open and vague, broad-ranging yet without limit. Hence, while we invited authors of this and other parts to map the history and geography of 'their' segment of the social landscape, each has in practice found it necessary to limit this perhaps impractical brief in accordance with the balance of research in the published literature. Second, while these key terms serve to put the media in their place, avoiding an excessive 'media-centrism' which fails to recognize the constructive processes which shape both the nature and the uses of new media, yet one risks losing sight altogether of media and their particular technological, semiotic or other characteristics when grappling with the complexity of the many interlocking and conflicting social processes which in turn define and shape the landscape. Third, in so far as new media are becoming recognized as significant within and so increasingly researched by many traditionally distinct academic disciplines, sustaining a focus on thenew media requires an interdisciplinarity that challenges the typically discipline-based expertise of researchers as well as encouraging them in new, boundary-crossing work.

Relating Technologicaland Social Change

Underlying the metaphor of the social landscape, or the stress on social context, in new media studiesis a debate over how technological innovation is related to social change. As many have observed, no aspect of society at the start of the twenty-first century – from work to family life, from politicsto entertainment, from religion to sexuality – is untouched by innovations in information and communication technologies. Yet, such observations can all too easily lend themselves to the kind of technological determinism that social science now widely critiques. As Raymond Williams noted, 'in *technological determinism*, research and development have been assumed as self-generating. The new technologies are invented as it were in an independent sphere, and then create new societies or new human conditions' (1974: 13). Rather than researching questions which cast technological innovation as the cause and society as the effect, social science has developed the counter-view that 'the technological, instead of being a sphere separate from social life, is part of what makes society possible – in other words, it isconstitutive of society' (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 23). Thus, before and indeed after any new medium is introduced there is a lengthy process of development and design, of the identification of a market and the construction of a 'need', all of these being fundamentally social activities rather than purely technical ones.

Although this alternative to technological determinism is widely endorsed, interestingly it seems in continual need of restatement, as will be apparent throughout this volume. For despite a range of critiques, technological determinism remains alive and well and, whether in academic, public or policy forums, significant social changes are being attributed to technological innovation which are more properly attributable to preceding or concomitant social, political or economic changes. Such discourses are readily exemplified by concerns over children, tending to construe childhood as a fixed and idealized essence vulnerable to the external and undesirable intrusion of new media. In countering this naive technological determinism, Buckingham shows how the expectations and fears commonly associated with new media instead derive from long-standing social and moral concerns regarding childhood, tensions which historians have traced back several centuries to the origin of the Western conception of childhood itself (Luke, 1989). A similar argument can be made for other aspects of the social landscape.

Nonetheless, just how new media are 'partof' society remains subject to theoretical dispute. The critique of technological determinism ismost assertively posed by those who implicitly or explicitly develop the alternative case for cultural determinism. In support of this view, one may note that when discussions over social contexts and consequences of new media become most lively or contentious, it is generally because people are discussing not technology but society – how is society changing, what are the key drivers of change, and which changes are for the better or the worse? Instead of regarding ICT as, for example, a panacea for the ills of modern society (loss of political participation, of community belonging, of childhood innocence), the cultural approach instead seeks to understand the social relations that brought these about in the first place. ICT may mediate these,but the social relations – whether of democracy, or culture, or social exclusion – remain primary. Consequently, by questioning the popular view that the new media somehow constitute a new realm which raises entirely new questions and demands new analytic concepts, the authors in this part prefer to analyse human activities within

well-established frameworks, taking as their starting point questions of democracy, childhood, community and so forth.

There appears to be a contingent, though not necessary, link between the stress on the cultural (or economic) origins of new-media-related pheno mena and a critical response to the question of social change. Particularly in so far as social institutions, processes and distinctions reproduce traditional power relations just as much through the new media as elsewhere, the cultural approach tends to respond to the hype surrounding new media by asserting change' or 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Livingstone, 1999a). For part of the research community, this also represents a response to the particular pressures that the widespread interest in new media is placing on the academy. Thus increasingly, it seems expected that academics are able to predict, and so intervene in, events which shapethe future; notably, a considerable wariness about engaging in futurology characterizes the essays in this part (see also Silverstone, 1997). Even though to counter technological determinism as an explanation for social change need not demand that one argue against social change *per se*, this wariness regarding new media's relation to social change has its advantages. Particularly, as some of the chapters in this part illustrate, research most effectively begins with what is known, evading the hype, learning the lessons of history rather than 'reinventing the wheel', and moving only cautiously in the direction of what may, perhaps, be new.

Curiously, in avoiding a technologically determinist approach, it may seem that some researchers of new media readily bracket off the 'black box' of the technologies involved, being primarily interested in exploring new or distinctive patterns of interaction among people in their uses of new media. Such an approach – advocated in extreme terms by none of our authors – neutralizes new media, undermining attention to their specificcharacteristics, histories and potentials. However, in attempting to move beyond both a simple cultural and a hard technological determinism, it remains a challenge to encompass both the breadth of the social landscape and the detailed technological or semiotic specificities of the new media. Here MacKenzie and Wajcman's (1999) distinction between technological determinism as a theory of technology and as a theory of society proves useful. As the former, technological determinism clearly fails: technological innovation is a thoroughly social process, from conception, design, production, marketing, diffusion, appropriation, use and consequences. But as a theory of society and social change, one may agree with MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999: 3) that technological determinism contains 'a partial truth'. In other words, provided it is firmly understood that, as argued in Part Two of the *Handbook*, technologies are social products which embed human relations in their very constitution, we may – for convenience in our arguments and discussion – cast them in the role of actors, along with other kinds of actor, when explaining social processes, whether education, political life, childhood, labour and so forth. But this is only a shorthand, for 'precisely because technological determinism is partly right as a theory of society (technology matters not just physically and bio logically, but also to our human relations to each other), its deficiency as a theory of technology impoverishes the political life of our societies' (1999: 5).

A focus on the 'theory of society' is of course highly abstract, particularly unmanageable when faced with the concrete particularities of new media, and for this reason ways of conceptualizing the scope and flows of the social landscape are essential. More pragmatically, however, we may also learn here from past 'new' media. If we shift

our focus for a moment from new media to research on the social uses of now older media, especially television, the argument for context (or landscape) has been thoroughly stated (e.g. Radway, 1988). Indeed, the research corpus on the social, institutional and political nature of both media production and media reception or consumption in everyday life is well known. In new media studies, however, where media forms and contents are much less familiar, and where little research as yet exists on either production or use, it is easy to find new media technologies intrinsically fascinating objects, losing sight of the particular social contexts, located within particular cultural flows, which render them meaningful (Livingstone, 1999b). Thus in new media research, one may find that the overwhelming perception that technology is making a difference to society leads some researchers to assert the rhetorical rejection of technological determinism expected of right-thinking social scientists but then to endorse implicitly a more qualified and contextualized 'soft' determinism (as a partial explanation of society, as argued above). Such a soft determinism is interestingly developed by drawing on the theoreticalcontinuities between research on 'old' and 'new' media, specifically through the analogy of technology as text. While avoiding a simple determinism, this analogy invites the identification of how technologies, like texts, are designed and interpreted – both within particular social contexts – so as to facilitate certain social options and close off others. Thus, several of the authors in this part are interested in pursuing the ways in which the social processes of new media design and use in turn shape communication in specific realms (politics, community, etc.) and through engagement with relevant public and policy forums so as to open up, or close down, certain social possibilities (see the chapters by Jankowski, Bentivegna and Kellner).

This softer, more constructionist position is to some degree consistent with the dominant public conception of new media. This is both useful and dangerous, for among both the general public and the specific publics for academic research (such as policy-makers and research funding bodies), the assumption that new technologies are somehow introduced into society and then 'bring about' social change serves as the trope which mobilizes interest in academic research. The danger is that such assumptions easily shift from soft to hard technological determinism, and from a theory of society to one of technology, while all the while such lay beliefs are themselves constitutive of the social contexts which frame new technology development, appropriation and, indeed, research. Undermining or qualifying these assumptions, particularly when they are seen to draw on a widespread moralanxiety sufficient to stifle complex, careful orcontingent responses on the part of a policy community, becomes in turn a key strategy for some social scientists in the field when disseminating their research (see the chapters by Webster and Buckingham).

Researching the New Media

While the relation between technological and social change represents the key debate underlying this part of the *Handbook*, the differing positions adopted by the authors on other aspects of new media research illustrate further debates current in the field. First, it is clear that varying assessments of the pace, urgency even, of both social and technological change frame new media debates. While, as already noted, the widespread hype surrounding new media appears in and of itself sufficient to generate a sceptical

response from the academy, there are indeed genuine difficulties in measuring social change. This in turn has implications for the role of new media research in either critiquing or intervening in the political and economic management of new media. Thus Webster opens this first part by reminding us not to bypass conventional standards of intellectual and empirical rigour in making sense of the new media, noting that these standards are easily swept aside in the rush to research a supposedly fast-changing world. On the other hand, Kellner, later in this part, warns that the academy may itself be bypassed should it fail to address the questions asked regarding new media as and when these rise to the top of public and policy agendas.

This is not simply a matter of trading academic standards against timely intervention in policy, but also reflects the long-standing debate within media and communications between so-called administrative and critical traditions of research (Levy and Gurevitch, 1994; see also Ferment in the Field, 1983). Is it the responsibility of research actively to shape technological change or to evaluate the process of social shaping from a position of independence and distance? Should communication research produce knowledge in order to inform or to critique the strategic activities of the establishment, and when is either approach in the public interest? Compromise positions are often favoured, although it remains problematic that the former requires knowledge to be produced according to an external timetable, while the latter is generally best furthered with the benefit of hindsight. Interestingly too, it would appear that a soft form of technological determinism is more often endorsed by those concerned to intervene in policies regarding new media design and appropriation in order to furtherprosocial goals, though such a link is far from neces sary. Of the chapters in this part, Bentivegna, Jankowski, Rice and Kellner appear more interested in rethinking technologies in terms of their potential benefits to the cultural and political life of our societies, while Webster, Buckingham and Baym are to varying degrees more critical of the grand claims made for new media.

More generally, one may ask, in what terms should the study of new media pursue its project? For the authors in this part, as already noted, the key analytic terms derive primarily from the social landscape. Thus, rather than identifying a radical break between past and future, they take a broadly evolutionary approach which tends to view technological innovation through the lens of well-established social and political conceptual frameworks. Thus while they explore, to varying degrees, how new technologically mediated possibilities for communication, participation and relationship may open up new visions of society, they root their accounts in the slow-to-change social landscape, stressing the complexity and the diversity of the economic, political, social and cultural processes which context ualize new media. For example, Bentivegna addresses the relation of politics and new media by beginning with the difficulties faced by Western democracies, identifying how, by drawing on the theory of the public sphere, these can be construed as problems of access, communication and social relations. In so far as new media implement new models of communication, they may contribute to the conditions that bring about change in democratic participa-tion and citizenship. Similarly, Baym grounds her account of computer-mediated communication within the social psychological analysis of interpersonal relations, noting how new forms of electronic communication have been analysed in relation to the standards for diversity and interactivity setby the age-old model of face-to-face communi cation (and found wanting,

in these terms). And Buckingham relates children's use of electronic entertainment back to another age-old social activity, that of play, while Webster critiques the grand claims regarding the transformation of society into an 'information society', grounding his critique in the longer-term continuities in work, communication, economy, etc.

Thus, it is the thrust of this part that the social landscape – its character, its problems, its concepts and debates – precedes, and remains more significant than, any particular technological innovation. Another way of putting this is to say that in so far as the social landscape is undergoing change, it is social and cultural rather than technological boundaries which are centrally at issue. In the domain of politics, the key boundary is that of state institutions versus the public sphere in providing a forum for citizen deliberation. In the domain of childhood, the key boundary is that of child and adult, often mapped onto innocent and corrupt, or ignorant and knowledgeable, or safe and dangerous. In the realm of education, new media are seen to pose a fundamental challenge to a long-endorsed pedagogic tradition based on authoritative, elite forms of knowledge and a valorization of print over visual literacy. And so forth. Indeed, it is the tensions over these boundaries which shape, discursively and materially, the design, diffusion and appropriation of new media technologies.

I have noted here just some of the debates evident in the attempt to contextualize new media within 'the bigger picture'. Like the physical landscape, the social landscape is both as old as the hills and yet the setting for, and so constitutive of,present and future action. Within this landscape, the authors of this part advocate a broad and multi faceted approach to identifying the key factors which shape the emerging place of new media in social life, while also advocating considerable caution in announcing the sighting of wholly original forms of social life, particularly those attributable to new media. For through the complex interplay between the social landscape and the human activity that it shapes and is shaped by, we are witnessing a process of evolutionary change in which, in terms of both process and consequences, new media play a still hotly contested part.

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