Digital Cultures

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1 Digital theory: theorizing New Media

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There is no set method or theoretical framework for studying New Media. As this book hopefully reveals, the field is a complex and diverse one and it would be naive to suggest that a methodological and theoretical approach could ever be drawn up and regarded as definitive. Indeed, as David Bell points out in the following chapter, the theoretical complexity that typifies New Media may even reflect the state of play in current Net and Web research, suggesting the openness of New Media to 'cut and paste' different methods and theoretical approaches together. However, although there may not actually be something as clearly discernible as 'digital theory', that should not prevent us from locating and exploring a new set of theoretical issues and methodologies which might better suit and reflect our current media age.

If we are to appreciate what these new theoretical approaches to New Media might be, it is crucial that we first outline the way the media has tended to be analysed and explained historically. This is because, rather than being a systematic overthrow of previous trends, these new theoretical approaches are inevitably a development and reaction to the way the media has been understood and theorized in the past. In order to clarify this historical debate, I will first discuss (old) media analysis within a largely 'modernist' context, and then move on to discuss the connections between postmodernism, post-structuralism and New Media.

Modernism and 'old media'

Beginning approximately at the end of the nineteenth century, modernism is the umbrella term we give to the way that human society responded to the changes that took place during the industrial revolution. With its roots in the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century, modernism tended to challenge the theocratic and God-centred notion of the world that had helped define human society in the past. Ideas such as evolution in biology, communism in politics, the theory of relativity in physics and the emerging field of psychoanalysis attempted to explain the universe in scientific or quasi-scientific terms. In this way, modernism tended to challenge and revolutionize the religious mysticism of the pre-industrial world.

With its belief in the scientific inevitability of progress, many aspects of modernism tended to have an optimistic belief in the power of modernity to transform human life for the better. However, as the twentieth century progressed, so

the brutal effects of science and industrialization on human life (particularly in both the First and Second World Wars) became increasingly evident. In particular, many modernists came to perceive industrialization as the enemy of free thought and individuality; producing an essentially cold and soulless universe. It was for this reason that modernism's reaction to modernity is often perceived as intensely paradoxical, offering both a celebration of the technological age and a savage condemnation of it (see Hall 1995: 17). Struggling with these contradictions, modernist artists attempted to reflect the chaos and dislocation at the heart of the modernization process. As the growth of technology and science transformed our conception of society and ourselves, so artists and intellectuals sought new ways to represent and articulate the fragmentation of this 'brave new world'. Surrealism vividly dramatized Freud's insights into the power of dreams and the unconscious, while the Futurists espoused a love for the machine, technology and speed. Yet, there was also a deep anxiety embedded in many of these artistic expressions; the schizophrenia of the modern experience seemed to be at the heart of the 'stream of consciousness' novel, while the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists seemed to articulate the chaotic, anarchic, idiosyncratic and nihilistic landscape of the modern world.

Implicit in these artistic movements was the modernist belief in the role of the artist, a romantic figure often regarded as a self-exiled hero whose genius was able to revolutionize and transcend both art and the world around us. As David Harvey puts it, the 'struggle to produce a *work of art*, a once and for all creation that could find a unique place in the market, had to be an individual effort forged under competitive circumstances' (emphasis in the original, 1990: 22). And it was partly modernism's belief in the power of art and the artist to transform the world that lay behind its overwhelming distrust and distaste for the sort of everyday culture to be found in pulp novels, the cinema, television, comics, newspapers, magazines and so on. As Andreas Huyssen points out, modernism was almost consistently 'relentless in its hostility to mass culture' (1986: 238), arguing that only 'high art' (particularly a strain of it known as the 'avant-garde') could sustain the role of social and aesthetic criticism. It was this tension between these two extremes (a 'mindless' mass culture versus an 'enlightened' avant-garde) that perhaps most explicitly defined modernism's reaction to the media's early development during the twentieth century.

There are many examples that reflect modernism's disdain for the media, but perhaps one of the most famous groups of intellectuals to take this ideological stance was 'The Frankfurt School'. Exiled from Germany to America during the Second World War, this group of European Marxists were struck how American mass culture shared many similarities with the products of mass production. In particular, The Frankfurt School liked to perceive the media as a standardized product of industrialization, frequently connecting mass culture with aspects of Fordism. Fordism was a term coined to describe Henry Ford's successes in the automobile industry, particularly his improvement of mass-production methods and the development of the assembly line by 1910. His use of mass-production techniques meant that cars could be made more cheaply and therefore became more accessible to ordinary American

citizens. However, because they were mass-produced all his model T. Fords were exactly the same. When asked what colours his cars came in, Ford famously replied, 'any color – as long as it's black'.

For the Marxist theorists of The Frankfurt School, this 'Fordist' philosophy was also evident in all aspects of mass culture, where every television show, film, pulp novel, magazine, and so on were all identical. Their description of the 'Culture Industry' clearly reveals their distaste for these 'industrialized' products and their formulaic packaging. Instead of stimulating audiences, these media 'products' were designed to keep the masses deluded in their oppression by offering a form of homogenized and standardized culture. As Theodor W. Adorno explains with reference to popular music:

> *Structural Standardization Aims at Standardized Reactions*: Listening to popular music is manipulated not only by its promoters but, as it were, by the inherent nature of this music itself, into a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the idea of individuality in a free, liberal society … This is how popular music divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditional reflexes.

> (Adorno [1941] 1994: 205–6, emphasis in original)

Such anxieties about the media also came to inform some aspects of broadcasting policy. For example, the BBC's notion of 'public service broadcasting' was based on a number of cultural, political and theoretical ideals akin to modernism. In particular, its first director General, John Reith, argued that broadcasting should be used to defend 'high culture' against the degrading nature and influence of mass culture. This is one of the reasons why he argued so strongly that the BBC should be financed entirely by taxation, thereby avoiding the heavily commercialized nature of the American media. Although he would have been politically apposed to the Marxist beliefs of The Frankfurt School, Reith would have shared their concern for the corrupting influence of mass culture on a powerless and uneducated audience. 'It is occasionally indicated to us', he famously wrote, 'that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want – but few know what they want and very few know what they need' (cited by Briggs 1961: 238).

This perception of a mass audience as generally passive and gullible was reflected in media analysis during the modernist period, particularly in the 'effects' model of audience research. Sometimes referred to as the 'hypodermic needle' model, this way of approaching audiences tended to conceive them as wholly defenceless and constantly 'injected' by media messages, as if it were some form of mind-altering narcotic. Audience research carried about by The Frankfurt School was clearly part of this 'effects' tradition, simply aiming to validate its pessimistic claims about media indoctrination. In terms of textual analysis the school pursued a similar trajectory, critiquing the means by which mass culture disseminated the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie. Adorno's ([1941] 1994) work on popular music, Lowenthal's (1961) studies of popular literature and magazines and Hertog's (1941) studies of radio soap opera, all revealed similar preoccupations with the 'standardization' of mass culture and the media.

Despite the pessimistic approach of The Frankfurt School towards the media, it can still be praised for at least taking these new Media forms seriously and worthy of academic study. This project was continued and developed by the Structuralist movement which became increasingly popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Partly growing from a belief in the power of science and rationalism, structuralism argued that the individual is shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures over which they have little control. This belief in the power of rational thought also informed a methodology that could be used to uncover these structures by using quasi-scientific methods of investigation. Semiotics played a central role in this endeavour, being applied to all manner of cultural texts from the cinema to advertising and from photography to comics. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce's work on linguistics, semiotics set out a clear and coherent methodology by which the meaning of any text could be read objectively as a system of 'signs'. By 'decoding' these 'signs', semioticians could gradually unravel the means by which an audience were being manipulated. As Daniel Chandler puts it, '[d]econstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal *whose* realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. Such a study involves investigating the construction and maintenance of reality by particular social groups' (emphasis in the original, 2004a: 15).

Roland Barthes's ([1957] 1973) hugely influential book *Mythologies* famously used structuralism and semiotics to analyse all forms of mass culture including wrestling matches, the Citroën car, Greta Garbo's face and soap-powder. Yet, as a Marxist, the conclusive nature of the textual readings supplied by the likes of Barthes left little doubt that structuralism still saw mass culture as primarily propagating the forces of a dominant and all-persuasive ideology. One of Barthes's most famous examples of this process at work was his semiotic analysis of the photo on the cover of a *Paris Match* magazine in 1955. Showing a young black soldier saluting the French flag, Barthes argued that this was an example of the media giving French Imperialism a positive image in a moment of national crisis. So while the quasi-scientific methods of structuralism helped to further legitimate the study of mass culture and the media after the war, its conclusions still tended to suggest that audiences were powerless to resist its hidden meanings (see Barthes 1977a).

In this way, then, we can begin to identify some of the major components by which the media and its audiences were conceived and analysed during the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, the context of modernism gives us a theoretical insight into the way in which the media was understood and the ideological impulses which inevitably influenced its critical theories. This type of theoretical approach generally distrusted the media, arguing that its audience needed to be protected from its standardized and debasing influence. It therefore differs profoundly from the theoretical ideas that have now come to define 'digital theory' and the role of New Media in the twenty-first century.

Postmodernism and New Media

Whereas modernism was generally associated with the early phase of the industrial revolution, postmodernism (first identified in architecture (see Jenks 1984) is more

commonly associated with many of the changes that have taken place after the industrial revolution. A post-industrial (sometimes known as a post-Fordist) economy is one in which an economic transition has taken place from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy. This society is typified by the rise of new information technologies, the globalization of financial markets, the growth of the service and the white-collar worker and the decline of heavy industry (see Bell 1976). Not surprisingly, it is seen that the culture and politics produced by a 'post-industrial' society will be markedly different to that which was dominated by the industrial context of modernism. These cultural changes can partly be understood as the inevitable by-product of a consumer society, where consumption and leisure now determine our experiences rather than work and production. This means that 'consumer culture' comes to dominate the cultural sphere; that the market determines the texture and experiences of our everyday lives. In this 'postmodern' world there is no point of reference beyond the commodity and any sense of technology itself as separate to experience is slowly disappearing.

These changes in post-industrial society have clearly influenced the way that critical theory now understands and conceives the role which the media currently plays in society. In particular, there has been a discernible shift away from the cultural pessimism that once defined the modernist approach to the media found in the likes of The Frankfurt School. Perhaps the first signs of such a critical shift can be detected in the work of McLuhan. While McLuhan shared many of the modernist anxieties about the ideological influence of the media on a gullible and powerless audience (see, for example, his early analysis of the detrimental effects of advertising in *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951)), his work often betrayed an enthusiasm and excitement for the media that was seldom detected in modernist critical theory. Even his writing style seems steeped in the fragmented messages of the electronic media with famous aphorisms such as 'the medium is the message' appearing to mimic advertising slogans or sound bites. Indeed, his early use of the term 'surfing' (to refer to rapid, irregular and multi-directional movement through a body of documents), preceded the World Wide Web and multi-channel television by some 30 years. As Levinson (1999) points out in *Digital McLuhan*, much of his work anticipated the power of New Media to enhance an audience's interactivity with electronic information as a whole – transforming us all from 'voyeurs to participants' (pp. 65–79).

This theoretical shift in the conception of the media and its audience was later carried out by much of the work informed by post-structuralism. While structuralism generally reflected the modernist need to uncover the latent ideological meaning embedded in the media text, post-structuralism tends to take a less deterministic view about the nature of the media as a whole. Influenced by the work of theorists like Louis Althusser (1971) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), media analysis gradually began to acknowledge that ideology was more complex than first imagined, that media audiences could resist ideological meaning and that texts themselves could be 'polysemic', that is, consisting of multiple meanings (see Fiske 1998: 62–83). This

inevitably meant that the modernist insistence that a media text could be stripped down to one ideological meaning became increasingly untenable. As Elen Seiter puts it:

> Post-structuralism emphasizes the slippage between signifier and signified – between one sign and the next, between one context and the next – while emphasizing that meaning is always situated, specific to a given context … Theories of psychoanalysis and of ideology, under the influence of post-structuralism, focus on the gaps and fissures, the structuring absences and the incoherencies, in a text ………
>
> (Seiter 1992: 61)

The indeterminacy of meaning in a text is central to much of poststructuralist theory, changing the very means by which contemporary research not only understands the media but also its receiver or 'reader'. In particular, the influence of poststructuralist theory on media analysis means that current research has tended to put less emphasis on the way a text is *encoded* (by its producer) to the ways in which it is *decoded* (by its receivers) (see Hall 1973). Originally referred to as the 'Uses and Gratifications' tradition, new methods of media analysis have now produced a wealth of material that endeavours to show how complex the production of meaning between a text and its audience actually is (see Brooker and Jermyn 2003). This is a profound step away from the modernist and structuralist conception of the audience as passive cultural dupes, re-imagining them instead as active participants in the production of meaning.

As this suggests, crucial to both the postmodern and poststructuralist view of the world is the notion that meaning itself can never be entirely pinned down. Building on structuralism's understanding of culture through the structures of linguistics, post-structuralism argues that reality can only really be known through language and discourse. This means that rather than simply and innocently reflecting the real world, language actually *constructs* our view of ourselves and our notions of 'the real'. So, rather than looking for a deeper meaning which somehow magically exists beyond language and discourse, post-structuralism tends to analyse the discursive and practical conditions by which 'truth' is constructed (see, for example, Foucault 1991). So while modernism tended to search for meaning and truth among the chaos and fragmentation of the modern world, postmodernism appears to accept that the pursuit for such universal truth is futile.

This instability of 'truth' is linked to the postmodernist claim that by the end of the twentieth century people had gradually become more sceptical about utopian theories such as the Enlightenment and Marxism. Dismissing them as 'grand narratives', postmodern theorists tended to categorize these totalizing world views as nothing more than linguistic and narrative constructs. Although it may be difficult to conceive of such a theory in a world partly in the grip of religious fundamentalism, the belief in the utopian possibilities of modernism does appear to be contested by what many critics argue is an increasingly cynical Western world. As postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard puts it:

> In contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, postmodern culture – … The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation … Anytime we go searching for causes in this way we are bound to be disappointed.
>
> (Lyotard 1984: 37–8)

This distrust towards the revolutionary projects of modernity may help explain postmodernism's more relaxed attitude towards the media as a whole. While the media was generally dismissed by modernism as standardized, formulaic and shallow, postmodernism tends to celebrate popular culture generally for its implicit refusal to look for deep universal truths, tending instead to embrace image, surface and 'depthlessness'. This may help explain why postmodern aesthetics appear to indulge in increased levels of intertextuality, generic hybridity, self-reflexivity, pastiche, parody, recycling and sampling. Such characteristics may be seen as reflecting a world where traditional binary oppositions such as 'fact' and 'fiction', the 'real' and the 'unreal', the 'authentic' and the 'inauthentic' are less clear than they may have once seemed. This is perhaps why Andy Warhol's work is often conceived as intrinsically 'postmodern'. Warhol's 'Campbell's soup cans' (1962), for example, confuse and upset the very differences by which we have come to understand 'art' and the products of 'mass production'.

Indeed, some postmodern critics argue that it is now increasingly impossible to distinguish between the media 'image' and the 'real' – each 'pair has become so deeply intertwined that is difficult to draw the line between the two of them' (McRobbie 1994: 17). According to the philosopher Baudrillard (1994), in a contemporary society the simulated copy has now even superseded the original object. This phenomenon Baudrillard refers to as the 'third order of simulacra' which produces a state of '*hyperreality*'. It is not that simply the line between the media image and the real have become blurred; it is more that the media image and the real are now part of the same entity and are therefore now unable to be separated at all. As Best and Kellner puts it, '[r]eality and unreality are not mixed like oil and water; rather they are dissolved like two acids' (1997: 103). Some critics have even suggested that the differences between human and machine is now beginning to disappear, tending to eradicate the old 'human' versus 'technology' binary opposition upon which so much of the pessimistic theories of modernism were based. Although the idea of the cyborg (a hybrid of machine and organism) may still be in its scientific infancy, feminist critics like Donna Hathaway (1991) already use it as a metaphor for the power to deconstruct essentialist notions of gender and identity in a 'posthuman' world. As Mark Dery puts it:

> Our interaction with the world around us is increasingly mediated by computer technology, and that, bit by digital bit, we are being 'Borged', as devotees of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* would have it – transformed into

cyborgian hybrids of technology and biology through our ever-more-frequent interaction with machines, or with one another through technological interfaces.

(Dery 1994: 6)

For some critics, then, such a theoretical framework gives us a new critical arena through which we can start to understand and account for various aspects of New Media. For example, the poststructuralist and postmodernist distrust of a stable and fixed notion of the 'real' tends to reflect the landscape of New Media where such traditional definitions are increasingly becoming problematized by new technologies. With the arrival of artificial intelligence, cyberculture, virtual communities and virtual reality, our sense of what is 'real' and what is 'unreal' is clearly undergoing a dramatic transformation. For example, real existing companies now place advertisements in virtual worlds like Second Life, an artificial environment which affects real existing sales. So how can we separate the 'real' in this example from the 'virtual'? What part of this virtual world is 'real' and what part of it is not? Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but as the sociologist David Holmes points out, it is an illustration of the wider kinds of technological and cultural change that developments in New Media are currently producing:

Of the myriad technological and cultural transformations taking place today, one has emerged to provide perhaps the most tangible opportunity for understanding the political and ethical dilemma of contemporary society. The arrival of virtual reality and virtual communities, both as metaphors for broader cultural processes and as the material contexts which are beginning to enframe the human body and human communication …

(Holmes 1997: 1)

As this suggests, this problematizing of what we once recognized as 'real' will inevitably influence the very notion we may have of an 'authentic self', the conception of identity in a postmodern world becoming increasingly fluid and contestable. In particular, it has been argued that the increased interactivity of New Media generally allows audiences to play around with and make their own composite identities from various and sometimes even contradictory sources. This process is referred to by Hartley (1999: 177–85) as 'DIY citizenship', the notion that the media now allows us to all create our own complex, diverse and many faceted notions of personal identity. With so many different communities now open to us on the web, we can begin to simply pick and choose which identities we want to adopt and which ones we want to reject, allowing an individual to decide how they define themselves rather than simply having to stick to the narrow and limited number of choices that once defined the past. This is in stark contrast to a world where identity is primarily a matter of heritage.

This fluid notion of identity certainly appears to be in direct contrast to the concept of citizenship and identity that was propagated by the underpinnings that informed the roots of modernism, particularly a concept like public service broadcasting. John Reith's conception of 'culture' and 'Britishness', for example, now seems to

be unforgivably narrow and restrictive in the transnational, multicultural world (what McLuhan (1962) famously described as the 'global village') that many now live in thanks to the arrival of email, satellites and global television. Postmodernist critics might argue that even the notion of 'broadcasting' itself is a totalizing concept which was never able to successfully reflect the sheer diversity of a nation or its people (see Creeber 2004). The phrase 'narrowcasting' – that is used to denote New Media's pronounced interest in addressing and catering for niche audiences – perhaps better encapsulates the role of television and radio in a world of multimedia (see Curtin 2003).

As we have seen, the increased interactivity of audiences in a New Media context is also articulated in poststructuralist theory whose tendency is to conceive the audience as *active* participators in the creation of meaning. Websites like YouTube, MySpace and Facebook appear to reflect this recent understanding of 'participatory culture'; not only creating virtual communities but also allowing audiences to become 'producers' as well as 'receivers' of the media. Theories of 'fandom' are important here with the Internet allowing the fans of different forms of culture to create virtual communities that add to the original understanding and even content of their chosen interests (see Chapter 7). For example, the rise of 'slash fiction' allows audiences to actively participate in the production of meaning by creating extra-textual material about their favourite television programmes (see Jenkins 2006b). Consequently, rather than being seen as essentially commercial and inactive, in a postmodern world consumption itself is now regarded as a positive and participatory act. As Mackay puts it, 'Rather than being a passive, secondary, determined activity, consumption … is seen increasingly as an activity with its own practices, tempo, significance and determination' (1997: 3–4). Such ideas have clearly informed David Gauntlett's notion of 'Media Studies 2', a theoretical embodiment of Tim O'Reilly's notion of Web 2, a world where users generate and distribute content, often with freedom to share, create, use and reuse (see Introduction and Chapter 2).

Indeed, John Reith's 'top-down' cultural 'uplift' seems particularly redundant in a world where audiences are increasingly determining their own choice of media and what they do with it. The hypertextual 'cut' and 'paste' culture of New Media – that seemingly encourages sampling, poaching and remixing – produces not only copyright problems, it also further confuses the very means by which we conceive of the media and its relationship with its audience. Certainly, the idea that a media organization like the BBC could so rigidly dictate public tastes seems almost unimaginable now. As Lev Manovich points out, we may now require a completely new theory of authorship to help us understand the current relationship between the media and its audience, one which fits:

> perfectly with the logic of advanced industrial and post-industrial societies, where almost every practical act involves choosing from some menu, catalog, or databse. In fact … New Media is the best available expression of the logic of identity in these societies – choosing values from a number of preferred menus.

> (Manovich 2002: 128)

This increased interactivity among the New Media audience has also prompted some critics to suggest that there has even been an increased 'democratization' in the nature of New Media compared to old. 'Citizen Journalism' (where people use blogs, photos or phone footage to create and comment on the news of the day) is only one current example among many that postmodernists might select to illustrate the increased ability of 'ordinary' people to become actively involved in the very production of the media; moving power away from the 'author' into the hands of the 'audience' (see Chapter 7). Indeed, for theorists like Mark Poster (1997), the Internet provides a 'Habermasian public sphere' – a cyberdemocratic network for communicating information and points of view that will eventually transform into public opinion. As voting on the Internet becomes more widespread so it may increase our democratic rights even further (see Chapter 9).

The postmodern context I have outlined here tends to place New Media in a primarily positive light, as if technology itself is simply opening up increased levels of audience participation, creative involvement and democracy. However, other chapters in this book will clearly outline some of the more negative features of this New Media world, not least the 'digital divide' that currently enables only a small fraction of the planet to participate in this new digital culture (see Chapter 8). Even in the West, not all New Media participants are created equal. As Henry Jenkins explains, '[c]orporations – and even individuals within corporate media – still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others' (2006a: 3). Similarly, some critics refer to the 'myth of interactivity', arguing that the participatory nature of New Media has been over-inflated to such an extent that people now refuse to see its limitations. 'To declare a system interactive', Espen Aarseth warns us, 'is to endorse it with a magic power' (1997: 48).

Critics have also argued that a landscape of postmodernism and New Media are turning citizens of democracies into apolitical consumers, no longer able to distinguish between the simulated illusions of the media and the harsh realities of capitalist society that they implicitly conceal. Many critics argue that now even the political landscape is a triumph of image over substance, a terrifying symbol of McLuhan et al's (1967) aphorism that 'the medium is the message', that is, a world where *how* something is presented is actually more important than *what* is being presented. In particular, these critics tend to argue that the postmodern obsession with 'image' over 'depth' produces a superficial and artificial environment where little is taken seriously; that its predominantly 'camp' aesthetic has turned everything into entertainment. As Neil Postman puts it:

> Our television set keeps us in constant communication with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable. The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining …

> (Postman 1985: 89)

Postman's nightmarish vision of a world where all information is packaged as entertainment is perhaps further facilitated by a form of New Media that appears to

give us so much choice, but ultimately ends up by limiting *real* choice; reducing everything to exactly the same commodified and consumerist product. Critics argue that the avant-garde's revolutionary power has now also been reduced to sheer commercialism, modernism's radical forms and aesthetics used to sell alcohol and cigarettes in advertising (what David Harvey calls 'the official art of capitalism' [1989: 63]). Rather than increasing people's ability to play with various identities, critics have even argued that the globalization of the world (partly facilitated by New Media) may actually decrease cultural and national identities as we all become increasingly alike and culturally homogenous. This process has been provocatively described by one critic as the 'McDonaldization' of society (see Ritzer 2000).

The Internet has also been accused of narrowing people's choices down and encouraging obsessions with worthless and unimportant trivia such as bizarre hobbies and low-quality television shows (see McCracken 2003). As more and more virtual communities come into being so some critics argue that real relationships and communities are being neglected; the one-to-one human contact on which civilization was based becoming increasingly redundant (see Lister et al. 2003: 180–81). Meanwhile, the breakdown of the 'private' and 'public' sphere (people treating the public arena of cyberspace as if it were private) has serious implications on civil liberties that are only now being fully recognized. Recently, for example, it has come to light that many employers are surreptitiously using websites like MySpace to ascertain the online personality of a future employee (see Finder 2006). Similarly, it is still hard to conceive the democratization of the media actually taking place in a country like China where Google and Rupert Murdoch seem happy to cooperate with the strict censorship of a non-democratic government in order to gain access to the vast financial potential of the country.

Some critics of postmodernism also argue that if there has been a breakdown between the 'image' and the 'real', then we are entering an age of 'moral relativism' where little critical or moral judgement can be exercised and where theorists even discuss the 'reality' of the Gulf War (see Norris 1992; Chapter 8). Such thinking, it is argued, inevitably produces a dangerous and unregulated media, where endless hardcore pornography sits alongside chat rooms that prey on the young and the innocent or websites that give voice to extremist political forces (see Dean 2000). New Media may seem to offer a world of glossy images and limitless communication, but it is also important to keep in mind who and what is left out of its postmodern embrace. Technological utopianism might suggest that New Media will automatically improve our world for the better, but our future well-being clearly lies in how and what we do with the choices we now have on offer.

Conclusion

Whatever theoretical point of view you may take about New Media, it is difficult to argue that the media itself has not come under considerable change over the last 20 or 30 years. We therefore need a new theoretical framework which allows us to understand and appreciate both the positive and negative features of our current media age. This means that critical understanding of the field is essential if we are to

produce a sophisticated theoretical approach. As I mentioned at the start of this section, it would be naive to suggest that a methodological and theoretical approach to New Media could ever be drawn up and regarded as definitive, but this section was simply intended to offer a framework through which a number of approaches can be more carefully contextualized and approached.

The theory of New Media is still in its early stages of development and there is much work to do to flesh out and expand some of the basic arguments set out here and elsewhere in the book. However, I hope that what is clear by now is that since its conception, the media has been analysed and examined through a whole plethora of diverse schools, theories and methodologies. I hope that by simply organizing some of these within their 'modernist' and 'postmodern' contexts, it has helped to clarify many of the major debates that have taken place in and around the field as a whole. Although other chapters in this book might not refer explicitly to modernism or postmodernism, they will clearly offer greater insight into some of the basic theoretical ideas introduced here. 'Digital theory' may not yet be discipline in its own right, but its presence will be felt throughout this book and the way that we conceive New Media long into the future.

Recommended reading

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