

# Preface

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The title of the book is aptly named *Frontiers in New Media Research*. Certainly frontiers in new media are being forged more or less continuously now, with a new device, service, or app appearing, sometimes lingering, sometimes disappearing, occasionally representing a significantly new way for people to share information and relationships.

The continuing emergence and diversity of new media forms, content, services, and affordances are creating a shift from the predominance and clarity of the technological object, institution, and transmission triad, as the editors note in the introductory chapter, to a frontier of convergence, digitization, and melting boundaries among technologies, institutions, content format, participants, intellectual property, and distribution modes. Even the nature of “media characteristics” (Rice, 1987) is in flux, due to continuous innovation and reinvention, and initial periods of interpretative flexibility. People have wide choices in content, format, group memberships, and even in the development of new material, features, services, and technology (consider the pervasiveness of social media such as Facebook, the social and commercial impact of blogs and Twitter, the rapid diffusion of new “apps” for mobile phones and devices, and the incredible deluge of videos posted to YouTube). Users not only can create, but also (re)distribute, recommend, and evaluate content.

## INTEGRATION OF EXISTING AND NEW THEORIES AND METHODS

As argued in my *The new media* (1984) and *Research methods and the new media* (Williams, Rice, and Rogers, 1988), and as the editors note in their introduction, there is both a trend of, and need for, increasing integration of traditional communication theories and research with new media, as well as generating new concepts, theories, methods, and insights appropriate to the newness of media.

For example, James Katz’s and my book *Social consequences of the Internet: Access, involvement, and interaction* (2002) provided a comprehensive empirical and conceptual overview of the fundamental social impacts

associated with this network of networks from 1995 through 2000. Those included the changing nature of the digital divide (including dropouts), how Internet use is (very slightly) associated with greater engagement in society (arguing against a loss of social capital), and how it is slightly associated with greater communication and use of most other media. Indeed, we argued against either a dystopian or a utopian perspective about the social aspect of the Internet. Rather, we proposed a syntopian view, whereby people use new media to do more, with fewer obstacles, of what they usually want to do anyway—and this includes both very bad and very good things. Two other examples of integrating social aspects of the Internet and new media with traditional communication and media theory are the very significant areas of health communication and online health information seeking and support (Katz and Rice, 2001; Muro and Rice, 2006), and the changing nature of media industries and media regulation (Rice, 2008).

New research ideas and methods develop somewhat less quickly, as it should be. However, new media and research can interact to generate new frontiers in academic study, policy, and evaluation. The chapters in this book do that. Issues include economics and online labor (Brunns; Chu; van Dijk; Strover), civic engagement (Dutton; Webster; Yong), user content and distribution control and collaboration (Brunns; Chu; Ha, Leconte and Savidge; Steinfeld), cultural perceptions (Lo et al.), online journalism (Allan; Chyi and Yang), the nature of information searching and probabilistic knowledge (Hartley), malleable and shifting online and networked identities (Papacharasi), interpretive flexibility and reinvention (van Dijk; Strover), and the reciprocity of information society and surveillance society (Lyons).

## GLOBAL THEMES IN INTERNET RESEARCH

This collection contributes to an increasing attention to integrating and introducing new media research. For example, a recent synthesis (Rice and Fuller, 2013) reviewed the major theoretical approaches to studying social aspects of the Internet between 2000 and 2009. Our analysis of 315 social science articles from 46 journals identified a wide variety of primary and secondary theories, and revealed 27 theory themes within six global theory themes.

The Global Themes and constituent main themes included: (1) Media Attributes (Interactivity, media attributes), (2) Media Implications/Use and Understanding (credibility/trust, diffusion of innovations, media effects, media use/adaptation, possibly harmful Internet use, uses and gratifications), (3) Participation (civic engagement, participatory media/users, political participation, public sphere), (4) Social Relations (community, groups, identity, media use and sociality, relational management, social capital, social networks/network analysis), (5) Societal (boundary crossing, cultural differences, digital divide, political economy/policy, privacy), and (6) Theory Framework (critiques, integrated/new theoretical models, and reviews).

## THEORY FRAMEWORKS

The following sections provide an overview of the very wide range of emphases within the theory framework global theme, along with several examples for each.

### Critiques

Critiques of some theoretical and research approaches to studying the Internet included conceptualizations of hypermedia; components of online trust; the terminology of the digital divide concept; implications of co-presence versus co-location; a need for an increased focus on the intersection and borders of the Internet with other social, cultural, and social-psychological venues; the importance of a political economy perspective of analyzing structural and processual power; the appropriateness of a uses-and-gratifications approach to studying each new medium; and the need to integrate concepts such as interactivity, demassification, hypertextuality, and a-synchronicity.

Selwyn (2004) provides a meta-theoretical overview of the digital divide, arguing that much of the debate about it remains conceptually oversimplified and theoretically underdeveloped. Popular and political definitions of the digital divide mostly focus on a dichotomous conceptualization of haves and have-nots. Rather, digital divide research needs to clarify: What is meant by ICT (there are many different technologies)? What is meant by “access”? What is the relationship between access to ICT and use of ICT? And how can we best consider the consequences of engagement with ICT?

Mansell seeks greater attention to political economy approaches, criticizing “the state of mainstream research on the media, with its focus on individuals, functionalism and pluralism” (2004, p. 97). This would consider, among other issues, the capitalist production of new media, products and services; the role of capital, organization, and control; the symbolic form, meaning and actions, as well as structures of power and institutions, and allocation of scarce resources; and scarcity created through copyright, access, obsolescence, creation and sale of audiences. An example of a central question generated by such a political economy approach is: What dominant principles, values and perceptions of power are being embedded in our technologically-mediated interactions?

### Integrated/New Theoretical Models

Main topics included in the *integrated/new theoretical model* theme included social information seeking in computer-mediated communication; panoptic theories of surveillance; and collective action theory. Other primary theories/concepts included critical Internet theory; diagrammatic theory of surveillance; discursive space; hyperpersonal perspective; interactional-new

literacies, possibly harmful Internet use; social information processing theory; social networks; time; transformative democracy; and voice.

Concerned about what media literacy means in the contemporary environment, Leu and Kinzer (2000) reviewed the development of and resistance to various literacies. Many factors play a role, such as global economic competition using information and communication; the emergence of new media at work, home and school; and governmental ICT-related policies to foster education and literacy including of ICTs. The authors then propose 10 principles of a New Literacies Perspective, including, for example, the notion that there are multiple new literacies, and that new media can foster social construction of learning.

Enduring and increasingly debated aspects of new media is privacy, surveillance, and targeted marketing. Elmer (2003) discusses three contemporary arguments about the panopticon theory: the “dataveillance” critique; the critique of the automatic disciplinary effect; and the synoptic nature of panopticism critique. One particularly intriguing notion is technology’s ability to “reward” us with familiar images/commodities and “punish” us for seeking out things that are not consistent with past content/commodity choices.

## Reviews

Reviews integrated a wide range of topics, such as social connectivity and social control associated with use of the Internet and mobile phones (Rice and Hagen, 2010); access and equity; democratization; diffusion of innovations; digital divide; effects on language and communication; globalization; group dynamics; media attributes; metamorphosis; metaphor; network theory; perpetual contact; privacy; public sphere; social context; social control; social structures and norms; social support; and technological determinism.

One new frontier in new media research, yet an enduring preoccupation of philosophers and academics, is time: in particular, how the Internet has changed notions and uses of time. Laguerre’s (2004) review of “virtual time” discusses the collapse of temporal boundaries; the compression of time and distance; interactions of cybertime with the civil week; flexibility; behavioral decoupling of time zones; real-time schedules and virtual time; and synchronized and de-synchronized connectivity. Consider, for example, just two claims: Digitization redistributes peak time and fragments the flow of time, and personal and local temporality are decoupled (from co-workers, family, community).

Harrison and Falvey’s (2001) review argues that we need for a more comprehensive definition of democracy in the context of new media. They justify this through an analysis of five root theses that relate democracy and new communication technologies: Decentralization-centralization; Information access; Interactional access; Liberal democracy; and Deliberative democracy. Four relevant research sites for exploring the relationship

between technology and democracy include the interpersonal, organizational, government and political, and community networking.

## CONCLUSION

Although much of the early Internet research was criticized as being a theoretical, we can see that a wide range of primary and secondary theories, within more inclusive primary and global themes, are being applied to understanding social and communicative aspects of the Internet and new media. This collection contributes to that broadening and deepening of understanding the frontiers in new media research.

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