CHAPTER 1: 
Introduction to New Media

Chapter Outline

This chapter asks what is new about new media and what role it plays in social change. New media has emerged through the digitization of content and is now deeply embedded in the politics, processes, and practicalities of our society. This digitization has changed computing, communication networks, and content, which in turn has enabled convergence—the process by which media technologies, industries, and services merge. Although this specific convergence is new, we must also put these changes in perspective. We must recognize that long-standing social, cultural, political, and economic factors remain important and actively mitigate and filter the impact of technological change. This chapter identifies the characteristics of digital information and how these characteristics result in a kind of communication that can be summed up as interactive. We examine the internet as one of the most important new media forms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and review its history, social implications, and recent evolution into social media. We examine the role of search engines, which have become a foundational technology and an important enabler of the data-driven economy. We also look at the importance of online encyclopedias, status updates, friend lists, and online video in the context of a growing and globalizing technology. The chapter concludes with a review of some of the implications of convergence on media creation and consumption and the role of social media in this process.

Questions to Consider

- How is communication mediated by technology? Why is this significant?
- Why is it important to think about new media from a wide range of perspectives?
- What are the various ways that the digital divide can be understood? What are the causes and consequences of such divides?
- The communication environment of the 2020s is vastly different than that of your parents and grandparents. What would you miss most about today if you were growing up in their time? What do they find most confusing or have a hard time adapting to?
- In what ways is globalization significant when thinking about new media?
- In what way has the internet and social media changed the process of social change? What are the benefits or drawbacks of this shift?
**Key Terms**

**Algorithm** A process or system of instructions for solving a problem, especially when referring to computers.

**Convergence** Media forms and media businesses coming together, as when America Online (AOL, internet services) bought Time Warner (publishing and cable television); the term is sometimes used to describe technical convergence, as when various modes of entertainment, such as music, movies, and magazines, are all available on one internet-connected device.

**Digital** Made of discrete (usually binary, 1 and 0, on and off) units.

**Digital divide** The gap between those who have access to the internet and those who do not; the term is sometimes expanded to include gaps related to speed of access as well as capabilities to use the services (as, for example, when it is not in your native language).

**Digital natives** Individuals who grew up with digital technologies and take them for granted and have a fluency that is the result of using them from a very young age.

**Folksonomy** A definition or description (tag) for an object (photo, webpage) that is generated by users of a web service such as Flickr. It contrasts with “taxonomy,” or the official naming of things.

**Globalization** The process by which markets, technologies, cultures, and businesses are homogenizing and becoming accessible everywhere on the planet. The term also refers to the process of moving jobs and capital to the place where they will reap the largest return (as when jobs move to low-wage countries).

**Hypertext** Now associated almost exclusively with the blue underlined words that provide links on webpages, the term was coined by Ted Nelson in 1963 for his Project Xanadu.

**Interactive** The ability to contribute to as well as consume media; it is generally reserved for activities that extend beyond merely changing channels. Internet services are almost all interactive.

**Interface** The way users experience software or hardware, epitomized by the WIMP (windows, icons, menu, pointer) desktop that has become the standard for computer operating systems.

**Long tail** The large number of items that make up a small sales volume individually but together may account for a non-trivial opportunity for retailers—such as Amazon.com—who can deliver these goods to people who want them. The term was coined by Chris Anderson of Wired magazine to illustrate the power of online access to the enormous number of books (and other items) that wouldn’t merit stocking in a bricks-and-mortar store.

**Microblogging** Posting short messages (typically the length of a mobile phone text message, on which the business was premised at first) to a website for sharing with others. Twitter is the best known of these, but this would also include the posting of short status updates to a Facebook wall.

**Packet switching** The process by which messages are converted into small bundles (packets), each with its own address information, to permit message passing by simple computers.

**Remediate** In the Bolter and Grusin sense, this describes how new media adopt and extend old media.
**Social network** The face-to-face or electronic relations between people for formal and informal purposes. In the context of this book, the social network especially includes those aspects enabled or harmed by new media.

**Tag (tagging)** A descriptive term for a piece of content or a key word; also the act of applying these tags.

**User-generated content** The unpaid contributions of the users of a service, which oftentimes constitutes the bulk of the content (over 90 per cent in the case of YouTube). This is also known as peer production.

**Web 2.0** Now known as social media, Web 2.0 refers to any website in which the contributions to and evolution of the site happens online via the users of the site.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some key differences between what we would today refer to as new media and the media that preceded it?

2. How is convergence a term that is prone to confusion? In what ways are the current trends in convergence perhaps only the tip of the iceberg?

3. In what ways do new media devices affect our communication activities and practices, as well as larger social arrangements and organizations?

4. Comment on the following: “The quality of participation increases as the number of participating users increases, and this in turn attracts more new users to the sites.”

5. What does it mean to describe the internet as having graduated from being a computer network akin to a highway to a “place” that can allow people to “understand the world around them”?

6. What are some of “the cultural practices that enable users to engage with the technology” and what best describes the “hidden engine of the user’s interaction with the text”?

7. Why would a smaller media company, like Snapchat, turn down an offer to merge with a larger company, like Facebook? What do you think are the implications of the increasing number of media conglomerates compared to more varied media companies? Give the following a close reading: “Media studies as it emerged in the twentieth century understood media production, texts, and audiences as discrete forms, following a linear model of different ‘moments’ in the media production–consumption cycle.” What does this mean, and what are the implications today? Does this still work, in your view?

8. In what ways do trends in new media reflect trends in globalization?
Class Activities

1. In groups of five, discuss which websites or apps you spend the most time on per day and the activities you engage in with those apps/sites. Consider whether those activities were the same a year ago, what changes have occurred, and why. Discuss what you think about society’s use of social media.

2. Visit a website, such as Alexa, that provides a list of the top 10 sites in the world. Take a look at the sites you might not be familiar with and classify these sites into different types. Alternatively, visit the Android or Apple app store and consider the various “top download” categories. Which ones are important to you and why? Are there whole categories of apps that you never look at? If so, why not?

3. Given the global nature of much new media, a large group of students may have very different sources of online information. In class, compile a “long list” of all the local and regional websites that you are aware of or use for news, information, entertainment, and so on. How much divergence and how much similarity is there in your class? What are the sites that are common? What differentiates the sites that have only one or two votes?

4. Almost anything related to new media is subject to rapid change. Firms come and go; technologies change; and numbers of users, viewers, and creators for new media content and memes change every day. Look up a fact or figure in this chapter and verify whether it remains true today. Identify corroborating or supporting sources for your findings. Not only will you have the new facts, but you’ll also have an appreciation for how quickly things change and, most importantly, a visceral sense of the way in which the internet and new media are self-revealing to the diligent and inquisitive scholar. If you discover a fact that needs updating, you can even submit your update (with a page reference and new citation) in the form of a rewritten paragraph, to the author: Richard Smith (smith@sfu.ca). He promises to reply.

Debate Questions

1. Streaming services, such as Spotify, Apple Music, and Google Play, seem to have created a pathway for the paid consumption of music and also enabling sharing and discovery within that paid environment. Do you see this as the end of illegal downloading and sharing of musical content? Is this model the same as video streaming through subscription models, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, or Hulu? Why or why not?

2. The role of comments on news stories and social media is one of the interesting aspects of online social protest movements. Whenever a news site such as cbc.ca or a social media site such as YouTube features a protest, it attracts a large number of comments, many of which are hurtful or harmful and cannot be remotely described as constructive criticism or useful debate. Argue for and against the proposition that this sort of behaviour is inherent in news and social media and we should either get used to it or ignore/eliminate open comments in online media. Is online trolling an inherent or solvable problem? What examples have you seen where comments are a positive force for dialogue and how was this achieved?
3. Do you believe that vlogging is truly more authentic than mainstream media television content? Why or why not? Do you think that these two industries will merge in the future? Do recent controversies about sponsored content and product placement in YouTube channels—and the subsequent Federal Trade Commission crackdown—affect how you view YouTube videos? Explain your answer.

**Recommended Websites**


**Recommended Videos**

