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The New Media, the New Meanwhile, and the Same Old Stories

Steve Jones

We make some of the same claims for the internet that we had made for media that preceded it. It will improve education; it will supplant learning. It will aid terrorism; it will encourage mutual understanding; it will bring people together; it will isolate us. The internet has been pigeonholed into the same discourse that has surrounded media moral panics since movies and comic books were blamed for the decline of America's youth.

But no matter how much one tries, as a medium the internet refuses to be pigeonholed. The adage that the internet is "a medium of mediums" is now more than ever true, as it is used to broadcast video, radio, news, voice, and indeed most all of the communication that had once been given its own place in the panoply of electronic media. Why not, therefore, study video online as we had studied it before the internet's spread? Why not study online news just as print news has been studied?

While there may be some reasons to do so, particularly for comparative purposes and because there is much that is valuable about existing methods and theories, I think we rightly sense there is something special about these uses of media when they occur via the internet, computer and, increasingly, mobile devices, rather than via the media that had once delivered them. Just the mind-boggling scale of the internet makes the media experience different. Never have so many, near and far, had access to so much information, and to so many others, and so quickly.

It is along those dimensions (information, people, distance, time) that we undertake, unsurprisingly, most of our studies of internet phenomena. But is there anything particular about the internet that the study of it will give us new or improved insight into human matters? Or is it another means of telling the same stories about people, places, and events that humanists and social scientists have told for years, decades, centuries?

Not long before his death in 2006, James Carey wrote a couple of essays that took the internet seriously (even if they did not take it as their starting point). In one essay he noted that the internet "has never arrested my imagination as some

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older technologies have" (2005, p. 444). Perhaps we should not be surprised. By the time the internet became widespread the magic of the media had disappeared. Older technologies' introductions were often attended by wonder, amazement, even awe. Electricity, perhaps the first "medium of mediums," though harnessed for commercial and consumer use, continued to draw rapturous attention from poets, pundits, and ordinary individuals. Occasionally during the early years of what are now considered "old" media, some technologies were accorded magical or mystical powers (for a fascinating discussion of these phenomena see *Haunted Media* (2000) by Jeffrey Sconce). But Carey was always one to decenter the object of study, and his decentering of the internet is what gives his observations of its consequences a depth of context lacking in more mundane efforts to think about the internet. In the case of Carey's efforts it is clear he is less thinking about the internet and more thinking through it, to ascertain its presence in the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of its time.

The main context within which Carey situated the internet's ascendance was its growth at a time of rising nationalism. At the end of an essay titled "The internet and the End of the National Communication System," Carey noted that

> The internet is at the center of the integration of a new media ecology which transforms the structural relations among older media such (as) print and broadcast and integrates them to a new center around the defining technologies of computer and satellite. The economic struggle among firms attempting to control and dominate this complex is the outer and visible edge of deeper transformations in the structure of nations and other forms of social relations. This new media ecology develops in relation to new physical ecology among peoples represented by world-wide migrations over national borders, the formation of diasporic groups and what we might call the diaspora of the internet itself wherein new social groupings are formed and organized. In turn, and at the cultural level, there is a struggle over new patterns and forms of identity, new representations of nations and transnational associations, and the eruption of "identity politics." The end point of all of these changes is quite uncertain. . . .We should remind ourselves that the culminating event of the communications revolution of the 1890s came when the guns of August sounded in 1914 and the twentieth century really began. (1998, p. 34).

Obviously there is a lot packed into this single (abridged) summary paragraph. The most interesting element is the somewhat understated notion of a "diaspora of the internet." Perhaps the ongoing processes of forming, coming, and going that characterize online communities are less like the mythic community-building so often claimed for them and more like processes of migration and immigration, but without the usual risks attendant to moving one's self, family, and/or possessions. To put it another way, the internet may provide a reconception of mobility that on the one hand can be understood better by re-examining what we know about migration, immigration, and the processes of moving (whether across town or across the globe) and on the other hand those processes of mobility may be better understood in contemporary times if we take into consideration the internet's role in them. How has diaspora changed among those who have internet access? How has immigration changed with internet access (and with other new media now available, such as mobile phones and inexpensive long distance calling)?

Carey's last essays were more forcefully concerned with questions of borders going up and coming down, and of border crossings, than any of his previous essays. Carey found the rhetoric of convergence remarkably similar to the rhetoric of the "electrical sublime" he critiqued two decades previously (1970a, 1970b):

> The global village created by communications technology has turned out to be a rather peculiar place. It is not a place of convergence where the cultures of the world arrive at some omega point of agreement and identity. Everything has risen: Communications and transportation have uprooted human cultures and set them in motion once again. Yet nothing has converged: These cultures are in motion in their infinite variety and painful diversity. There are days when we wish for the dangerous certitude of squared-off countries pitted against one another – the United States versus the Soviet Union. However, today we encounter collage societies barely hanging together, where host and migrant cultures leak into one another. The very technology that is bringing us together physically and imaginatively is just as assuredly driving us apart. (1993, pp. 182–183)

It is not hard to show a clear trajectory from this 1993 text (from a speech given in 1992) to Carey's last published work that shows a preoccupation with but one question: How do we get along with one another? One way is by telling stories we wish to be true. That is not to say that there is anything delusional about discourse. Rather, it is that discourse is a means by which negotiation of social relations occurs, and as such is on the one hand fluid and on the other hand occurring in anticipation and through imagination of a desired goal (which itself may be fluid).

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson noted that in the eighteenth century two new "forms of imagining" arose, the newspaper and the novel, that enabled the ascendance of national identities. These two forms are particularly interesting for their blending of fact and fiction. Subsequent media reiterated national identity through form and substance, medium and message, but relied ultimately on the telling of a story. The internet shares this reliance on storytelling. It is in some sense a storytelling machine. It is a means by which we create and share our stories, our selves, our hopes, our desires. And, as Anderson noted of the novel, even more so the internet, as a storytelling machine, relies on a "complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (1983, p. 30). The newspaper brought the novel's sense of simultaneity out of fiction and into fact. It brought to daily consciousness the omnipresent sense that there were things happening elsewhere, beyond the horizon, which might have consequences for us and to which we might pay attention. It brought, in other words, an early (and imaginary) version of what is now known as "multitasking," communicating via multiple media with multiple people at the same time.

While most thinking about the internet has focused on its scale in relation to space and distance, little has been said about its scale in relation to time. The sense an internet user has of simultaneity and interconnection is akin to that of the reader of a novel who presumes connections between characters, places, and events or that of the newspaper reader who takes for granted that the news stories reported in the day's edition all took place at about the same time. It is not the conception of time electronic mass media, particularly television, had fostered, when one had

the sense that "the whole world was watching" meant something not about surveillance but about viewing an event on TV at the same time as millions of others. For the reader of a novel action occurs during "novel time," an indeterminate and infinitely "pause-able" time marked by reading. For an internet user, however, action occurs during real time, but it is never quite clear how the user's time synchronizes with that of another user. In cases of synchronous communication such as when using IM it is still not clear to what degree one has the other user's attention. Most internet users' experience of others is asynchronous (anecdotally evident by the surprise one often feels when the passing back and forth of e-mail messages seems synchronous). It is this asynchronous passage of time that most strongly marks internet use. Every choice about attending to an e-mail, web page, blog, IM, etc., is a choice to not attend to another message and thus to not attend to another person (with obvious exceptions noted, such as automated e-mail). Multitasking can only go so far to alleviate the sense that as one reads or composes an e-mail message there is, meanwhile, another message or posting or site that might be missed. The strongest feeling an internet user has is not one of overcoming space (perhaps we now take it for granted that the internet has made distance merely a physical concern?) but of being unable to overcome time. It seems as if the speed of internet communication has enabled the temporal compression of communication in a way that allows one to do more in the present, to get more into the moment, into "now." But now is a very short time, one quickly senses, and the greater the effort to maximize it, the shorter it seems, and the greater the sense of its passing, usually unnoticed.

It is worth emphasizing that every decision about how to spend one's time and about where to turn one's attention is also a decision about not paying attention to something or someone else and not spending time on or with something or someone else. The internet has accelerated the rate at which such decisions are made and gave practical form to the concept of "networked individualism" (Wellman et al., 2003) by emphasizing linking, connection, as the instrumentality of choice. But as Carey wrote about the new forms of communication in the late nineteenth century, we do not yet know the consequences of our newfound instrumentality:

> The 1890s appears to be a moment when people actively shed their past, shed ways of being and belonging, and created a society in motion that lacked a clear sense of where it was going or what it would be when it got there. These were moments organized by media, defined by media, commented upon by media, formed within media or at least as responses to new conditions of social life brought about in part by new media.
>
> The 1890s also involved kicking over the narrative structures of the past, of searching for a new metanarrative within which to tell the story of the modern. (1998, p. 33)

It would be simple and somewhat satisfying (and quite possibly accurate) to note that 100 years later, due to the quick and widespread adoption of the internet and the world wide web in the 1990s, that a similar process was under way.

However, it is too soon to know just what narrative structures are being kicked over and to know what new metanarrative is being crafted. One dimension of the new narrative is most likely about community and the individual, about how we get

along with one another. The general sense we have of community is still that it's "a good thing," which elides the reality that every community is at once inclusive and exclusive. By making community the focus of concerns (if not making it an object of study) one is set on a path that takes focus away from the individual, and there is no particularly good way to understand internet users in an aggregate form. Our efforts to categorize users, whether quantitative or qualitative, avoid the reality of a medium that permits an individuality greater than other electronic media and puts people together in groups of our own making who would in all likelihood never consider themselves able to be conjoined. Behavior is one thing, a sense of belonging is another. We can witness and possibly measure the former; the latter remains ephemeral and difficult to express, much less measure.

Another dimension of the new metanarrative being crafted is one of narrative itself. As I mentioned, the internet is a storytelling machine. With old media those who told stories were set apart in society, as poets, journalists, singers, artists. With new media anyone can tell a story. The locus of creation and control of new narratives has thus shifted. As Carey contended in a passage I quoted earlier, the "new media ecology develops in relation to new physical ecology among peoples represented by world-wide migrations over national borders, the formation of diasporic groups and by what we might call the diaspora of the internet itself wherein new social groupings are formed and organized" (1998, p. 34). Despite having had over 100 years to observe and learn since the last communications revolution, when the merger of media and electricity formed the foundation for modern media, we seem to be no better prepared to make sense of the present one. It is crucial that we find ways to understand the shared and multiple realities of those immersed in this new media ecology, difficult as it may be to do so since we as researchers are also always already immersed in it. We must listen to the new stories being told in a new medium of mediums. If we do not we will not comprehend or understand the shifting power relations that are already making themselves visible in new political formations and discourse at local and global levels that may be a harbinger of the guns of an August yet to come.

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