

When Media Are New: Understanding the Dynamics of New Media Adoption and Use

John Carey and Martin C. J. Elton

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Interview with Carey and Elton

What are you trying to convey through the book's title?

The book is about how users adopt – or reject – new media. The present tense – "When Media Are New" – matches our focus on factors that have changed little, if at all, since the time that broadcast television was introduced. During the last couple of decades or so, the technology has been changing at a pace many find dizzying, but as far as whether and how to adopt a media innovation is concerned, patterns of people's behavior have been stable in many important respects.

Why did you choose to focus on users?

Partly, of course, because this is what we know best. For the last 40 years our research, separately and together, has been concerned mainly with the behavior of prospective and actual users of new communication services. It's a field riddled with fascinating research questions and one in which the answers often turn out to be counterintuitive.

But another reason is that whether we are working with our students or our research clients, we are so frequently frustrated by the fact that, although there is so much valuable information about users' behavior "out there," it has not been brought together across media and through time. We have written the book with an eye both to our major need as teachers of university students and to what we feel corporate and governmental professionals will find valuable to understand.

And you feel that a single book can serve both academics and professionals?

Considering the importance of the subject and the gap in the literature, there is certainly a need for a variety of new books: for some that are more towards the scholarly end of the spectrum – going into much greater depth about particular aspects of theory and research methodology, specifically acknowledging far more of the fragmented literature, and so on – as well as for others that are more towards the professional end of the spectrum – more condensed perhaps, with an emphasis on "how to" advice. But there is a core of

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knowledge and understanding that we consider valuable to students and their teachers, on the one hand, and to those professionally involved with today's new media, on the other hand. And it is this core that the book is concerned with.

There is a more subtle point, too: we hope that each type of readership will help in validating the book for the other. If professionals vouch for the relevance of the points we make, and if those who lived through part of the history can vouch for the accuracy of what we describe, then academics can have more confidence that the book fits the reality we deal with. If, on the other hand, academics can vouch for the fact that the explanations we offer do not misuse or fly in the face of relevant theory or research findings from their specialties, then professionals, for their part, can have more confidence in the ideas we put forward.

How do you feel about the massive amount of hype about new media these days?

There certainly is a massive amount of hype, but it needs to be put in context. First, it isn't just "these days." Hype about new media has been with us since the first appearance of the telephone or television. Second, hype may attract attention to some new service or device; it may help persuade those who can afford to do so to try it out; but hype does not cause people to keep using something unless its use has value to them. And more and more people are continuing to use more and more new media. So, clearly, there must be a great deal of value, as well as a great deal of hype. Third, it's worth noticing the connection between hype and what economists call "network effects" – among other things, these cause the chicken-and-egg problems of starting up a new media service. One type of problem arises with services for connecting individuals with one another. The case for being one of the first to buy, say, a videophone was relatively weak: there were too few others with whom to connect with it. The other type of problem arises with services for which new content must be developed, like for some forms of interactive television – and now, 3-D TV. Why should consumers have purchased the associated product or service until there was enough content to enjoy? But why should third-parties have invested in developing such content before there was a large enough market of

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consumers? For both types of problem, people's expectations are key. The more an innovation is widely perceived as likely to be an early success, the more likely consumers and/or investors in content development are to take the chances which will allow a chick to emerge from an egg. Chicken-and-egg problems increase the economic incentive for those who are introducing new media services to hype them up.

That said, we are very well aware of the downside to hype. For example, it can lead to serious mistakes when corporations actually come to believe their own hype and, as a result, underprepare for the implementation problems they may well encounter. It can also lead to problems when managers believe in hyped-up forecasts. And, as a more dramatic illustration of the perils of hype, there was the dot-com crash at the turn of the century.

Should journalists play along with this hype?

Well, the hyped-up output of corporate PR departments can provide easy copy for journalists, but there are more fundamental factors to consider here. One is the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if enough journalists are upbeat about an innovation, it is more likely to succeed; if enough of them are critical, it is more likely to fail.

Then there is the question whether, if they felt that they should, journalists would know enough to apply a critical eye to the information they were being fed, or whether they would know enough even to realize when and where a critical eye – even if someone else's eye – needed to be applied. Take the subject of forecasts: we cringe whenever we see a forecast for the sales of some projected new media innovation included in a newspaper or magazine article.

Why are you so interested in forecasting?

Forecasting has generally been regarded as central to rational decision-making about new products and services. There have been many cases of business decisions that turned out

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to be disastrous because a forecast of the demand for some new media service turned out to be fatally flawed – and not always because it was far too high. Cellular telephony, which was invented at AT&T's Bell Laboratories, provides a dramatic example. In the 1980s, on the basis of a forecast provided by outside consultants, AT&T decided to leave investing in the development of the market to others. As a result, some years later, it cost the corporation about \$16 billion to buy its way in.

It turns out that the forecasting problem cannot be solved unless and until the service in question has already established itself in the marketplace, and by that time, unfortunately, much of the need for a forecast has passed anyway. Clearly, it's important for managers responsible for new products – and for those who provide them with funds – to know that the emperor has no clothes. And unless academics who study and teach about new media appreciate the limitations of forecasting, they will have a decidedly distorted view of why the last 40 years or so have unfolded as they have.

You seem to draw heavily on ethnography. What is your disciplinary perspective?

One of us entered the field of communication by the door marked, "Anthropology," the other by the door marked "Management Science." However, the perspective we have adopted in much of our research, as well as in the book, is transdisciplinary. Our interest is first in what actually happens at the level of users and then in why these things happen. A transdisciplinary perspective recognizes that in the case of new media, a single discipline often cannot by itself provide the answers to these two kinds of question. One must try to integrate the contributions of several disciplines. This perspective also recognizes the value of engaging with non-academics in real-world problem-solving.

That said, we have both been very encouraged to see a substantial increase in the use of ethnographic research in both university-based and, more strikingly, corporate research over the last 20 years or so. Ethnography is, *par excellence*, the route to obtaining, among other things, a textured understanding of how different individuals, families, and groups *actually* behave and how this varies with the settings they are in. In the book, we

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have tried to make good use of the results of ethnographic studies of, for example, television viewing and people's use of mobile phones.

Do you have any regrets at having used an old medium – print on paper – to write a book about new media?

This calls for a "Yes, but" answer. Yes, mainly because online media could have considerably relaxed the constraint on length, making it possible for us to have included much more of the visual material at our disposal. It isn't the case that, with new media, we would have made much use of the potential for the interactivity that hypermedia brings. Using this potential to good effect would very probably have required considerably more skill and experience than either of us has yet accumulated. It would probably have also required a great deal more of our time in writing the book – and dare we mention the nightmarish task it would have posed for our copyeditor?

The "But" part of the answer is that, anyway, the book does take advantage of online media. Any professional who wants to make a presentation based on part of the book or any teacher who is using the book in class, will find downloadable Powerpoint slides of charts which appear in the book, of other charts which ideally we would like to have included, and of photographs that complement the text on the Web site for the book

whenmediaarenew.com

For a purist the question may be "Which would be better, the new form or the established form?" But for pragmatists like us, a hybrid, combining some features of the new with some features of the old, seemed a good way ahead.