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Old Against New, or a Coming of Age? Broadcasting in an Era of Electronic Media

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Abstract

“Broadcasting” is often cast as an outdated term—we are constantly told that we are in the midst of a digital/social media revolution that will make the unidirectional, mass communication model obsolete. In response, we argue that to consider the continued relevance of terms like “broadcasting” in an era of electronic media is to neither hastily disregard the legacy of these terms, nor cling to them too rigidly. In this special issue of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* written and edited by graduate students, we begin a new thread in the longstanding conversation about what it means for media to be “old” and “new.” While this distinction is not one we should take for granted, the articles in this issue all show how we can strategically approach the intricate intersections and interconnections of different media, old and new. As such, this issue collectively calls our attention not to the familiar trope of “old against new,” but rather to the tensions that arise around a “coming of age.” Presenting a wide range of international scholarship from graduate students across many different disciplinary backgrounds, topical literatures, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks, this special issue represents an emerging approach to what it means to study broadcasting in an era of electronic media.

Old against New?

This special issue begins a new thread in the long-standing conversation about what it means for media to be “old” and “new”—a distinction we should not take for granted, but rather use to strategically approach the intricate intersections and interconnections of different media. The creation of this special issue was ignited by the conviction that as emerging scholars, graduate students are uniquely and fruitfully situated to shift forward this conversation by rethinking both what it means for media to come of age and how to study such a phenomenon.

As guest-editors of the first graduate student special issue in the history of the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*(JOBEM), we wanted to provoke debate and solicit contributions by posing a set of questions regarding the tropes of the old, the new, revolutions, and a coming of age: Do ideas about new media revolutions help us better understand the complicated relationships between radio and early television programming, telegraph networks and emerging telephone infrastructure, or musicians and the various shifts in the recording industry? Do notions of social media disruptions help us understand how participation takes place in sites like Wikipedia, Reddit, or YouTube, or how these sites are situated in relation to more established news and media industries? What is the relevance of “old media” terms such as “broadcasting” for studying today's social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Pinterest? And

in what ways could phenomena like “lifecasting” or YouTube’s invitation to “broadcast yourself” help us better examine and enhance the value of such terms in addressing our contemporary scholarly concerns?

As we called on graduate students to rethink the notion of “broadcasting” in productive ways and to explore the relevance this term has in an era of electronic media, we intentionally took the risk of leaving the title, “Old against New, or a Coming of Age,” open to interpretation. The choice was rewarded as we received a multiplicity of contributions from theoretically and empirically diverse perspectives. As a result, this special issue showcases seven emerging perspectives to the intersections and interconnections of “old” and “new” media. The articles in the issue advance our understanding of the diverse array of practices, content, people, technologies, industries, and policies that collectively constitute our contemporary media ecology. Taken together, they cut across disciplines, methodologies, theoretical traditions, media technologies, social phenomena, and topics of study.

Considering the ways in which terms like “broadcasting” can be productive in an era of electronic media is to neither hastily disregard the legacy of these terms nor cling to them too rigidly. As guest editors for *JOBEM*, we know that the term “broadcasting” certainly has the connotations of a rapidly disappearing era. There is a strong temptation to sharply distinguish between old and new media, and “broadcasting” (and even “electronic”) is a term that is now often associated with the old. We are constantly told that we are in the midst of a digital/social media revolution that will make the unidirectional, mass communication model obsolete. Even electronic circuits, which were a visible and foregrounded aspect of sending and receiving broadcast signals, have turned into invisible infrastructural elements in today’s allegedly immaterial and “seamless” Internet. Yet a cursory glance into either the history of media technology or the contemporary use of new media platforms complicates these dominant narratives, and calls our attention back to a broad constellation of factors and actors at work in and around media.

When the Old Was New

In thinking of the new and the old, we took a look at a selection of *JOBEM* papers from 1957, when the journal was founded as the *Journal of Broadcasting*. (“Electronic Media” was added in 1985.) We found that researchers back in the “good old days” were writing on familiar issues and concerns about what was new and old back then: television, radio, and print. The inaugural issue focused on the controversial topic of broadcasting from inside courtrooms, which in the United States had been severely restricted not by law, but by the American Bar Association. In other articles, Whan (1957) studied college courses delivered through TV and radio; Oppenheimer (1957) theorized a right to privacy in television coverage; Munn (1957) discussed programming targeted towards minority groups, “narrowcasting” before the term was coined; Yaeger (1957) analyzed the

evolution of Murrow's *See it Now*, the first major television “newsmagazine” in the United States. And in an article on audiences, Meyersohn (1957) opened by reflecting on how problematic it is to split media into generational epochs and then strictly compare the newer medium of television with the older medium of radio:

Two remarkable facts are equally true: 1) how much television resembles radio—as radio used to be—and 2) how different contemporary radio is from its own past and from its main competitor, television; or, to put it another way: a highly irregular cross-breeding has taken place in the genealogy of mass communication ... Precisely because there used to be something called “good old days,” or “old time radio,” we ... fall into the well set trap of comparing radio with television. (Meyersohn, 1957, p. 220)

If we were to replace 1957's new medium of television with Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook, and then replace 1957's old medium of radio with television, radio, and print journalism, this kind of quote could be found in many of the articles in this special issue. While the specifics have changed over the years, the articles in this special issue all give us different ways in which we can avoid this “well set trap” that is laid when we hear the familiar narrative that a new media will entirely replace the old.

As Paul Duguid warns, “supersession ... the idea that each new technological type vanquishes or subsumes its predecessors” (Duguid, 1996, p. 135) is not only a powerful trope today, but one that was prevalent in debates about the printing press, the telephone, and even writing. The idea that one new media entirely takes over old media has been called into question by a number of media historians, who often focus on “When Old Technologies Were New,” as Carolyn Marvin (1988) does, or see media as “Always Already New” as Lisa Gitelman argues (2006). David Henkin (2006), in studying the rise of United States postal service in the mid-19th century, emphasizes how we often have a “technological bias” (p. 15) that calls our attention away from social, cultural, political, institutional, and economic factors. Raymond Williams, in studying how “the invention of television was no single event” (Williams, 1974, p. 7) argued that even from a technological perspective, television was a combination of many different inventions, and that what television was changed dramatically over the years. Even Marshall McLuhan, famous for many of his technologically determinist predictions of electronic media, emphasized how new media are often a new container for an older message in his claim that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8).

While these kinds of nuanced perspectives on the new and the old are somewhat standard for today's media historians—historians frequently have to combat determinist narratives of progress—these issues and concerns are less prevalent in other contemporary studies of media. Yet all of the articles in this special issue carefully avoid the trap laid when we first hold new and old constant, then strictly compare some

essentially new medium or age with another essentially old medium or age. In contrast, the articles in this issue all show how some of the most interesting and relevant issues arise at the intersection of constantly evolving media technologies, institutions, audiences, practices, ideologies, and infrastructures. Furthermore, none of the articles in this collection overly fetishize the new by assuming that something is deserving of study simply because it is contemporary. While many of the topics discussed in this issue could be cast as novel, emergent, or disruptive, the authors have all grounded their work in broader, ongoing conversations across a diverse but overlapping set of topical literatures, disciplinary approaches, and theoretical concerns.

Outline of the Issue

We open the issue with Elia Powers' article "Building Buzz and Episodes with Bite-Sized Content: *Portlandia*'s Formula for Turning a Video Project into a Television Series." In it, Powers explores the potential synergy between television and digital media and the possibility to take advantage of how niche audiences access media content. The article examines *Portlandia*, a comedy series that affectionately satirizes daily life in Portland, Oregon, and more broadly the contemporary "hipster, eco-friendly coffee shop culture" common to many urban areas. The episodes in the series consist of bite-sized sketches that function independently as well as in connection to others, borrowing aspects of their format and online distribution model from music videos. Powers depicts how the creators of *Portlandia* succeeded in turning audience fragmentation and ready access to entertainment media on the Internet into an asset in attracting the interest of independent commercial television, and how this, ultimately, lead to the production of a successful series. Powers' article exemplifies how "new" media can serve a creative project's attempts of achieving commercial success through "old" channels.

This is followed by Benjamin Burroughs and Adam Rugg's "Extending the Broadcast: Streaming Culture and the Problems of Digital Geographies" which argues for understanding and analyzing the streaming of sports content as an enforcement of corporate media strategies, a reflection of telecommunication policy, as well as a cultural practice and tactic. Starting from the observation that Internet users are increasingly using VPN (virtual private network) technologies to bypass geofences that center sports consumption within a nationalized television broadcasting framework, Burroughs and Rugg propose a categorization of streaming in the digital era that goes beyond simply reducing the practice to the crude binary of legal versus illegal. This piece addresses the intersection of the old and the new by examining how large transnational media corporations are trying to bend digital sports consumption to the broadcast models that they have historically employed and how, in contrast, their audiences are finding tactics to circumvent the artificial digital geofences they face when they try to "sneak into the

digital stadium.” Reaching beyond the lens of piracy, the authors clear the way for defining streaming as an emergent reconstitution of broadcasting in the digital age.

Tanya Kant, in “Giving the ‘Viewer’ a Voice? Situating the Individual in Relation to Personalization, Narrowcasting, and Public Service Broadcasting,” opens with an intriguing insight: contemporary media platforms like YouTube and Facebook are often both celebrated and critiqued in ways that seem quite similar to how public service broadcasting (PSB) is discussed. Both are often cast as ways in which people can be collectively informed “through the transmission of common knowledge and interests,” but both also face concerns that they fragment the public sphere into isolated publics. Kant critically interrogates these assumptions and discourses, drawing from a rich set of longstanding theories of public service broadcasting and “narrowcasting,” as well as contemporary theories of algorithmic personalization and the “viewer.” At one level, this article speaks to an ongoing concern about how the publics and audiences of media institutions are affected by the technological affordances of media technologies. Furthermore, with a multi-faceted comparative lens, Kant also calls our attention to the discourses and ideological assumptions that are brought to bear across new and old media.

Jaclyn Cameron and Nick Geidner's “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed from Something Blue: Experiments on Dual Viewing TV and Twitter” investigates the increasingly common practice of broadcast television producers overlaying traditional TV content with content from social media streams. In studying this entanglement of old and new media, Cameron and Geidner's controlled experiments found that this augmented form of television has measurable effects on influencing viewer opinion, both in political and entertainment contexts. This specific emerging phenomenon is certainly worth investigating in its own right, but Cameron and Geidner also situate these findings in relation to not only longstanding approaches to the study of public opinion from communication and journalism studies, but also theories from social psychology on conformity. Their study is a compelling reminder that new media are often directly incorporated into older media, and we need both specific studies and a broad range of theories from across the disciplines to examine how these hybridized forms operate.

Weiai Wayne Xu and Miao Feng's “Talking to the Broadcasters on Twitter: Networked Gatekeeping in Twitter Conversations with Journalists” examines interactions between journalists and readers on Twitter—something similar but also quite different to writing letters to the editor. While existing studies of networked gatekeeping in social media sites have focused on the role of social media in making mass media content more or less visible, Xu and Feng explore the increasingly prevalent practice in which readers are situated alongside journalists in a social media platform. The authors first give an in-depth theoretical and methodological synthesis of various approaches used to study

interactions between gatekeepers and “the gated,” as they argue that this form of interpersonal communication is an important but understudied mechanism of networked gatekeeping. They then present results from an empirical study of conversations between journalists and readers on Twitter, exploring issues around homophily, political influence, and relationship building. Xu and Feng's article calls our attention to the new and old issues that arise when new media platforms and participants are situated alongside older media institutions and professions. As in Cameron's article on social media content in television programming, Xu and Feng demonstrate that we need to specifically investigate these kinds of intersections that emerge between new and old media.

Portia Vann's “Changing the Game: The Role of Social Media in Overcoming Old Media's Attention Deficit Towards Women's Sport” explores the struggles that professional women's sport faces, in terms of the lack of coverage and attention by mainstream media, through a case study of the 2013 ANZ Championship netball season. While “new” social media platforms may be leveraged to foster online communication between passionate sports fans and to provide a place for sport organizations to promote their competition and teams, without relying solely on broadcast coverage, being covered by the “old” mainstream media outlets remains important for both athletes and their audiences. The article proceeds from the contention that if social media use is widespread in a digital sports community, it may provide more incentive for traditional media outlets to endorse and promote the sport in question. Moreover, Vann examines the positive influence the convergence of “old” broadcast media and the “new” social media platforms can have on traditionally overlooked groups, as the resulting new environment may transcend some of the existing structural restraints on media attention and transform the consumption of sports into a more complex and participatory experience.

The issue concludes with Vincent M. Meserko's “Going Mental: Podcasting and Artist-Fan Identification on Paul Gilmartin's Mental Illness Happy Hour.” Meserko presents a rhetorical analysis of comedian Paul Gilmartin's Mental Illness Happy Hour (MIHH), a self-help podcast for those suffering from depression, anxiety, or frustration. Through this case, the article explores podcasting as a medium and its connections to traditional radio. It demonstrates the extent to which central attributes of traditional radio media, including its intimacy and its blurring of the public and the private, continue to endure even when methods of distribution are altered in significant ways. Beyond considering how podcasts reject some of traditional radio's overriding logics and distribution processes, Meserko's analysis of MIHH showcases how a podcast can act as a distinctive site of intimacy that makes visible those parts of a performer's identity that were not previously disclosed, and invites audiences to interact with artists, thus potentially lessening the distance between the two.

When Media Meet

Many of the articles in this issue explore how new media may provide an alternate space for visibility and participation, critically interrogating the relations between the new and the old. The opportunities these technologies provide can benefit groups that are overlooked by old outlets, such as the women's netball league Vann studied. It can also empower individuals who feel constrained expressing themselves via old venues and feel empowered by the opportunity to feel more authentic and more engaged with their audiences through new formats and distribution channels, such as the comedian Paul Gilmartin whose podcasts Meserko analyzed. Yet importantly, the articles also depict ways in which new media can be used to gain visibility and success in old broadcasting channels through novel processes. Powers' account of how *Portlandia* grew from a creative project to a network series is one example of this. In a similar vein, Vann expresses optimism that widespread social media in a digital sports community may help the community fight the lack of attention the sport receives in traditional mass media. While new media can empower and engage, it is essential that scholars continue to examine critically who gains, who is left out, and what are the moments where new technologies may (unintentionally) reinforce or even reinvigorate old forms of discrimination.

There are many shared concerns that unite the articles in this special issue. Among them, we wish to highlight a shared focus on the issues that arise when different media meet. Often, the phenomena under study are such that the technologies involved cannot be cleanly divided into the new and the old. Cameron's study of social media streams in television broadcasts—which found that these streams have measurable effects on viewers—is a compelling reminder that new media are often directly incorporated into older media, and we need specific studies to examine how these hybridized forms operate. Kant's focus on “narrowcasting” and algorithmic personalization shows us that there are not only strong tensions between the goals of longstanding broadcast media institutions and newer social media platforms. Yet, the boundaries between these new and old institutions are blurrier than we often imagine. Burroughs and Rugg note that the use of streaming technology for sports broadcasting was expected to perpetuate the longstanding practice of segmenting media markets, but these Internet-based “geofences” were complicated by VPNs. Finally, Xu and Feng discuss the various power relations around networked gatekeeping in their study of interactions between journalists and readers on Twitter—a kind of second-order media institution. These studies all show that what it means for media to “come of age” often does not involve the new replacing the old, but rather the emergence of complex assemblages that are produced when the new is incorporated into the old, or vice-versa.

Conclusion

It is our hope that if, more than 50 years from now, another group of scholars stumbles upon this special issue in whatever new archival medium we cannot even begin to imagine, they will find these articles and concerns as conceptually interesting, insightful, and relevant as we found many of the papers from the inaugural 1957 issues of the *Journal of Broadcasting*. In some of the articles in this issue, we see the tensions that arise when a well-established mass media industry encounters new media technologies, reshaping standard practices and assumptions. For others, the focus is not so much on a new technology disrupting an old institution, but on how the use of a well-established medium is re-shaped and re-situated by a newer medium. Some authors ask whether the norms and practices of well-established media institutions are upheld in newer media, while others inquire how the publics and audiences of media institutions change as the media technologies they use change. These kinds of issues have been with us for quite some time, and these kinds of questions will continue to be relevant, long after the specific media the authors discuss grow obsolete.

However, compared to the *Journal of Broadcasting* in 1957, we found many differences between this issue and then. Notably, this issue is written and edited by graduate students, and represents a set of shifting perspectives and approaches in study of media. Moreover, the authors and editors of this issue are a far more diverse group of scholars than those involved in the 1957 issue; back then, almost all the contributors were American men. This issue is also highly multi-disciplinary, as these articles would likely never sit next to each other in any standard journal or syllabus. They represent contributions to various sub-fields of communication, journalism, and media studies, but are also in conversation with sociology, geography, political science, history, critical theory, science and technology studies, and human-computer interaction. The empirical methods used range from in-depth case studies, interviews, and discourse analysis to controlled experiments and large-scale statistical analysis. Theoretically, the authors draw from and contribute to a large set of both novel and longstanding conceptual frameworks from across the humanities and the social sciences.

For us, one of the most compelling indicators of the expansive scope of this special issue can be seen in the reviewers who gave their time and energy to this project. We would like to thank the diverse group of scholars—some of whom were *JOBEM* regulars, while others were experts from other areas—who gave insightful feedback to all submitted papers. While we asked the reviewers to give the articles the same rigor they would give when reviewing any standard issue of a major journal like *JOBEM*, we also asked them to keep in mind that the articles were all written by graduate students, who may be submitting a journal article for the first time. In response, we were continually amazed at the level of constructive feedback that accompanied both votes of acceptances and rejections, helping graduate students make their research the best that it can be. We are touched that there are so many scholars who are willing to help graduate students add

their voices to the many ongoing conversations taking place across a variety of fields. We believe this speaks volumes for both the present and future state of research in this area.

In this vein, we would like to particularly thank Zizi Papacharissi, the editor of *JOBEM*. Zizi came to us with more than just an idea to have a graduate student special issue; she brought a strong conviction that a student-run, student-authored issue was an important thing to do. On behalf of all of the authors in this issue, we are grateful to Zizi for believing in us and giving us this opportunity. And last but certainly not least, this special issue would not have happened without the work of Stacy Blasiola, a Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois-Chicago, who normally works as the editorial associate for *JOBEM*. As part of making this a truly student-run project, Stacy took on the responsibilities of the journal's editor for this issue. She has been with us every step of the way, showing keen insight, careful planning, and passionate dedication. We are incredibly grateful that we had the opportunity to work with Stacy throughout this project, exploring what it means for both emerging media and emerging scholars to come of age.

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