Preface to the Second Edition

Preparing the second ddition of this book has afforded the opportunity to consider several issues. These have been prompted, in equal part, by reviews of the book, debate about its perspectives, feedback from students, our own continuing collective and individual researches and, not least, by an ongoing history; a history that the first edition itself fore-grounded and of which it has inevitably become a part. There have been changes in the field of new media and new media studies over the last decade. As we returned to our original project we were, in fact, testing the approach we adopted in the first edition, where we sifted out significant change, and ways of understanding that change, from the wider culture of continual upgrades, rapid obsolescence, marketing hype, shrill manifestos and disciplinary limits. We have been pleased to find that much of our thinking in the first edition still stands. Yet, this second edition contains many changes, some sections have been radically redrafted, others more subtly modified, and there are wholly new sections. But for good reasons, other parts of the book remain unchanged from the first edition.

The situation upon beginning the process of revisiting, revising and augmenting the first edition was daunting. Yet, as work progressed, the rudiments of an archaeology came into focus. We were able to perceive the overlay of 'new' technological artefacts and relations onto the schema that we constructed for the 2003 edition. As this became clear, the strong historical element of our project telescoped. The histories that figured in the first edition now became a part of longer histories by virtue of the subsequent accretion of time and change. In the period between the first and this edition, there has been argument and debate, com-peting viewpoints have emerged, new research has been undertaken, and theories have evolved. We, however, cannot emphasise enough the importance of the historical dimension of the study of technology (media or otherwise) in culture. Already reflectively addressed in the first edition, this has become even clearer now. Taking account of the historical dimension of technologies, and the cultures they inhabit and afford, avoids the pitfalls of identifying an essential change. Although much was made, around the turn of the present century, of the transformative potentials of technology, whether utopian or dystopian, when considered his-torically such moments can be seen to contribute to lines of development that have longer histories. Such moments of intense technological change add directions to these longer lin-eages, they prompt intentions, they select from the possibilities those lineages afford and the futures they shape.

Now that the first edition is itself a part of (new media) history, how has it fared? First, we have been gratified to learn that it has been widely read and adopted as core reading within university courses across three continents. This provides a welcome acknowledgement that the book's central aim of providing a survey of the most important problems raised by the issue of technology in culture have been essentially met. Second, it is used at different levels in university teaching, on both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, indicating that the book's accounts, problematisations, and arguments have attained a balance of lucidity *and* generality to serve a variety of academic purposes. Third, unusually for a textbook, it has been critically reviewed and its arguments disputed and discussed in academic research lit-erature (Kember 2005, Morley 2007). This tells us that our arguments hit home, that our characterisations of the core problems not only of New Media Studies, but more broadly, of technology and culture are, within always uncertain limits, accurate.

A certain anxiety inevitably arises in writing about a 'new' anything: by definition ephemeral, the new cannot remain new; we asked ourselves at the time of preparing the first edition how best to avoid this inevitable pitfall. We were, then, clear about the challenge a book on new media faced. We were also clear about the strategy that we would adopt. We decided it would be absurd to tie a discussion of 'new media' to those particular media which were new at the time of writing; our task was not to simply catalogue this and that new piece of kit and its uses but instead to concentrate on larger-scale historical trends and identify the core problems of technology and culture. What constitutes newness in media? Are there some key characteristics that allow us to distinguish the 'new' from the 'old'? What part does technological change play in that? What questions do new media pose to our available ana- lytical frameworks? Which disciplines would help us?

In seeking to avoid producing a book that would be just an historical incident, the mere expression of a moment, we broadened our field of view to the history and philosophy of technology and culture as the informing context for our study of new media. In consequence, the continuing use, and the demand for a second edition, provide a testable record of the success of our aims for the first edition.

While working on this new edition we adopted a principle to guide us in deciding to include new material. It is this: the mere appearance of a new media device or newly named media practice would not in itself mean that we should devote a new section of the book to it. That way would lie the madness and kind of novelty-driven 'upgrade' scholarship which we wished to avoid in the first edition. This would have been to allow the tail to wag the dog. Instead we asked, Does a new development require new conceptualisation? Which devel- opments require new thinking because they present us with issues and questions which the first edition is not equipped to explain? Here, for instance, we decided that 'blogs' and 'blog- ging', a form and a practice that has developed exponentially since 2002, did not *substantially* require new thought and analysis beyond that we gave more generally to com- puter mediated communication, and specifically to the temporality and interactivity of email, in the first edition. On the other hand, the rapid growth of Social Network Sites since 2003 (Boyd 2007) or the significance of YouTube did present us with socio-technical practices which were not evident, or rather, were *not evolved*, in 2003. These would then require our attention. We have spoken already in this Preface about history, which formed one of the core lineaments of our considerations; the other consists of identifying the recurrent or perhaps transhistorical *problems* of techological cultures. While by no means an exhaustive or closed list, certain of these are worth drawing the reader's attention to. This is not simply because we think them interesting (although we certainly do); it is also because these provide the out- lines of what we think *any and all* study of technology in culture *must* address.

At an early stage in the planning of the first edition, the project was criticised for paying excessive attention to a problem many academics and researchers considered over and done with or, maybe, simply a methodological diversion. This was a problem that we raised and characterised using the debates between Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams. Risking our colleagues' indifference, we insisted on the map these two scholars drew of the problem-field of technology and culture. While, as we point out below, it has been Williams's account that has held formative sway over the majority of the social, cultural and historical study of media, culture and technology, the problems to which this account provided its dis- cipline-structuring conclusions remain live, indeed heightened, ones. Specifically, the debates focused on the role of *causes* in culture. While the by now traditional response to this issue is to deny that causes are active in, or pertinent to the study of, cultural phenomena, prefer- ring instead to centre all upon human agency, more recent developments in a variety of fields

of academic inquiry – we should mention in particular the considerable impact of Actor Network Theory in Science and Technology Studies – have in effect re-opened this debate by rethinking, indeed denying, a difference in kind between cultural and natural events. We address these points in what follows under the rubric of a *realism* in the study of technology in culture. We ask our readers, therefore, to be alert to the difference it would make to cultural studies in the broadest sense, if we no longer insist, as did Williams, on the essential sepa-rability of culture from nature. This is neither a dogmatic commandment, nor is the shape such studies of culture would assume determined in advance; rather, we maintain that this is a field open for contributions, and in which there are considerable opportunities for con-tributing to new accounts of cultural phenomena. Conceptual change, however, also involves change in our overall image of a culture and its elements. In the humanities and the social sci-ences in general, we are used to considering the concepts of 'subjects' and 'identities' as core in the study of culture; yet what *are* these, and how might they be altered, or even replaced, by drawing different maps of cultural entities?

A second important issue we are now in a position to consider, is that technology is not some occasional player in cultural events, but a permanent fixture . Without recording tech-nologies of some kind (tablets, paper, wax, movable print, analogue and digital electronics and so forth), the cultures we all inhabit would not exist. Technology then is not peripheral to the concerns of analysts of culture, media and history, but an omnipresent element of them. In short, *all culture is technological*. While some may panic at this, fearing perhaps that cul-tural studies could be replaced by engineering diagrams, this reductive response is not the only one available. We should consider, however, in increasingly complex technological envi-ronments, entering into dialogue with all the players in our cultures' production – the sciences, the engineering, and the humanities and social sciences – and so should not reject engi-neering as culturally irrelevant simply out of fear and a desire for the comforts of our academic homes. As we note in what follows, for instance, the affects (the fear, rapture, or indifference) that accompany technology are themselves real elements in the cultures these technologies inhabit. One argument we offer that makes sense both of the engineering and the affect con-cerns the concept of *affordances*: technology is not all there is to culture, nor does it determine it in some predictable or absolute way; rather, technologies *afford* cultural possi-bilities, not all of which are exploited or actualised.

The first edition of this book was published in 2003, which means that it was researched and written in 2000-2002, and conceived even earlier. In that first edition, while recognising longer formative histories, we suggested that the mid-1980s were a useful marker for think-ing about 'new media' (see p. ?? of Introduction). However, even then, some commentators found the term 'new media' a strange one to choose to refer to something that begun to be apparent in the 1980s. At the time, we recommended our choice of title by pointing out that it was a more serviceable term than the obvious alternatives: 'digital media', 'interactive media', or 'computer-mediated communication' etc. (see **1.1.4** for those reasons). To some, it will seem even stranger to retain the title for this second, 2008 edition. Now, a whole gen-eration of readers, born in the 1980s, have come to maturity for whom so-called 'new media' were always a part of their world and the 'old' media to which they were originally compared now hardly exist in any distinct form untouched and transformed by the 'new'. This holds for the production of an ancient media form such as this book, and the way that it was written and produced, as much as to the existence of the persistent virtual world of Second Life. Of course, deliberately purist niches and minority cultures hold out against, or within, the ubiq-uitous restructurings of new media. Some people seek out Super 8 movie film, vinyl records, assiduously pursue chemical photography, write letters, paint pictures, play the acoustic

guitar. Of course they do and specialist economies support them (ironically, often utilising the resources of the Internet). However, a generation exists, many of whom will be the readers of this book, who work, think, and play within a new media environment as naturally as fish swim in the sea. For them (for you), the epithet 'new' attached to their (your) media only makes sense with effort; with historical perspective. Critical enquiry into the formation and significance of the most naturalised and habituated phenomena benefit from a kind of distance or shock, from 'making strange'. It is remarkable, and a testament to the speed and depth of change, that we already need to achieve this 'making strange' in respect of 'new media' for, as McLuhan observed, 'One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in' (McLuhan quoted in Federman 2003). With the greatest respect to fish, this book, in both its first and now its second edition strives to bring into view that which they are ignorant of.

'New media' is historical in an epochal as well as a biographical way. At the time of writing, a Google search for terms containing 'new media' yielded massive results: 'new media courses' found 49 million results, for 'new media jobs' 52 million results, for 'new media products' 51 million, and using Google Scholar, 'new media' as a topic of academic research offered over 31 million results. Rather like the 'new world' of the Americas 'discovered' by Europeans in the fourteenth century, the term has truly stuck. It is a historical marker. It locates a watershed.

In what follows, we propose and discuss certain types of history, some linear and 'teleological', or directed towards a particular outcome; some not linear in this sense, but involving twists and turns that only appear after they have done their work. We do not conclude by recommending a particular historical approach, but insist only that history is complex and convoluted. What appears simple and linear from a limited, present perspective, is always more complex. Technological history, in particular, is haunted by the 'corpses of dead machines', as Marx put it (see, for example, **2.1**). Part of addressing this history involves sorting through the immense present, and paying attention, therefore, to what is not immediately obvious, even though it stares us in the face. And in drawing up these histories, we are inevitably drawn into them. The inescapability of history is to be embraced, and our involvements in it examined. By engaging in this second edition, we have been afforded the opportunity to involve ourselves further in unpredictable developments; in messy forecasts and fuzzy understandings of the present. We do not escape this by mapping problems (there are always new problems to be identified), nor do we avoid it by grasping history whole, as it were, from outside (even were this possible, it would be history seen from outside at a certain point in history). But by attending to the history and problems of technology in culture, and by considering no issue settled in advance, we do make a serious attempt to understand our surroundings and how they have assumed the strange shapes they have. It is to this project that we would like to encourage contributions, and we offer this second edition, with its inevitable limits, in the hope that it may inspire you to do so.

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