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## Technophilia and the new media: Contemporary questions of responsible cultural consumption. A call for public debate

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### **Abstract**

*Since the dawn of modernity, technological developments have shaped the social landscape. In the past few decades, they have done so with increasing pace and impact on everyday life and behavior. The rapid ascent of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, and the broad diffusion of new tools of electronic mass communication like smartphones, webcams, and tablets unavoidably change how we perceive, interpret, and manage our lives, transforming our habits of cultural consumption. These developments and their practical implications question some of the micro-level (individual) and macro-level (social) conceptual cornerstones of Western modernity. The primary task at hand is not to anticipate the developments ahead – an impossible charge given the speed of evolution – but to identify an array of open questions at the inter- and trans-disciplinary crossroads between the different fields involved in these changes. This short piece tries to highlight some of these questions as a kind of “memory aid”. In our view, the respective answers must be the outcome of debate and public dialogue. They will thus be found in differing ways under the circumstances of changing discursive, socio-cultural and political contexts.*

*Key words: technophilia, new media, medium, culture, consumption*

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### **Questions focal to the new media**

What role do new media like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, live blogs, podcasts, webcams, smartphones, or tablets play in the post-modern, on-demand, interactive, and open societies of today? Given that new media create equal opportunity for anyone to autonomously publish, distribute, and consume content, how, and to what extent do they impact the social, cultural, and political spheres in non-democratic societies, which are still the majority in the currently arising “world civilization” — as the revolutionary events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, or Bahrain have markedly shown in the first months of 2011? What is the cultural and anthropological value of new, explicitly individuo-centric simulation worlds such as Second Life? Why has interactive entertainment become one of the ten most powerful high-tech industries in the world?

Is Facebook really a “new country” with 600 million “citizens,” and is it truly worth 50 billion dollars, although it does not strictly “produce” any economic goods?

Given that private sector companies like Microsoft collaborate with governments to create innovative Internet-based projects such as the “World Wide Telescope” as didactic tools (in this case, for the exploration of space), how might we view our new global vision, or imaginary (1), given that it is increasingly intertwined with political and economic goals and interests? If contemporary journalism continues to be both “embedded” in political and military events, and “fictionalized” (i.e., converted to a quasi-fictional narrative) in response to the growing popularity of live media, can we then trust the media to be accurate or impartial? In this new intersubjective context, are new media breaking down the fact-value distinction

i.e., as rejected by W.V.O. Quine (2)? Specifically, do free-information organizations like *WikiLeaks* transcend mere subjective opinion and offer pure objective truth, and if so, should they be seen as agents of progressive change? In general, does open access to unfiltered content in real-time contribute to our understanding or does it clear the way for unmediated value-laden judgment and error?

Given such inquiry, we pose further, yet essential questions: what role do these phenomena play in “cultural consumption”? Is this concept simply the “consumption of culture,” or should it now refer to a specific “cultural” method of consumption (for example, to promote sustainability). How does technology shape the complex relationship between new media and social change especially in light of the discourse of empowerment and assimilation brought forth with the rise of new technological and media-oriented ideologies? Finally, how will this nuanced relationship develop as the globalized culture of 21st century evolves?

While these questions are radically open, they are fundamental to our future. We struggle to provide plain answers for a nascent field in constant flux, but one thing is certain: we live in a time in which *human attention* has quickly become the most important and widely traded economic resource in the world. Unfortunately, many of the terms and concepts of contemporary social science do not adequately capture our shift toward this “attention economy,” and are now contradictory, ambiguous, and/or anachronistic. Michael Goldhaber explicitly remarks that, “we are entering an entirely new kind of economy. The old concepts will just not have value in that context” (3). The notion of an emerging “attention economy” is crucial to inquiry into emerging media.

In contrast to most of the traditional information-revolution theories, the concept of the attention economy privileges what is most scarce and desirable now: attention. While information is overflowing on the Internet, attention remains discretely limited. Much of human activity is better characterized as involving attention exchange rather than monetary exchange. The attention economy carries its own kinds of wealth, class divisions, transactions, and property, all of which make it incompatible with the current industrial, money-market-based economy (3). Today, our ability to produce material goods has outpaced our ability to consume those goods, and production of traditional economic resources has leveled out or declined. The energy

now available from the relative success of the market-industrial economy (i.e., satisfaction of immediate material needs) moves toward competition for attention, and the ability to obtain intrinsically scarce attention converts easily into control of physical action and material wealth. Further, attention is not a momentary entity, but rather endures and offers opportunity to gain purchase, credibility, and stability in the new economy. Goldhaber notes that, “economics is about the overall patterns of effort and motivation that shape our lives, and it is these patterns and motivations that are changing. That implies a wholly new set of economic laws that *replace* the ones we all have learned” (3). Certainly, the new media plays a key role in this shift — their spread through billions of people has already begun to restructure patterns of interaction and value in ways that are different in kind (not simply in degree) than ever before. The deep interdependence of new media and attention challenges traditional notions of societal movement and change.

Will new media unify and empower through open access or divide and destabilize as a hegemonic tool of the elite in this new attention-based reality? Will new media support merit-based projects of social mobility by leveling the attention “playing field,” or indirectly strengthen existing boundaries (i.e., developing vs. developed) by offering more attention (and thus control) to those already in power? If the latter, how might we inject open, plastic, and egalitarian conditions into an economy predicated on subjective and socially-ordered attention? How can and should we manage the practical ethical concerns (e.g., in the realm of intellectual property) that will arise out of a shift from material value to a relatively intangible system of attention-oriented power? Since the emerging attention economy is based on attempts at originality (mechanistic repetition is no longer viable), how do we preserve objective information and analysis in our developing societies? And given that attention flows from (and mostly to) individuals, how will we reconcile an increase in autonomy with a decrease in structured role resulting from the impact of new media on both the organization and the self? Finally, are we sufficiently equipped to deal with this modern attitude of “deep ambivalence” that will mark the advanced technological cultural evolution of the future?

### **Conceptual redefinitions: Medium, culture, and consumption**

If we are to illuminate key aspects of these questions, we must instantiate and sustain an inclusive public

discourse to share individual experiences and collective perspectives. To maintain a successful discussion, we should first consider the conceptual and terminological framework of three core concepts: medium, culture, and consumption. In sequence:

### 1. Medium

According to the standard definition, a “medium” is an “extension of man” (4) or a vehicle. It extends and/or channels a substance between two extremes, and becomes the intermediate “subject” between the two. Moreover, the medium connects the individual with the other. Hence, the term “medium” is often analogous to concepts of “technology” that axiomatically relate to the ways that tools are used to augment human skills — including our capacities for both acquiring knowledge and social engagement. Today, new media is shifting focus from the external to some sense of interiority not just of an individual, but also between individuals. Media permeates the human brain-mind-self and the social realm, thus evolving into a “trans-” or even “meta-social” concept. In short, the social and cultural spheres worldwide are in the midst of a deep transition that underwrites a crucial dimension of the turn from the 20th into the 21st century: media influence, pervade, and reconstruct society from both the outside (cultural practice) and the inside (physical brain-mind-self and human ontology) (5). As a result, the human being is on the brink of becoming a hybrid that seamlessly blends with technology (i.e., a cyborg) (6). Technology, in the form of new media will continue to become a leading cultural force not only in the West, but worldwide.

In this situation of technological holism, questions of personhood arise: to what extent am I myself? To what extent do I want to be “the other” through harnessing and incorporating the media? In other words: am I what I am, or will I be transformed by the narrative action of new media? How will new media alter our epistemological and ontological perspectives of the person? Will new media infiltrate our evolutionarily-layered self-referential core, proto, and autobiographical selves (7) or reveal personhood criteria as illusory altogether (8)? Moreover, how do I interpret myself through my specific methods of cultural consumption connected with the media? This inquiry is no longer purely philosophical, but has become intimately physical. Nature can be changed through its nurturance, and the embodiment of new media will change our perceptions of the self. Marshall McLuhan

claimed that, “new electronic media would rewire human consciousness just as effectively as print once did, giving birth to a ‘global village’ where people all over the world would be linked via communication technology” (9). Jeet Heer notes the connection between McLuhan’s theory and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of a “noosphere,” in which the “whole world [is] alerted simultaneously everyday to goings-on in Washington, Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, and...Moscow” (9).

McLuhan opined that from now on nature has to be programmed. The crucial question is: is this programming reversible? If so, how far along are we on the path, and are we moving toward a significant loss in autonomy and free will? McLuhan famously claimed that, “the medium is the message,” (10) which means that with each new technology we invent, we create “new mental habits and new patterns of thought...our tools aren’t separate from us but rather interact with us and alter, be it ever so slightly, who we are” (9). Are these didactic tools narrowing our intersubjective space and worldview instead of broadening it as initially proposed? And where does the agency truly lie? Are we, or the tools, actually doing the causal work? Further, how does this dynamic shift once we ascribe basic levels of sentience to the emerging technologies (a possibility available in the near future)? This techno-human interaction results in a coalescence: these are no longer separate ontological entities, but rather have become so deeply intertwined (through use and reliance) that they fundamentally change who we are, and how we navigate the external (and in many cases, the internal) worlds and niches we occupy. While form is traditionally said to lead to function, we are witnessing a reversal: our function (imbued with technology) is altering our form and demarcating new iterations of the self. Will the “I,” as we have known it through humanistic and enlightenment ideologies, survive this process or will it be transformed into a new notion redefined by technology, and if the latter case, what paths might this assume, and what are the biopsychosocial implications of such directions?

### 2. Culture

Etymologically, “culture” is based upon the Latin word “*cultivare*,” which means, “to take care of something,” or to “cultivate” something — to transform something that is non-human (including nature) into something human, and thus to insert it into the social milieu. Traditionally, a culture creates and maintains values and practices over time. In this sense, it can be defined as “transferable social

practice” or as “the inheritance of society” (11). While some processes connected with new media as “extensions of the human” may confirm this (12, 13), others seem more contradictory. If, for example, interactive live streams over the Internet allow us to engage and participate in any event in the world in real time, what does this ultimately mean for the individual, and more generally, for our evolving culture? Will it, as proffered in the idealistic media theory of German poet and author Berthold Brecht (14), allow the free subject to be present first-hand at every critical event of mankind worldwide, mediated only by technology itself? Or, will it distract the individual, taking her virtually away from her concrete, local environment and the specific, situational, and real tasks connected with it? If we broaden this quandary to the socio-political realm, we confront whether global democratization through open access to information is actually a political or cultural task (e.g., currently unfolding in China)? The United States’ “soft power” — its ability to attract others by the legitimacy of its policies and the values that underlie them — becomes more important than ever before with the emergence of the attention economy and new media.

For decades, theorists have argued that technology would transform world politics. In effect, the information revolution is ending hierarchical bureaucracies and “leading to a new electronic feudalism with overlapping communities and jurisdictions laying claim to multiple layers of citizens’ identities and loyalties” (15). We can no longer uphold the rigid type-identity based on purely geographical metrics, and are now in a more holistic token-identity phase, which defines individuals based on their unique choices, attention, and experiences within radically shifting architectonics of technology-oriented criteria and soft boundaries. At the same time, there still exists a nuanced role for the continuity of beliefs, the persistence and scope of institutions, and the influence of strategic state-based actors. Are we sufficiently prepared to effectively navigate the coming change while remaining grounded to these enduring human factors? Given the expanse of cyberspace, will individuals — as creators of the new media acting in the emerging attention economy — enjoy increased power in shaping (i.e., preserving) our current notions of the self? Or, will new media outstrip its initial human constraints, and operate autonomously outside of our direct control and guidance? Regardless, the creation of rules (e.g., criminal law and intellectual property policy) will be critical to the success of new media. The fundamental issues concerning who governs and on what terms will be directly relevant to operating

strategically and ethically in cyberspace. As we move forward, are we ready to confront the unique challenges and complexities posed by the evolving new media?

The understanding and effective management of new media will be key for progress on the world stage. Given that we are entering a world in which “security and force matter less and countries are connected by multiple social and political relationships,” (15) the emergence of new media bespeaks the need for a coherent structure of soft power. In this context, new media must offer pragmatic situational benefit in order to flourish in political space already occupied by extant beliefs, desires, and values. If new media is to gain prominence, it must initially operate within the confines of current policy. Yet, we may be on the precipice of a power shift between the traditional state and emerging technology. While the majority of new media qualifies as open and free information, it will be essential to recognize the differing motives and levels of infiltration assigned to individuals, companies, institutions, and governing entities. The creation of commercial information and the commodification of free information (e.g. the model of Facebook) will become increasingly prevalent as we move into the next decade. At the same time, the dominance of new media will significantly lower the value of strategic, or closed, information. In particular, this content has become more difficult to possess and privatize given the ubiquity of the tools of the new media (e.g., the expansion of Google Maps toward regularly updated satellite imaging of personal space). The new media will alter patterns of complex interdependence by vastly increasing our ability to sort, process, and transfer information about complex events through the rising number of available communication pathways in world networks. Nevertheless, new media operates within existing political structures, and its effects on the flow and type of information will vary significantly (15).

The rise new media in soft power will carry key structural implications. According to Nye, soft power works by convincing others to follow or getting them “to agree to norms and institutions that produce the desired behaviour” (15). Here, new media as the structure (if harnessed) reifies, reconstructs, and strengthens these social norms. While new media represent and manifest citizens’ preferences, can they begin to shape action in substantially tangible ways? Methodologically, how might we quantify this mapping of societal desire in order to inform policy theory and decision-making? In the modern era, new media

will become the most important information technology resource capable of influencing power. Will we recognize this in time to harness this resource? If so, will we set up an adequate infrastructure (e.g., intellectual property law and policy) so as to deal with this changing and expanding field? Moreover, how will we manage the ethical, legal, and social issues that arise? Michael Foucault's notion of biopower — as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations (16) — sheds light on an aspect of this ethical dilemma. The ontological shift lies in the ability of the elite to gain purchase by establishing and enforcing certain technophilic norms (e.g. the power to classify specific iterations of new media as standard) through control of and access to emerging technologies, and thus indirectly manipulate populations and political decision-making.

From a practical ethics perspective, we must confront concerns of creation, control, and availability. In the sphere of new media, will large corporations (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Apple) continue to solely reap the financial benefits from their economies of scale, or will grassroots movements (e.g., The Free Network Project) gain traction and contribute? In other words, who will become the first movers, or creators of the standards and architecture of information systems (15), in the era of new media? Will they value open access and transparency or ownership and profit? Further, how will those decisions manifest in the daily life of the end-user? In the coming rise of new technology and content (and the fall of contemporary media), who will be able to establish credibility in procuring, editing, and disseminating information? Will these actors be in the public or private domain, and how will they wield their unique status? As new media rises in prominence, how will the physical locations of its support system affect how content is framed? For example, does Facebook engender liberal, capitalist, Americanized values because it is financed and managed in the United States? If so, geographical boundaries may still hold influence (albeit indirectly) in shaping content, beliefs, and desires. In the next decade, new media will hinder information-legitimizing institutions insofar as it construes scientific knowledge (and its epistemological project) as socially constructed. In this context, Richard Rorty's conversationalist normative notion of truth — as simply a compliment paid to sentences seen to be paying their way (17) — informs the trajectories and effects of new media in modern society. In the political world, will

the West play a larger role in the emergence of new media? If so, how will authoritarian states respond? Finally, will new media directly contribute to a global shift toward democracy?

Today, the vital soft power is in decline as a result of an increase in (as we believe, unjustified) anti-Americanism (18). Thus, the project of cosmopolitanism (19) is necessarily political and cultural. In 2010, Hillary Clinton proposed a new more-egalitarian macro-strategy for the United States — to “lead through civilian power” (20) — that is, through the soft power implicit in our method of Western cultural consumption (21), and to harness the power of the Internet to distribute the ideals of democracy, equality, individualism, and Western human rights throughout the world (including emerging countries like China and still authoritarian regimes like Iran and much of the Arab world) (22). To what extent is this political strategy of supremacy a sustainable cultural vision in an era of widespread globalization? Clearly, this question is a constitutive element of the current “global systemic shift,” (23) since it abuts global social change at its very politico-cultural and (at least potentially) trans-civilizational core.

### *3. Consumption*

We live in an age of growing environmental, social, and economic (24) crises that calls for further responsibility, connectivity, and personal commitment. In this context, the term consumption may be an antiquated tool of analysis. Still, it remains the most appropriate description of how we behave (at least much of the time) under the influence of new technology and media. Perhaps, the comprehensive use of new media has made us “consumers” on a more complex level than even before. In the coming years, should we remain “consumers” of technological culture, or must we become “cultural users” of technology — and what are the implications of such a distinction? As Paul Ehrlich has noted, “cultural evolution becomes...essential in preventing a global collapse of society. We have got to have cultural evolution, so that we start to treat each other and the environment on which we all depend much better.” (25). Faced with the rapidly increasing impact of new technologies and the media on our behavior, how can (and should) we manage the transition from the passive notion of “consumer” to the active notion of “cultural user” through a more responsible, non-dogmatic, and cosmopolitan use of new media tools?

## Trajectories of the new social technologies

These questions are interrelated, and the two overarching meta-questions emerge as political and ideological. First, how can we negotiate a prudent stance between an inevitable global “culturalization” of the new media, and the entailed political and technological issues? Second, how can we reach a reasonable balance between *positive* mystification and utopianism (embraced by modernists, for example, Alvin Toffler) (26) and *negative* mystification and dystopian visions (offered by post-humanists such as Martin Heidegger) (27)? Is a stable balance even possible, given the quality and gravitas of the “problem level” (28)?

In our view, the only method to ward appropriate answers to these questions is through public discussion, participation, and engagement. In order to fully address such inquiry, this new public discourse must be able to investigate and interpret core aspects of the current transformational impact of media and cultural consumption on contemporary post-modern societies. Given that there is a deeply evolving ambivalence inherent to the new media that appears more complex and high-levelled than the basic two-dimensional dichotomy that characterizes most “modern” ideologies of “left” and “right,” it is beneficial to proceed by a phenomenological method of context-inclusive “thick description” as advanced by Clifford Geertz (29). In this way, we might first directly look at the phenomena in our experience, then try to describe them as “densely” as possible. Only at that point may we construct analytic terms and approaches appropriate to their essence and influence.

At the heart of such discussion and analysis is the question of what the main trajectories of the new social media might portend for the years ahead. The steady advance and integration of science, technology, and media as social forces challenge civil society to fund a participatory exploration of issues at the crossroads of technology, ethics, politics, law, and culture. We must encourage discursive engagement based on sound scientific research and well-informed policy. This endeavor is complicated given its inter- and trans-disciplinary nature. It must mirror the activities of technology, cultural theory, sociology, and media, while incorporating debates of conflicting and overlapping socio-cultural value. Thus, the active participation and cooperation of relevant stakeholders in the public as well as experts in the scientific, technological,

economic, and political fields will be crucial. In sum, we believe that the discourse will be successful if— and only if— it is thoughtfully organized in an experimental, lively, and open manner, so as to ensure that it will be engaged at an appropriate pace and scope, and in this way align the momentum, characteristics, and realities of current scientific, technological, and media advancements.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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