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Introduction

It was only in the 1920s – according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* – that people began to speak of 'the media', and a generation later, in the 1950s, of a 'communication revolution', but a concern with the means of communication is very much older than that. Rhetoric, the study of the art of oral and written communication, was taken very seriously in ancient Greece and Rome. It was studied in the Middle Ages, and with greater enthusiasm in the Renaissance.

Rhetoric was still taken seriously in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when other key ideas were emerging. The concept 'public opinion' appeared in the late eighteenth century, while a concern with the 'masses' is visible from the early nineteenth century onwards, at the time when newspapers, as Benedict Anderson argues in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), helped fashion national consciousness by making people aware of their fellow readers (see below, p. 31).

In the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the wake of two world wars, scholarly interest shifted towards the study of propaganda. More recently, some ambitious theorists, from the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, have extended the concept of 'communication' still more widely. Lévi-Strauss wrote about the exchange of goods and women, Luhmann about power, money and love as so many *Kommunikationsmedien*. If this is the case, as readers may already be asking themselves, what in the world does not count as communication? This history, on

the other hand, will restrict itself to the communication of information and ideas in words and images by means of speech, writing, print, radio, television and most recently by the Internet.

Significantly, it was in the age of radio that scholars began to recognize the importance of oral communication in ancient Greece and in the Middle Ages. The beginning of the television age in the 1950s brought in visual communication as well and stimulated the rise of an interdisciplinary theory of the media. Contributions were made from economics, history, literature, art, political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology, and led to the emergence of academic departments of communication and cultural studies. Striking phrases encapsulating new ideas were coined by Harold Innis (1894–1952), who wrote of the 'bias of communications'; by Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) who spoke of the 'global village'; by Jack Goody, who traced the 'domestication of the savage mind'; and by Jürgen Habermas, the German sociologist who identified the 'public sphere', a zone for 'discourse' in which ideas are explored and 'a public view' can be expressed.

This book argues that, whatever the starting-point, it is necessary for people working in communication and cultural studies – a still growing number – to take history seriously, as well as for historians – whatever their period and preoccupations – to take serious account of communication (including communication theory).

Students of communication, for example, should realize that some phenomena in the media are older than is generally recognized, as two examples may suggest. Today's television serials follow the model of radio serials which in turn follow the model of the stories serialized in nineteenth-century magazines (novelists from Dickens to Dostoevsky originally published their work in this way). Again, some of the conventions of twentieth-century comic books draw directly or indirectly on an even longer visual tradition. Speech balloons can be found in eighteenth-century prints, which are in turn an adaptation of the 'text scrolls' coming from the mouths of the Virgin and other figures in medieval religious art (see Figure 2). St Mark, in the painting by Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–94) known as *St Mark rescuing a slave*, is presented like Superman in the comics four hundred years later, diving head first from Heaven to rescue a Christian captive (Figure 1).

In the third place, denunciations of new media follow a similar pattern, whether the object of these denunciations is television or the Internet. They take us back to debates about the unfortunate effects of romances on their readers and of plays on their audiences in the eighteenth or even the sixteenth century, stressing the stimulation of the passions. San Carlo Borromeo (1538–84), archbishop of Milan, described
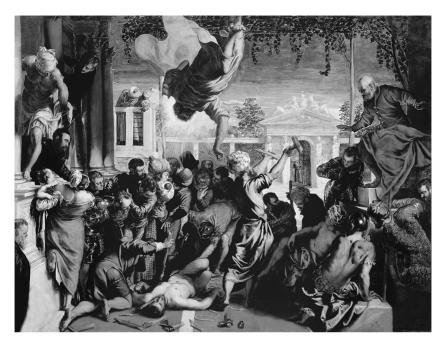
Figure 1 *Tintoretto*, St Mark rescuing a slave, *1548.*

plays as the 'liturgy of the devil', while the first chapter of Dennis and Merrill's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* was entitled 'The Belly of the Beast'. The role of the press, and of the journalists who earn their living from it, has always been controversial. The unreliability of the 'gazeteers' was already a commonplace in the seventeenth century. The charge of 'muck-raking' is also an old one (see p. 208).

Despite all such continuities, this book will concentrate on changes in the media. In presenting these changes, an attempt will be made to avoid two dangers, that of asserting that everything has got worse or of assuming that there has been continuous improvement. The implication that trends have moved in a single direction must be rejected, although writers trusting in it have often been eloquent and distinguished in their own fields. Thus, the Italian historian Carlo Cipolla, in his study of *Literacy and Development in the West* (1969), stressed the contribution of literacy to industrialization and more generally to 'progress' and to 'civilization', suggesting that 'widespread literacy meant . . . a more rational and more receptive approach to life'. In this respect, Cipolla's work is representative of a mid-twentieth-century faith in 'modernization', a faith which underlay the literacy campaigns

Figure 2 *Anon*, The Vision of St Bernard, *Book of Hours*, *c.1470*.

organized by UNESCO and by the governments of Third World countries such as Cuba.

The problems raised by this kind of approach demand discussion (see p. 256). So, too, do statements about the Internet and its potential as an agency of 'democratization'. It is not possible at this point in its history to conclude that through the widening of access and its transformation 'from below' it will in the long run fulfil that role. Already some critics fear that it undermines all forms of 'authority', affects behaviour adversely, and jeopardizes individual and collective security. Rightly, a number of specialists in media studies have focused on what they call 'media debates'. They concern both topical issues and long-term processes.

A relatively short history like this must be extremely selective and must privilege certain themes, like the public sphere, the supply and diffusion of information and the rise of mediated entertainment, at the expense of others. It must also concentrate on change at the expense of continuity, although readers will be reminded from time to time that, as new media were introduced, older ones were not abandoned but coexisted and interacted with the new arrivals. Manuscripts remained important in the age of print, like books and radio in the age of television. The media need to be viewed as a system, a system in perpetual change in which different elements play greater or smaller roles.

What follows is essentially a social and cultural history with the politics, the economics and – not least – the technology put in, while rejecting technological determinism, which rests on misleading simplifications (see pp. 14, 16). We have been influenced by the simple but deservedly famous classic formula of the American political scientist Harold Lasswell (1902–78), describing communication in terms of who says what to whom in which channel with what effect. The 'what' (content), the 'who' (control) and the 'whom' (audience) matter equally. Context matters too. The responses of different groups of people to what they hear, view or read relate in part to the channel. How big the different groups are – and whether they can constitute a 'mass' – is also relevant. The language of the masses emerged in the course of the nineteenth century and reminds us to consider Lasswell's 'whom' in terms of 'how many?'

The immediate intentions, strategies and tactics of communicators need at every point in the story to be related to the context in which they are operating – along with the messages that they are communicating. The long-term effects, especially the unintended and sometimes surprising consequences of the use of one means of communication rather than another, are more difficult to separate, even with the gift of hindsight. Indeed, whether 'effects' is the right term, implying as it

does a one-way cause–effect relationship, is itself a subject of controversy. The words 'network' and 'web' were already in use in the nineteenth century.

This book concentrates on the modern West, from the late fifteenth century onwards. The narrative begins with printing (*c*.1450 AD) rather than with the alphabet (*c*.2000 BC), with writing (*c*.5000 BC), or with speech, but despite the importance often attributed to Johann Gutenberg (*c*.1400–68), whom readers of one British newspaper recently voted 'man of the millennium' (*Sunday Times*, 28 November 1999), there is no clean break or zero point at which the story begins, and it will sometimes be necessary to refer back briefly to the ancient and medieval worlds. In those days, communications were not immediate, but they already reached to all the corners of the known world.

The twentieth-century Canadian Harold Innis was one of several scholars who noted the importance of the media in the ancient world. Trained as an economist, he made his reputation with the so-called 'staple theory' of Canadian development, noting the successive dominance of the trade in furs, fish and paper, and the effects of these cycles on Canadian society. 'Each staple in turn left its stamp, and the shift to new staples invariably produced periods of crisis.' The study of paper led him into the history of journalism, and the study of Canada, where communications mattered profoundly for economic and political development, colonial and post-colonial, drew him to the comparative history of empires and their media of communication, from ancient Assyria and Egypt to the present. In his *Empire and Communications* (1950), Innis argued, for instance, that the Assyrian Empire was a pioneer in the construction of highways and it was claimed that a message could be sent from any point to the centre and an answer received within a week.

Like a good economic historian, when Innis wrote of 'media', he meant the materials used for communication, contrasting relatively durable substances such as parchment, clay and stone with relatively ephemeral products such as papyrus and paper (the sections on the so-called 'ages' of steam and electricity later in this book will underline his point about the material media of communication). Innis went on to suggest that the use of the heavier materials, as in the case of Assyria, led to a cultural bias towards time and towards religious organizations, while the lighter ones, which may be moved quickly over long distances, led to a bias towards space and political organizations. Some of his earlier history is weak and some of his concepts are ill-defined, but the ideas of Innis as well as his broad comparative approach remain a stimulus as well as an inspiration to later workers in the field. It is to be hoped that future historians will analyse the consequences of using

plastic and wire in the way in which Innis approached stone and papyrus.

Another central concept in the pioneering Innis theory was the idea that each medium of communication tended to create a dangerous monopoly of knowledge. Before Innis decided to become an economist, he thought seriously about becoming a Baptist minister. The economist's interest in competition, in this case competition between media, was linked to the radical Protestant's critique of priestcraft. Thus, he argued that the intellectual monopoly of medieval monks, based on parchment, was undermined by paper and print, just as the 'monopoly power over writing' exercised by Egyptian priests in the age of hieroglyphs had been subverted by the Greeks and their alphabet.

In the case of ancient Greece, however, Innis emphasized speech more than the alphabet. 'Greek civilization', he wrote, 'was a reflection of the power of the spoken word.' In this respect he followed a Toronto colleague, Eric Havelock (1903–88), whose *Preface to Plato* (1963) focused on the oral culture of the early Greeks. The speeches in the Assembly at Athens and the plays recited in the open-air amphitheatres were important elements of ancient Greek civilization. In this, as in other oral cultures, songs and stories came in fluid rather than fixed forms, and creation was collective in the sense that singers and storytellers continually adopted and adapted themes and phrases from one another. So do scholars today, although plagiarism is denounced and our conceptions of intellectual property require that the source of borrowed material be acknowledged, at least in a footnote.

Clarifying the process of creation, the Harvard professor Milman Parry (1900–35) argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – although they have survived into our own time only because they were written down – were essentially improvised oral poems. To test his theory, Parry carried out fieldwork in the 1930s in rural Yugoslavia (as it then was), recording performances by narrative poets on a wire-recorder (the predecessor of the tape recorder). He went on to analyse the recurrent formulae (set phrases such as 'wine-dark sea') and recurrent themes (such as a council of war or the arming of a warrior), prefabricated elements which enabled the singers to improvise their stories for hours at a time.

In Parry's work, developed by his former assistant Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Yugoslavia, and by analogy Homeric Greece, illustrated the positive aspects of oral cultures which had too often been dismissed – as they sometimes still are – as merely 'illiterate'. That ancient Greek culture was shaped by the dominance of oral communication is a view which is now widely shared by classical scholars.

Yet Alexander the Great carried Homer's *Iliad* with him on his expeditions in a precious casket, while a great library of about half a million

rolls was founded in the city named after him, Alexandria. It is no accident that it was in association with this vast library of manuscripts, which allowed information and ideas from different individuals, places and times to be juxtaposed and compared, that a school of critics developed, taking advantage of the library's resources to develop practices which would only spread in the age of print (see p. 21). The balance between media is discussed in Rosalind Thomas's *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992).

Images, especially statues, were another important form of communication, indeed of propaganda, in the ancient world, notably in Rome in the age of Augustus. This Roman official art was to influence the iconography of the early Church, the image of Christ 'in Majesty', for example, being an adaptation of the image of the emperor. For Christians, images were both a means of conveying information and a means of persuasion. As the Greek theologian Basil of Caesarea (*c*.330–79) put it, 'artists do as much for religion with their pictures as orators do by their eloquence'. In similar fashion, Pope Gregory the Great (*c*.540–604) described images as doing for those who could not read, the great majority, what writing did for those who could. The tactile aspect of images also deserves to be noted. Kissing a painting or a statue was a common way of expressing devotion, and one still to be seen in the Catholic and Orthodox worlds today.

It was the Byzantine Church which stayed close to ancient models. Christ was represented in majesty, as Pantocrator ('ruler of all') in the mosaics decorating the interior of the domes of Byzantine churches. Developing in a part of Europe where literacy was at its lowest, Byzantine culture was a culture of painted icons of Christ, the Virgin and the saints. As an eighth-century abbot declared, 'The gospels were written in words, but icons are written in gold'. The term 'iconography' would pass into high culture and later into popular culture, where 'icon' refers to a secular celebrity such as – appropriately enough – Madonna, the pop singer.

Byzantine icons could be seen in homes and streets as well as in churches, where they were displayed on the iconostasis, the doors screening the sanctuary from the laity. There was no such separation in the Roman Catholic churches. In both faiths, symbolism was a feature of religious art and the messages it conveyed, but in Byzantium, unlike the West until the Reformation, teaching through visual culture was under assault, and images were intermittently attacked as idols and destroyed by iconoclasts (image-smashers), a movement which reached its climax in the year 726.

Islam banned the use of the human figure in religious art, as did Judaism, so that mosques and synagogues looked very different from

Figure 3 *Anon tapestry,* Apocalypse, *14th century.*

churches. Nonetheless, in Persia from the fourteenth century, human figures along with birds and animals were prominent in illuminated manuscripts which went on to flourish in the Ottoman Empire and Mogul India. They were illustrating history or fable. The most famous western example of such illustration was in needlework, the *Bayeux Tapestry* (*c.*1100), which vividly depicted the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, a strip 232 feet long presenting a visual narrative which has sometimes been compared to a film in respect of its techniques and effects.

In medieval cathedrals, images carved in wood, stone or bronze and figuring in stained glass windows formed a powerful system of communication. In his novel *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831–2), Victor Hugo portrayed the cathedral and the book as two rival systems: 'this will kill that'. In fact, the two systems coexisted and interacted for a long time, like manuscript and print later. 'To the Middle Ages', according to the French art historian Emile Mâle (1862–1954), 'art was didactic'. People learned from images 'all that it was necessary that they should know – the history of the world from the creation, the dogmas of religion, the examples of the saints, the hierarchy of the virtues, the range of the

sciences, arts and crafts: all this was taught them by the windows of the church or by the statues in the porch'.

Ritual was another important medieval medium. The importance of public rituals in Europe, including the rituals of festival, during the thousand years 500–1500 has been explained (perceptively if inadequately) by the low rate of literacy at that time. What could not be recorded needed to be remembered, and what needed to be remembered had to be presented in a memorable way. Elaborate and dramatic rituals such as the coronation of kings and the homage of kneeling vassals to their seated lords demonstrated to the beholders that an important event had occurred. Transfers of land might be accompanied by gifts of symbolic objects such as a piece of turf or a sword. Ritual, with its strong visual component, was a major form of publicity, as it would be once more in the age of televised events such as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

Nonetheless, medieval Europe, like ancient Greece, has been viewed as an essentially oral culture. Preaching was an important means of spreading information. What we now call medieval literature was produced, in the words of a pioneering student of the subject, for 'a hearing not a reading public'. Reading often took place aloud. As the Cambridge don H. J. Chaytor remarked in *From Script to Print* (1945), if the reading room of (say) the British Library were to be filled with medieval readers, 'the buzz of whispering and muttering would be intolerable'. Medieval accounts were 'audited' in the literal sense of someone listening to them being read aloud. So were poems of all kinds, monastic or secular. The Icelandic saga, stretching back into a non-Graeco-Roman past, takes its name from the fact that it was read aloud, in other words spoken or 'said'.

It was only very gradually, from the eleventh century onwards, that writing began to be employed for a variety of practical purposes by popes and kings, while a trust in writing (as Michael Clanchy showed in *From Memory to Written Record*, 1979) developed still more slowly. In England in 1101, for example, some people preferred to rely on the word of three bishops rather than on a papal document which they described contemptuously as 'the skins of wethers blackened with ink'.

Yet, despite such examples of resistance, the gradual penetration of writing into everyday life in the later Middle Ages had important consequences, including the replacement of traditional customs by written laws, the rise of forgery, the control of administration by clerks (literate clerics) and, as Brian Stock has pointed out in *The Implications of Literacy* (1972), the emergence of heretics who justified their unorthodox opinions by appealing to biblical texts, thus threatening what Innis

called the 'monopoly' of knowledge of the medieval clergy. For these and other reasons, scholars speak of the rise of written culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Manuscripts, including illuminated manuscripts, were being produced in increasing numbers in the two centuries before the invention of printing, a new technology introduced in order to satisfy a rising demand for reading matter. And in the two centuries before printing, visual art was also developing what in retrospect came to be regarded as portraiture. The poet Dante and the artist Giotto (1266–1330) were contemporaries. Both were fascinated by fame, as was Petrarch (1304–74) a generation later, and all three achieved it in their own lifetime. So, too, did Boccaccio (1317–75) and Chaucer (1340?–1400) in England. The latter wrote a remarkable poem, 'The House of Fame', which through the images of dream drew on the treasury of his brain to contemplate what fame meant. Petrarch wrote a 'Letter to Posterity' in which he gave personal details, including details of his personal appearance, and proudly proclaimed that 'the glorious will be glorious to all eternity'. The emphasis on permanence would be still stronger in the age of print (see p. 21).

Following the development of electrical communication, beginning with the telegraph, a sense of imminent as well as immediate change developed, and the media debates of the second half of the twentieth century have encouraged re-evaluation both of the invention of printing and of all the other technologies that were treated at their beginning as wonders. That changes in the media have had important social and cultural consequences is generally accepted. It is the nature and scope of these consequences which is rather more controversial. Are they primarily political or psychological? On the political side, do they favour democracy or dictatorship? The 'age of radio' was not only the age of Roosevelt and Churchill but that of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. On the psychological side, does reading encourage empathy with others or does it encourage withdrawal into a private world? Does television or 'the Net' destroy communities or create new kinds of community in which spatial proximity is no longer important?

Again, are the consequences of literacy, or of television, more or less the same in every society or do they vary according to the social or cultural context? Is it possible to distinguish cultures of the eye, in which what is seen outweighs what is heard, and cultures of the ear, more attuned to soundscapes? Chronologically, is there a 'Great Divide' between oral and literate cultures, or between societies pre- and post-television? How does the steam engine relate to this division? With its invention, adoption and development, locomotives and steamships

could reduce travel times and extend markets. And electronics, a word not used in the nineteenth century, brought immediacy nearer, as nineteenth-century commentators already knew.

Some of the people who initiated media debates gave positive answers, not only Cipolla (see p. 3), but theorists from quite different academic backgrounds, such as Marshall McLuhan and his student Walter Ong, best known for his *Orality and Literacy* (1982). The former quickly established his own fame while the latter was content to be a priest and scholar. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), written in experimental form, *Understanding Media* (1964) and other works, McLuhan, following in the wake of his Toronto colleagues Innis and Havelock, asserted the centrality of the media, identifying and tracing their specific characteristics irrespective of the people who use them, the organizational structures within which their providers operate and the purposes for which they are used.

For McLuhan, who had been trained as a literary critic, what was important was not the content of communication so much as the form that it took. He encapsulated his interpretation in memorable phrases like 'the medium is the message' and the distinction between 'hot' media such as radio and cinema and 'cool' media such as television and the telephone. More recently, the psychologist David Olson, another Canadian, in *The World on Paper* (1994), coined the phrase 'the literate mind' to sum up the changes which the practices of reading and writing have made – so he argues – to the ways in which we think about language, the mind and the world, from the rise of subjectivity to the image of the world as a book.

Ong, more interested in context, acknowledged his debt to this Toronto school of media theory (the name, like that of the Frankfurt school, is a reminder of the continuing importance of cities in academic communication). He emphasized the differences in mentality between oral cultures and chirographical or 'writing cultures', distinguishing between 'orally based thought . . . chirographically based, typographically based and electronically based thought', noting, for example, the role of writing in 'decontextualizing' ideas, in other words, taking them out of the face-to-face situations in which they were originally formulated in order to apply them elsewhere.

The anthropologist Jack Goody has discussed both the social and the psychological consequences of literacy in ways which run parallel to Ong's. In *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), on the basis of an analysis of written lists in the ancient Middle East, for example, Goody emphasized the reorganizing or reclassification of information, another form of decontextualization made possible by writing. Drawing on his own fieldwork in West Africa, he has noted the tendency of oral cul-

tures to acquire what he calls 'structural amnesia', in other words for-
getting the past, or more exactly remembering the past as if it were like
the present. The permanence of written records, on the other hand, acts
as an obstacle to this kind of amnesia and so encourages an awareness
of the difference between past and present. The oral system is more
fluid and flexible, the written system more fixed. Other analysts have
made more sweeping claims about the consequences of literacy as a
condition for the rise of abstract and critical thought (not to mention
empathy and rationality).

These claims about the consequences of literacy have been chal-
lenged, notably by another British anthropologist, Brian Street. In *Lit-
eracy in Theory and Practice* (1984), Street criticized not only the concept
of the 'Great Divide' but also what he calls the 'autonomous model' of
literacy as 'a neutral technology that can be detached from specific
social contexts'. In its place he has proposed a model of literacies in the
plural which emphasized the social context of practices such as reading
and writing and the active role of the ordinary people who make use
of literacy. Taking examples from his fieldwork in Iran in the 1970s, he
makes a contrast between two literacies, the art of reading taught in
the Koranic school and the art of keeping accounts taught in the com-
mercial school in the same village.

A similar point might be made about modern Turkey, where the
country's leader Kemal Atatürk ordered a change from Arabic script to
the western alphabet in 1929, declaring that 'our nation will show with
its script and with its mind that its place is with the civilized world'.
The change vividly illustrates the symbolic importance of the media of
communication. It is also related to the question of memory, since
Atatürk wanted to modernize his country and by changing the script
he cut the younger generation off from access to written tradition.
However, in the Koranic schools in Turkey, as in Iran, the traditional
Arabic script is still taught.

The exchange between Goody and Street, together with the more
recent debate on virtual reality and cyberspace – the theme of the final
chapter of this book – offers vivid and always pertinent illustrations of
both the insights and the limitations associated with disciplinary
biases. In the course of their fieldwork, anthropologists, for example,
have more opportunities than historians for investigating social context
in depth, but fewer opportunities for observing changes over the cen-
turies. In the 1990s, the media analyses of both anthropologists and his-
torians have been pushed aside by writers (including novelists and
film-makers). Heinz Pagels and Scott Bukatman, for instance, contrast
the explosion of mechanical and electronic technologies and the implo-
sion of the media age in *The Dreams of Reason* (1989) and *Terminal*

Identity (1993). Some producers and scriptwriters, bypassing the problem of the relation of science to technology, reduce 'all the things in the world to blips, to data, to the message units contained within the brain and its adjunct the computer'. Others dwell on complexity and the way in which the computer has altered 'the architectonic of the sciences [and arts] and the picture we have of material reality'.

For historians and specialists in social studies, there is a continuing division between those who emphasize structure and those who emphasize agency. On one side, there are those who claim that there are no consequences of computers as such, any more than there are consequences of literacy (including visual literacy and computer literacy). There are only consequences for individuals using these tools. On the other hand, there are those who suggest that using a new medium of communication inevitably changes people's views of the world, in the long term if not earlier. One side accuses the other of treating ordinary people as passive, as objects undergoing the impact of literacy or computerization. The reverse accusation is that of treating the media, including the press, as passive, as mirrors of culture and society rather than as agencies transforming culture and society.

This is not the place to attempt to close such debate. On the contrary, readers are asked to keep alternative viewpoints in mind while reading the pages which follow. No single theory provides a complete guide to the contemporary realm of 'high-definition, inter-drive, mutually convergent technologies of communication', where relationships, individual and social, local and global, are in continuous flux.