



ISSN 1835-2340

❖ **Virginia Nightingale and Tim Dwyer (eds) — *New Media Worlds: Challenges for Convergence***

Oxford University Press, London 2007. ISBN 9780 95558364

Reviewed by John Farnsworth

New Media Worlds is a welcome addition, particularly for undergraduates, to understanding the complicated, shifting digital media environments with which they are involved. This said, and well-constructed as it is, the text illustrates many of the current dilemmas facing media scholars and teachers. How to keep up with the seemingly endless proliferation of new technologies and media forms? How to represent and understand these in terms of current thinking – and which current thinking? How to do so in ways that address student readerships often more savvy about media practices than their teachers?

The solution offered in this introductory text is to cover as many topics as its 19 bite-sized chapters as can be managed within 350 pages. Covering four broad areas of digitisation and convergence, activism, access and participation, its authors run the gamut of new media technologies, practices, issues and debates – at least, as much as this amount of space will allow. Given the book's well-conceived, tightly constructed organisation and design, there is a high degree of cohesion which its student readership is likely to appreciate. This includes an initial 'guided tour' of the contents, overviews for each major part and for each chapter, along with a set of key terms, activities, tutorial questions, recommended readings and websites, theory links and much else. All of this facilitates the task of reader and teacher alike.

This organization enables the content to sweep across a wide variety of new media worlds, covering internet and mobile technologies, software applications such as Second Life, practices that include social networking, internet surfing, community and private collaboration. Other chapters discuss issues of equality and access online, the significance of participation, play and socialisation across a diversity of traditional and new media and extensive space is given to debates around such issues as interactivity, the concept of media diversity and pluralism, the role of the digital divide and the digital commons, along with questions of policy and regulation. There are also more unexpected topics, such as disability and online culture. In addition, topics are often addressed through examples drawn from a variety of different national and cross-national contexts: for example, universal access in South Africa or crisis and the internet that focuses on the response to the 2004 Asian Boxing Day tsunami. This is possible in part, because while many contributors are drawn from Australia, there are also representatives from the UK, South Africa, Sweden and Norway. A number, apart from the editors, are also well-known scholars, including Graham Murdock, Jim McGuigan and Celia Lury.

Individual chapters draw together current practice or debate and relate these to a variety of theoretical frameworks. This enables Celia Lury, for instance, to draw on elements of actor network theory, particularly Michel Callon's work, to explore brands and branding as new media objects that mediate and constitute the worlds of production and consumption. This is a sophisticated discussion, particularly in the context of a student textbook, but one which develops a suggestiveness towards ways of thinking about media, media objects and media networks. The chapter itself echoes a different approach to brands developed earlier by Virginia Nightingale, where she draws on Henry Jenkins' work on transmedia storytelling.

Chapters such as this – and there are others – also point, however, to the limitations of this kind of textbook, and the limitations are important. At one level, they promote a theoretical pluralism which, when coupled with sheer diversity of media materials to which they are applied, can easily leave the impression that all

theories are equal, and this is sometimes the case here. In addition, theory is also in danger of taking a back seat to the proliferation of media entities with which it is engaged. For instance, there is a brief discussion of Pierre Levy's thinking on networked individuals (31-32). However, as with examples in other chapters, this underplays the broader impact of his thinking or the significance of how theory itself makes sense of or, indeed, helps constitute the media worlds it examines. In this sense, a chapter on theoretical frameworks or conceptual practices would have been a welcome addition, and might have shown more clearly how such issues can be problematised.

Inevitably in a textbook of this kind, there are always going to be not only gaps and omissions, but also difficulties of simply staying current. Some readers may complain for instance, that there is little on the large world of online gaming, or that mobile phone use is under-represented, particularly given the sizeable literature it has generated. Others may wish for more on key gateways, especially the central role of search engines, because these intersect all the key issues of software technologies, participation, networks, private and public domains, and the politics of access. Little, or piecemeal, space is also given to tracing the histories that have produced the current media worlds; likewise, there is relatively little hard data on the role of media occupations or the industries that shape and organize these cyberworlds. The editors argue (xxiv) that audience/user access and participation cannot be separated from policy and access issues but it can be argued, equally convincingly, that they cannot be separated from institutional, technological or industrial formations either – yet these are underemphasised in this text.

There also variations of persuasiveness between chapters. For instance, Graham Murdock develops a nicely nuanced chapter on digital technologies and moral economies that points up the tensions produced by new media forms such as Web 2.0 and Second Life. By contrast, Jim McGuigan's opening chapter on technological determinism and Raymond Williams' concept of mobile privatization seems awkward and inadequately related to the complexity of the media worlds explored in the book.

This said, the book is a wide-ranging and varied overview of its huge fields. It will serve students well who are new both to these and the debates they generate. Within the context of a undergraduate text, it does achieves what its editors claim for it: to provide insight into the ways people reconfigure their worlds around new digital technologies (xxiii). Its extensive cross-referencing and the very careful, elaborately designed organization of its materials and layout are also a major advantage. These not only complement the text but point up its strengths and provide a very user-friendly introduction to these complex, constantly evolving media worlds.