

Communication theory: media, technology and society
David Holmes, 2005
London, Sage Publications

Review by Caroline Pelletier

David Holmes' book tackles a question which has become central to sociology: how to frame research on contemporary modes of communication and processes of subject formation which does not view technology as either, on the one hand, subservient to sociological theories and categories of analysis, or, on the other hand, as deterministic in relation to social and cultural change. The spread of new media such as the internet is transforming social relations, creating new ways of understanding the world and ourselves. In this context, it seems insufficient to view technology as a simple outcome of social developments. However, the literature dedicated to new media has tended to be technologically deterministic, as seen, for example, in the hopes pinned on the internet to bring about global democracy. In laying out the state of the field in communication theory, Holmes takes us back to the traditional sociological conundrum—how to account for a state of affairs which combines a series of distinct but related elements—but in its contemporary form. What is the relationship between communication and communicational technologies? The book provides a comprehensive guide to theories of communication over the last 40 years, locating them in relation to associated disciplines such as media studies and computer-mediated communication. One of Holmes's principle aims is to critique the 'second media age' thesis, which proposes that new media enable social relations which are radically different and more progressive than those found in the older age of broadcast. The problem with this notion is that it overlooks continuities, defines convergence in terms of technical capabilities rather than economic interest, and is technologically deterministic, aligning technological forms (feedback mechanisms) with structures of communication (interactivity). Holmes maintains that different media environments can be examined separately but that they should be seen as mutually constitutive rather than ontologically distinct, and that emphasis should be placed on the social relations they put into practice rather than singlehandedly bring about.

Holmes' argument puts the problem of defining interactivity at the centre of new media theory. He distinguishes between two perspectives on communication. The first adopts a transportation metaphor for communication, and treats the technological medium as a channel for pre-packaged messages. Interactivity is then understood largely in terms of data exchange. The second perspective emphasizes that communication cannot be understood simply in instrumental terms as information processing but is centrally concerned with establishing social relations. Holmes describes this as a ritual view of communication, in that its focus is on the creation of social bonds. From this perspective, the term 'integration' is more descriptive than 'interaction'.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of defining social integration without a parallel notion of social disintegration or exclusion, Holmes' point has the virtue of problematizing the concept of mediation, which is implicitly based on a transport view of communicational media. Mediation implies that face-to-face interaction is the original act of communication, with everything else relegated to the status of remediated exchange. Such a view also establishes the problematic binaries of embodied versus disembodied, and virtual versus real. Holmes uses Derrida's concept of logocentrism to critique the politics of presence in much new media theory. By focusing on the performative dimension of communication, he also makes the constitution of subjectivity central to an understanding of media and technology. The last

chapter focuses on this question by looking at the notion of community, and its comeback in theories of cyberspace. The book can be divided broadly into three sections. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the key concepts and arguments. Chapters 2 and 3 review theories of broadcast communication and network communication respectively. Chapters 4 to 6 make the case for considering the interrelation between broadcast and network media as a way of reconceptualizing the characteristics of different communicational environments and the social relations they demonstrate. Holmes provides an overview of communication theory that is highly accessible and wide-ranging. He also sets out issues central to future research. His book will be of use to students and academics alike.

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