

Always Already New

Media, History, and the Data of Culture

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Perpetua by Graphic Composition, Inc. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gitelman, Lisa.

Always already new : media, history and the data of culture / Lisa Gitelman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10 0-262-07271-8 — ISBN-13 978-0-262-07271-7 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Mass media—History. 2. Communication and technology—United States—History.

I. Title.

P90.G4776 2006

302.2309—dc22

2005058066

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

This book started as a very different project than it has ended. At the outset, this was to be a straightforward monograph version of *New Media, 1740–1915* (MIT, 2003), the collection of essays I coedited with Geoffrey B. Pingree. Geoff and the contributors to that volume were teaching me much about doing media history, and I had the additional desire to be both more pointed and more lucid than I had been in *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* (Stanford, 1999), about the early history of recorded sound. So this is a book that is partly about “when old technologies were new,” as Carolyn Marvin so aptly put it. Moreover, it uses the case of recorded sound to open the important question of how media studies might begin to historicize digital media in a sufficiently rigorous way. Both that question and the Marvinesque perspective are here complicated by the suspicion—resident in media studies since at least the 1960s—that media are curiously reflexive as the subjects of history. That is, there is no getting all the way outside or apart from media to “do” history to them; the critic is also always already being “done” by the media she studies.

As I got deeper into this project, what I first assumed was a disjuncture—between old new media and new—turned out also to possess a few crucial elements of continuity. A second level of argument began to emerge—one that explored commonalities between records and documents, if not exactly between phonographs and digital networks or between playing music and retrieving information. To the extent that it has emerged to the foreground, this second-level contention makes this book as much about the humanities as it is about media history. Records and documents are kernels of humanistic thought, of the specifically modern hermeneutical project that has been associated since the nineteenth century with university departments of history and literature as well as many broader, less academic institutions of public memory, like libraries and museums, and other resonant forms of authoritative cultural self-identification, such as anthologies, reference books, bibliographies, and similar compendiums. What these structures all variously

entail is the cultural impulse to preserve and interpret, or better yet, to interpret and preserve, since taking their analysis down to the unit level of records and documents helps to reveal the interpretive structures that are always already in play within any urge or act to preserve. Cultures save themselves. And they save themselves according to a host of little-noticed assumptions that are particularly important to stop and think about in the present moment, as saving increasingly becomes a function of today's new media—something that gets done “on” or “to” the hard drive of a server, for instance, and with a digital device.

I am grateful to the friends and colleagues who have supported me in this endeavor with their advice, criticism, patience, warmth, and wisdom. Among them are many who read parts of this project as I was writing it: I am indebted to Jonathan Auerbach, Judy Babbitts, Wendy Bellion, Carolyn Betensky, Gabriella Coleman, Terry Collins, Pat Crain, Ellen Garvey, Katie King, Matt Kirschenbaum, Sarah Leonard, Lisa Lynch, Meredith McGill, Geoff Pingree, Elena Razlogova, Laura Rigal, Alex Russo, Laura Burd Schiavo, and Gayle Wald. I would also like to thank the audiences on whom I tried out so much of this work before the paint was dry, at the Modern Language Association, American Studies Association, and Media in Transition conferences as well as at the Harvard Humanities Center, New School University, University of Iowa, Concordia University, University of Maryland, University of Minnesota, Dibner Institute at MIT, Leslie Center for the Humanities at Dartmouth College, the history department colloquium at Catholic University, and the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University. My generous hosts at these institutions have included a number of those listed above along with other friends and colleagues who have been of great moral and intellectual support: Jason Camlot, Robert Friedel and Paul Israel, Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, Robert Levine, Tom Augst, Leah Price and Jonathan Picker, Lauren Rabinovitz, Eric Rothenbuhler, Michael Warner, and Mark Williams. While other colleagues who attended and participated at these many gatherings must here remain nameless, they have been utterly essential to this project. In the same spirit, I thank my colleagues and the students in the media studies at Catholic University. You make media studies easy to believe in and fun to do. Finally, special appreciation is due, as always and again, to Claudia, Hillary, and Alix Gitelman.

This book was supported in part by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I was able to take full advantage of the fellowship because of additional generosity on the part of Catholic University. I am grateful to the endowment and the university. Huge thanks as well to Doug Sery, Valerie Geary, Deborah Cantor-Adams, and the staff and readers for The MIT Press for seeing this project through. One portion of

chapter 1 revises an essay appearing in *New Media, 1740–1915*. Chapter 2 revises an essay appearing in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (MIT, 2003), edited by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, and contains a brief element drawn from an essay appearing in *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power* (Minnesota, 2004), edited by Ron Eglash. These essays make new sense together and have been significantly rewritten for the purposes of this book. Any overlap between old and new versions appears by permission.