

Chapter 7

Balancing McLuhan With Williams: A Sociotechnical View of Technological Determinism

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ABSTRACT

The article titled “Realising Virtual Reality: A Reflection on the Continuing Evolution of New Media,” presented a technological deterministic analysis on the evolution of virtual reality. A major criticism of the technological deterministic viewpoint is that it does not consider context of use and human agency. Looking specifically at the work of Raymond Williams and other British Cultural Studies researchers, this response argues for a more balanced viewpoint of technology, determined more so by cultural use than by technological enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

In the article titled “Realising Virtual Reality: A Reflection on the Continuing Evolution of New Media,” we are presented with an analysis on the evolution of virtual reality. Based primarily on Marshall McLuhan’s work, this piece discusses how this evolution takes place by locating it within

his frameworks for hot/cold media and the tetrad. A major criticism of this technological deterministic viewpoint is how it does not consider context of use and human agency. Looking specifically at the work of Raymond Williams, this response will argue for a more balanced viewpoint of technology, determined more so by cultural use than by technological evolution.

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The term “Virtual Reality” is still very much contested. A recent entry about this topic appears in Restivo and Denton’s *Batthelground: Science and Technology*, a two volume series whose goal is to “set focuses on one broad area of culture in which the debates and conflicts continue to be fast and furious” (p. xv). In this article (Potts, 2008), it states that virtual reality is contested because of the “conflicting dystopian and utopian views of filmmakers, book authors, game creators, academic researchers, military leaders, and technology community members” (p. 487).

Similarly, the binary between technological determinism and free will has an enormous impact on this discussion from the sociotechnical perspective. However, before addressing how Williams’ (1974) notion of agency and technology might be useful for understanding new media behavior, I will trace a broad trend within Media Studies regarding text and audience to serve as background for this issue.

In 1845, Marx and Engels provided a model of audiences and ideological control. Everyday people were presented as passive subjects constrained by their roles as workers and consumers of media and other products. The same is true of the Frankfurt School where in the mid-twentieth century Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) as well as others portrayed the masses as subject to a systematic culture “industry,” which turns out a homogenized and hegemonic products and services that shape the societies in which people work and play. Today, these theories are still of interest to those who subscribe to this Marxist viewpoint.

During the latter part of the last century, scholars began to place a greater emphasis on the audience’s heterogeneity, or differences. This is an important shift for sociotechnical researchers, recognizing the free will of the audience. These scholars focused on how individual audience members’ ability to respond in different ways that are not predetermined by the producers of the text (Hall, 1980, 1986). More recently, there has been an upsurge in interest in participatory audience

models, even within studies of traditional mass media reception (Jenkins 1992, 2006). This shift is also a key development for the sociotechnical community, as we build for cooperative participation rather than simple use.

Much of this shift towards audience empowerment originated in the Birmingham School’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) where Raymond Williams and then later Stuart Hall were the primary influences (Turner, 2003). It was Williams, the grandfather of modern Cultural Studies, who opened up the idea of media texts as negotiated rather than determined (1980). In a modification of earlier Marxist notions of economic Base determining cultural Superstructure, Williams suggested that any given text may “exert pressures and set limits” (p. 43) but cannot unilaterally determine how any given audience member or group will respond. Crucially, he introduced the idea of process rather than stasis, so that both Base and Superstructure and their relationship were seen as practices in a dynamic and ongoing cultural negotiation. Similarly, the texts themselves he regarded as practices and processes rather than fixed historical objects.

His junior colleague, Hall (1980), continued to move away from a static and hierarchical model of textual determinism to establish different categories of audience response. His canonical essay on “Encoding/Decoding” suggested that there are three main ways for audiences to “decode” a text; the “dominant,” where audience members accept the producer’s preferred meaning; the “negotiated,” where they inflect the preferred readings according to their own sociopolitical position; and the “oppositional,” where they reject the preferred reading and recognize it as a hegemonic device which favors the ruling class. Such readings emphasize agency for these participants, a key factor vacant in earlier Marxist work. Hall’s approach inevitably blurs the distinction between producer and consumer, between author and audience, a development that will be useful when we examine new media technologies.

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