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Book Review: Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*

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Theorists and historians of new media, regardless of their topics or strategies of analysis, must define and contextualize how media function within their produced frameworks. Lisa Gitelman, in her new book *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, investigates these historical and theoretical problematics for media productions at the end of the nineteenth century and on the cusp of the twenty-first, as well as the conditions of reception that articulated their respective newness. Permeating Gitelman’s analysis is not only an attempt, as in her other writings, to expand the boundaries of what constitutes “new media” and new media analysis but also to demonstrate how access to records and documents determines the types of media histories that can be written. Her commitment to the rigorous historicization of emergent media within their historical contexts resists the tendency to associate new media with temporal contemporaneity and provides a template for historicizing the present within and in relation to its unique and ever-changing media circumstance.

From Thomas Edison’s sound-on-tinfoil phonographs of 1878 to sound-on-wax discs from 1889-93 to the proliferation and domestication of sound recording technology from 1895-1910, early recorded sound media provides the first series of case studies for Gitelman’s exploration of the ways in which technology became situated within existing late-nineteenth century debates about writing, print media, and public speech. Gitelman next considers digital networks—both ARPANET, the Pentagon’s first distributed digital network from 1968-1972, and today’s Internet—to examine the modes in which the Internet both structures and performs its own history. Rather than draw parallels between early sound recording and digital networks, Gitelman elucidates the ways in which documents and records respectively influence the operations of these media at their inception and before their perceived meanings and uses solidified in the minds of its users. The ability to access, interpret, and contextualize these documents and records (or account for them in their absence) constitutes not only the underlying subject of her investigation but also the process performed in her analysis.

Gitelman’s previous work includes *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* (Stanford, 1999) and
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(as co-editor) New Media, 1740-1915 (MIT, 2003); Always Already New can be read as a monographic version of the latter and an opportunity to explore the themes and concerns of the former in a more pointed and lucid manner. In her first chapter, “New Media Publics,” Gitelman examines the U.S. population’s first exposure to recorded sound by way of Thomas Edison’s series of lyceum demonstrations in 1878. These demonstrations revealed how phonographic technology crudely captured sound onto sheets of tinfoil, many of which were distributed to its audiences as inscribed and otherwise unreadable souvenirs or records of those demonstrations. Even though these tinfoil souvenirs played an instrumental role in how the technology functioned for the public witnessing the demonstrations, no phonographic sheets of tinfoil survive today and Gitelman’s historical account appropriately reflects and revels in this absence; the inability of the public to read or decode the inscribed material on the souvenir pieces of tinfoil corresponds to the historian’s inability to discover the content or material of those inscriptions in a historical record in which none exist. She then proceeds to examine how in 1889-93 the nickel-in-the-slot phonograph machines offered a public use of phonographic technology (listening to prerecorded sound-on-wax musical recordings) through the individualized experience of listening with headphones. These uses of phonographic technology, as argued by Gitelman, not only reoriented the boundaries of a public sphere defined by print media and public speech but also redefined how that public produces its own memory of itself.

In her second chapter, “New Media Users,” Gitelman examines the transition of phonographic technology from the public to the private space in 1895-1910 and the accompanying distinction between media users and media publics. The emergence of phonographic technology as home entertainment and as a medium more defined by playback than recording established middle-class women as the primary agents in the evolving uses and meanings of the technology. As Gitelman states, “It’s not just that women were represented and reproduced on records, not just that they helped sell phonographs or appeared in advertisements; rather, it is that modern forms of mediation are in part defined by normative constructions of difference, whether gender, racial, or other versions of difference” (84).

In the second half of the book, Gitelman transitions from “The Case of Sound” to “The Question of the Web” and proceeds to examine the ways in which digital networks and their complex existence as inscribing documents both structures and complicates our understanding of a history of the world wide web. By first focusing on ARPANET (a digital network produced by the Advanced Research Projects Agency within the U.S. Department of Defense) at its inception in 1968, Gitelman hopes, as in her analysis of the tinfoil phonographs of 1878, to analyze the ways in which initial perceptions of this new media framework attempted to understand its historical signification. Gitelman then considers how today’s world wide web both structures history and conceives of its own history. Through a consideration of the Wayback Machine (www.archive.org), Error 404: File Not Found pages, and an errant ProQuest search that attributes the use of the word “Internet” to an 1854

An illustration of Edison’s tinfoil phonographs from Harper’s Weekly, circa 1878, featured in Chapter 1.
issue of The New York Times, Gitelman argues for a reconsideration of the ways the Internet “and new modes of inscription are complicated within the meaning and practice of history, the subject, items, instruments of public memory” (24).

Gitelman’s decision to address the newness of new media through the prism of the formerly-new offers a captivating mode of examining the specific issues of her analysis. Her refusal to stray outside the established parameters of her argument provides her with the space to both leisurely and rigorously investigate her case studies as well as to extend the conclusions and implications of those studies beyond the contexts of her analysis. A large portion of this book consists of re-workings of contributions to both New Media, 1740–1915 and Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition (MIT, 2003) and the analytic patchwork occasionally compromises the cohesiveness of her argument. By its end, her argument feels a bit more disjointed than a unified work of this variety ought to, especially in light of the anticipation built up and suggested in her inspired introduction. That being said, her rhetorical structure, the specificity of her case studies, and the ease with which she adheres to and yet transcends the boundaries of her argument testifies to the dynamism and relevance of her project. Her analysis and contextualization of the early public reception of Edison’s tinfoil phonograph demonstrations of 1878, a historical moment largely neglected in prevailing histories of early sound recording technology, will be of particular interest and value to media historians and scholars. While other contributions to the existing literature on the newness of media may provide a more expansive and comprehensive examination of the particular dynamics between old and new across broader technological terrain (Lev Manovich’s The Language of New Media comes to mind), Always Already New succeeds by refusing those very ambitions and deriving its rhetorical force through its adherence to its argumentative boundaries. Ultimately, Gitelman provides both a meditation on and example of the ways in which media historians and theoreticians may attempt to access and conceive of the historical present by treating our contemporary media circumstance with the same uncertainty and indeterminacy that she attributes to early sound recording and digital networks.

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