



Rewiring
media
studies **for**
the digital
age

Edited by
David
Gauntlett

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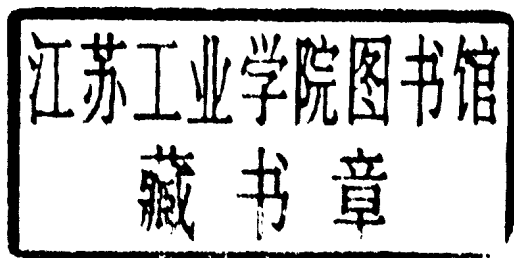
Web.Studies:

Rewiring media studies for the digital age

Edited by

David Gauntlett

*Lecturer in Social Communications,
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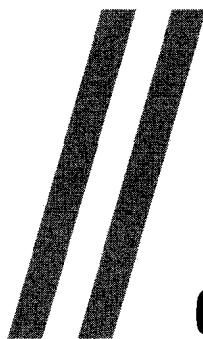
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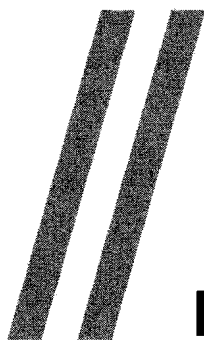
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David Gauntlett
June 2000



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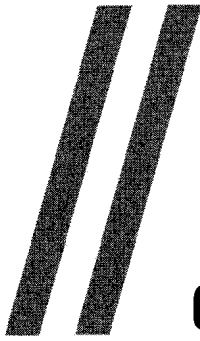
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Further resources on new media can be found at David Gauntlett's web site:





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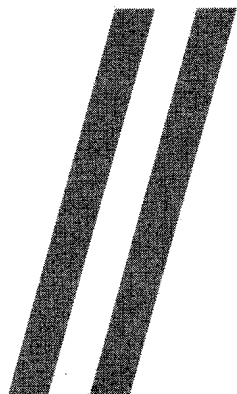
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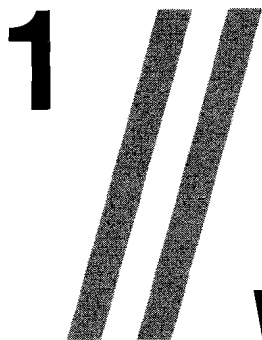
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Part I



WEB STUDIES





Web Studies: A User's Guide

David Gauntlett

Let me tell you a secret: in 1995, two years after the Mosaic browser had grabbed the attention of the world and made the Web an interesting place to hang out, I hated all the hype about the internet. Bloody internet: full of computer geeks swapping episode guides to TV shows. We laughed about the guy down the corridor who spent hours every day wandering around the net. We said that it was like wandering around an amateur library, gazing admiringly at the shelves, but with no idea where to find anything useful. Which, as far as I could tell, it was.

I was interested in popular mass media and the way they might change people's lives. Therefore, I thought, the internet was of little interest. Of course, I was wrong. Even whilst I was scowling about it, the Web was careering out of the hands of computer scientists and becoming, well, a form of popular mass media that might change people's lives.

Within three years it became impossible to think about life without the Web. By 1999 I was producing the websites www.theory.org.uk and www.newmedias-tudies.com, and was sending and receiving e-mails all over the world every day. This was nothing special – just the new face of academic life. Academic journals and conferences, which had always veered towards the tedious, were now quite clearly preposterous anachronisms. Why let an article go out of date by two years waiting for a journal to publish it? Put it on the Web today. Why fly thousands of miles only to hang around with lots of middle-aged, unhappy academics? Instead, chat with them within the welcome confines of e-mail, and then do the international travel to explore other cultures.

This book, for example, came together entirely on the internet. I have never spoken to most of the contributors, nor written to them by conventional mail. But we've exchanged a lot of e-mails. I invited some people to write chapters because I'd seen their work on the Web, or in books. (Books are still good.) A couple of contributors were part of the community that had developed around my websites and ones related to them. I also put out a call for contributions, once, on just one e-mail discussion list, and the net's grapevine effect meant that



1.1 *New Media Studies*, home of useful Web things.

I received 140 proposals for chapters – mostly from academics and postgraduate students – within a month. Obviously, I had to reject most of them. Once commissioned, the chapters were sent and discussed by e-mail. I checked facts and dates on reliable websites, and gave away bits of the forthcoming book at newmediastudies.com in a bid to raise interest. Of course, the good thing about the Web is that it's not just full of academics. It's the *diversity* of creative participation that keeps it alive.

Media studies was nearly dead: long live new media studies

By the end of the twentieth century, media studies research within developed western societies had entered a middle-aged, stodgy period and wasn't really sure what it could say about things any more. Thank goodness the Web came along. See where media studies had got to . . .

- ☞ Studies of media texts, such as a 'critical reading' of a film which identified a bunch of 'meanings' the director hadn't intended and which nobody else had noticed, were clearly a waste of time.
- ☞ Similarly, people had noticed that semiotic analysis and psychoanalytic approaches were all about saying that something had a hidden cause or meaning, but you couldn't prove it, so it became embarrassing.
- ☞ Audience studies had run out of steam. Unable to show that the media had a clear and identifiable impact upon people's behaviour, audience researchers had been trying to make some descriptions of how people *use* the media look interesting, with little success.
- ☞ The 1990s theoretical view that we had to consider media usage within the very broad context of everyday life had actually ruptured the impetus for research, since nobody could afford, or be bothered, to do such wide-scale, in-depth, qualitative research. And even if anyone did get all that data, it wasn't clear what they would have to do with it.
- ☞ Studies of media effects and influences had shown that the mass media do not have predictable effects on audiences. Nevertheless, the right-wing psychologists who argued (for reasons best known to themselves) that the mass media were responsible for the decline of western civilization seemed to be winning the argument (within the public sphere, anyway). Cue despair, resignation and boredom amongst researchers in this area.
- ☞ Historical studies of the mass media justified themselves by saying that we could learn from history when planning the future. But nobody ever did.
- ☞ Most importantly, media products and the organized use of communications technologies had become so knowing, clever and sophisticated that academic critics were looking increasingly redundant. In other words, media products, and their producers, had themselves become self-analysing and multi-layered. It is difficult to say something about Tony Blair's clever use of

political communications, for example, which is *more* clever, as a theory, than the actual practice. To make an intelligent film like *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) or *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) is a substantial achievement, whereas writing a typical academic article about it is, in comparison, pathetic. Even mainstream TV shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (a UK format sold to numerous other countries) were already, in themselves, super-analysed dissections of the style and culture of populist TV. All academics could do was write obvious explanations of what the producers were up to (boring and ultimately sycophantic), or make predictable critiques of what such shows tell us about capitalist or postmodern society (which you could do in your sleep).

Media studies, then, needed something interesting to do, and fast. Happily, the area of new media is vibrant, exploding and developing, and nobody is certain of the best way to do things. There is change (look at how the Web was just three years ago) and there is conflict (look at the Microsoft trial and the impassioned feelings it provoked). New good ideas and new bad ideas appear every week, and we don't know how it's going to pan out. Even better, academics and students can *participate* in the new media explosion, not just watch from the sidelines – and we can argue that they have a responsibility to do so. So it's an exciting time again.

First, though, we'd better rewind to the basics.

Origins of the Web

This is the internet

The internet is a global network of interconnected computers. Rumours that it started life as a sinister US military experiment may be somewhat exaggerated, although a computer network called ARPANET run by the US Defense Department from 1969 was a primary component of the super-network which would eventually become the internet, and the US Government was definitely interested in a network that could withstand nuclear attack. In fact the first talk about an internet can be traced back to 1962, when J.C.R. Licklider of MIT wrote a number of memos about his idea of a 'Galactic Network' linking computers worldwide (see www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.html).

The first event in the life of the internet as we know it today came in 1974, when Vint Cerf and Bob Khan defined the Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and Internet Protocol (IP) by which information could be put into a 'packet' and addressed so that computers on the network would pass it along, in the right direction, until it arrived at its destination. Various tests and demonstrations were conducted successfully, and internet-style networks started to take off, but it was 10 years before the TCP/IP-based internet rolled out across the USA in 1983. And then it would primarily remain the domain of academics and scientists for another 10 years.

So what is the World Wide Web?

The World Wide Web is a user-friendly interface on to the internet. It was developed by Tim Berners-Lee (www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee) in 1990–91, and caught on in 1993, when a freely available Web browser called Mosaic, written