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August 2024
CA 459: New Media and Society

AI Summarizer: Lisa Gitelman “Media as Historical Subjects”

In the introduction to her book *Always Already New*, Lisa Gitelman discusses the social and cultural significances of media, and encourages readers to look beyond mere technological definitions of media. She argues that all media “are very particular sites for very particular, importantly social as well as historically and culturally specific experiences of meaning.”¹ More specifically, Gitelman suggests that “newness” can be a useful perspective for analyzing *all* forms of media. She points out that even media which have long and well-established histories, such as recorded sound or the printing press, were themselves new at one point in time. When these media were first introduced, their norms of use and social significance were yet to be determined. By considering the “novelty years” of a new type of media, researchers can identify how social, cultural, and technical factors contribute to how that media format is perceived. Through written nearly 20 years ago, Gitelman’s writing continues to be influential for studies of new media because of how clearly it calls attention to the ambiguity of the very phrase “new media,” and then operationalizes that ambiguity to provide a useful framework for the analysis of media and technology.

After writing this initial summary of Gitelman’s introductory chapter, I turned to two AI chat bots to generate alternative descriptions of the book’s introduction and its significance for studying new media. I began by using the UW-Madison licensed version of Microsoft Copilot by logging in with my @wisc.edu email address and using this prompt: “Write a 1 paragraph summary of Lisa Gitelman’s ‘Introduction: Media as Historical Subjects’ from ‘Always Already New.’ Please include a discussion of why this work is important for studies of new media.” The Copilot output was:

In the introduction to “Always Already New,” Lisa Gitelman explores how media, particularly new media, are experienced and studied as historical subjects. She uses the examples of recorded sound from the late 19th to early 20th centuries and the World Wide Web to illustrate that all media were once new. Gitelman argues that examining the novelty and transitional phases of media can reveal much about the broader conditions shaping media and communication. This work is crucial for new media studies because it challenges scholars to consider how media history should be written and understood, emphasizing the importance of context, perception, and the evolving nature of media.²

¹ Lisa Gitelman, “Introduction: Media as Historical Subjects,” in *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 8.

² Microsoft Copilot. Generative AI output created August 26, 2024.

After using Microsoft Copilot to generate a summary, I asked Google's Gemini to also generate a summary using the same prompt. Its output was:

Lisa Gitelman's "Introduction: Media as Historical Subjects" provides a foundational framework for understanding media as historical objects. She argues that media are not merely tools or technologies but rather cultural artifacts embedded within specific historical contexts. By examining media as historical subjects, Gitelman encourages scholars to consider the social, political, and economic factors that shape their development, use, and meaning. This approach is crucial for studies of new media because it helps us to avoid technological determinism and instead recognize the complex interplay between technology, culture, and society. Gitelman's work highlights the importance of historical context in understanding the evolution of new media and the ways in which they have influenced our lives.³

One of the major concerns regarding the use of generative AI tools within education contexts is the potential for inaccurate information to be presented as fact. However, these two summaries contain accurate information, and do not misrepresent the contents of Gitelman's introduction. The Copilot output included several links to external websites to "learn more" about its output. One of these links was to the book's description page on the MIT press website, and several others were to PDF copies of the same introduction text that we read in class, so I am confident that the output was based on Gitelman's original writing. The Gemini output did not include any external links or citations, but does include specific key concepts, such as technological determinism, when discussing its significance. Ultimately, the AI-generated summaries were largely comparable to my own writing, both in terms of writing style and factual accuracy.

In all three of the above summaries, several common themes emerge from Gitelman's "Media as Historical Subjects." Each summary highlights Gitelman's argument that media include social, cultural, and technical factors. Additionally, they all make some reference to why Gitelman's work remains significant for those studying new media. However, the Copilot output offered the most specificity, noting that "it challenges scholars to consider how media history should be written and understood."⁴ In comparison, the summaries written by me and Google Gemini were more vague about Gitelman's significance. Reading the AI-generated summaries after writing my own was useful for highlighting additional perspectives, and reminded me of key phrases that I had overlooked in my initial summary. While the two AI chatbots were accurate, I am not sure that they would have been as useful if I hadn't also read Gitelman's introduction in its entirety. Generative AI tools are a form of new media, and the specifics of how they are being implemented throughout various facets of society are still being developed. But as Gitelman argues, this "newness" is a rich opportunity to analyze AI as a form of media and to consider its social and cultural implications.

³ Google Gemini. Generative AI output created August 26, 2024.

⁴ Microsoft Copilot.

References

Gitelman, Lisa. "Introduction: Media as Historical Subjects." In *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, 1–22. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006.

Google Gemini. Generative AI output.

Microsoft Copilot. Generative AI output.