New Media, New Crises, New Theories? An Interview With David Morley

Miyase Christensen, Stockholm University, KTH Royal Institute of Technology

David Morley, Goldsmiths, University of London

Miyase Christensen (MC): Thank you for this interview-essay for our special issue, "Technology and the Question of Empowerment." To start with some general questions: How do you see the "state of affairs" in terms of the ways in which the notions of technology and power are employed----or rather "positioned"-today? There are parallels and disjunctures in how they pop up in popular discourse on the one hand, and in academic writing on media and communication studies on the other. There are different trends, so to speak, such as those that emphasize affordances over impacts, and those that emphasize risks. Where do you stand on these questions?

David Morley (DM): Well, I think about that in relation to an even more basic question, which is how you conceive of the discipline or the field within which you compose that problem. As you know, I've talked in recent years about the notion of a "non-mediacentric" communication studies and it is within that context that I would see this problem. Approaches which focus on a given technology, and then attribute some kind of magical powers to that (whether in a utopian or in a dystopian mode) really don't interest me very much. I think, again and again they lead us up a blind alley. The astonishing thing is that it happens so many times, and with each new technology you see this incredible focus on the "thing itself," as if it's going to have powers of one kind or another over its users. I just don't buy any of that. We were talking-informally-a few moments ago about Don Slater, who has a lovely example, from some of his work in West Africa, where there are two different villages and one of them gets a lot of money from UNESCO or some funding body, and sets up a special air-conditioned building, with computers with fast modems and everything. However, it's built in a slightly "out of the way" place and so it's not very well used. Then, in another case, there is some American Peace Corps volunteer,

who's going home after working in this village for a while. He's got an old laptop, it's not very good, but he gives it to a guy that he's become friends with who owns a cafe, and the cafe happens to be just next to the bus stop and the taxi stands where lots of people pass through en route to the local markets. It turns out that this one rather limited piece of technology (in terms of technical capacity) makes more difference because it is plugged into that set of transport and gossip networks than all the very powerful technologies in the other special building, which don't really "fit" into the culture. So I think that's a very dear example of the extent to which technology (whatever its affordances might be) needs to be set in the right kind of context, in order to deliver any significant change of any kind. I do think that notion of affordances, that Ian Hutchby came up with, is quite an interesting concept, but when you look closely at the model that he offers, I don't see what it does that Hall's earlier "preferred reading model" doesn't do. It just repeats all those things in Hall's model about how a technology has got a particular set of designs built into it, which are intended for it to be used in this way, and here's a set of marketing discourses that propose that it is of interest, for this or that reason. It is exactly the same thing, the "preferring" of a set of meanings and uses which people may or may not actually take up. So, I'm happy to see people working with Hutchby's concept, rather than with the rather crazy notion of technologies having effects all over again, but I don't see it as the marvellous intellectual advance that it is sometimes proposed to be. I suppose what astonishes me most is the people I come across in the field, who are very sophisticated theoretically in lots of ways, about the media and modernity and globalization and all the rest of it, but when they talk about technology they revert to a kind of hypodermic effects model. It's as if all the audience research that so many people - Ann Gray, James Lull, Roger Silverstone, Shaun Moores - have done, over 30 or 40 years, about technology had never happened. Many of them just don't even know about it. They really do think that the world begins again with digital media and that digital media have such phenomenal consequences that are way beyond the scale of anything that's happened ever before. When I teach my course on audiences at Goldsmiths I always begin by making the students sit and listen to the first twenty minutes of the radio broadcast of Orson Welles' "The War of the Worlds" from the 1930s. For them, it's absolutely unimaginable that radio could have ever been powerful or frightening. So they find it really hard to take it seriously, but I make them listen to twenty minutes of it and think about how exactly Welles has

structured the text to make it "credible" in certain ways. After a bit, perhaps they begin to get the idea - "oh yeah, maybe once people thought about radio the way in which we get excited about Macs or iPhones, or whatever." But they only half get it. And that's understandable among young students, but I also see so much of that among my colleagues in the profession: that is disappointing - and there's an awful lot of it about!

MC: Yes. There is indeed a lot of that. We also see media ecology and related frameworks and approaches retaining their currency or being reasserted with new dimensions added. As you suggest, while we see change and progress toward more sophisticated understandings of, say, globalization and society, when it comes to technology there is still a tendency to revert to a shockingly deterministic take on it.

DM: Well, the other day somebody got in touch with me about a session I'm going to be doing at a conference in the near future and they were suggesting, in all seriousness, that one of the things that we needed to discuss was the work of Nicholas Carr, and I and the other people involved in this session at the conference said we had never heard of Nicholas Carr. So I looked it up and I discovered it's that guy who wrote a book about how the internet is "changing our brains." It's one of those new-style hypodermic effects models of neuroscience, which forgets about cognition and wants to see the "effects" of the media on the brain. The idea that I'm supposed to pay attention to a thesis that a piece of machinery is actually changing people's brains and that's how we should understand the media ecology of our time, really doesn't do a lot for me. I can't see even what there is to say about it, really. It's so banal. It's just so crude, to go back again to this notion of machines "doing things" to us.

MC: Yes, but has it really ever disappeared? I think that discourse is still alive and kicking.

DM: Well, it's carried on alive and kicking for quite a long time. But, I think it got a real boost once it attached itself to the question of "new media" because people were able to forget all the critiques that had been made of that approach, in relation

to television or whatever, and imagine that we had to start all over again, just because it's a computer this time around.

MC: To go back to disciplinary battles, or rather battles between different schools of thinking especially when it comes to understanding the undercurrents in society or what technologies are doing or not doing for underprivileged people and communities: the notorious rift between political economy and cultural studies is still very much discernable. This is particularly the case when it comes to the ways in which "power" is conceptualized - in and of itself but also in relation to technology. As we know, and to put it roughly, political economy, historically, put more emphasis on structural inequality, social (dis)empowerment or other forms of disempowerment and questions of labour, whilst we have seen individual(ized) empowerment and expressive capacity (of technology) occupying more space in some veins of cultural studies-at least in the past two decades. Again, I am clearly brushing with broad strokes here. We have also witnessed numerous debates in the field addressing precisely this rift and the differences in approach. So, decades after these debates first started to take shape, where do we stand today from your perspective? You were talking about the cyclical trend, that the effects model routinely making a comeback. Areas of research, for instance, where we often see techno-deterministic analyses are studies of media use amongst migrants or social movements and the use of technology. Perhaps one could construct "a" version of the same story through the lens of political economy and another version through that of cultural studies. Perhaps one could further ask whether it is the case that questions of technology and globalization further widened that gap, instead of providing meeting points, particularly in terms of how we should regard empowerment, consumption, spatialization and the presumed withering-away-of-geography. This is a very broad and packed question, but could you try to articulate how you regard these issues?

DM: Well, there are some curious aspects. I mean it's no secret that my colleague James Curran and I at Goldsmiths have spent most of our intellectual careers in battle with each other, criticizing each other's work - in a collegial manner - but

nonetheless it's all been quite forthright. Finally, it seemed that we had found one thing to agree about in recent years in relation to the big project that James and Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman and others have done, funded by the Leverhulme Media Trust, about the internet. They have actually been rather helpful in insisting on the ways in which a political economy perspective can illuminate that terrain, so that can get you away from the silly notion that we are all "empowered" consumers, who can make any number of choices we like. You can see how that latter strand, within what was originally a cultural studies kind of perspective (as now represented say by someone like Henry Jenkins) has run riot. In that approach, you've got the notion of active audiences carried to an exaggerated degree. We don't even think about audiences anymore because we're all apparently "prosumers" as much as consumers and everybody is supposedly transmitting as well as receiving. Which would all be very nice, if it was true. If you go back to Bertolt Brecht's little piece about the theory of the radio, written in the 1930s, that was him imagining all the positive things that could be done with the radio, in that respect. If you think about Raymond Williams and the notion about technology developing within particular circumstances, you can see that the particular form that radio happened to end up taking, as a mass broadcasting medium, was only one way it might have gone - it was not built into the technology. Now, what political economy can contribute to that debate is some statistical work, which tells you that actually, with any system like the internet, 90% of the people will simply be downloading, 9% might be uploading a bit, and 1% of the people are uploading like crazy. I mean, it's useful to be reminded of those things. It's useful to be reminded, as James and his colleagues tell us, what a vast proportion of web traffic goes through a very small number of websites, controlled by a small number of companies. It's useful to trace, as Des Freedman has done, the way in which the political potential of the internet has been corralled and challenged by a whole series of commercial factors, so I think that's an important contribution. However, at the same time, it's not going to help to just say "okay, so now we know who owns it, we can predict everything." That would be going back to the same old mistakes political economy always made in relation to earlier media - mistakes like, once we know the ownership of the media we can predict the content and therefore we can predict the effect. As someone formed within a cultural studies tradition, I'm well aware of the debate that you refer to, but I'm not really sure how helpful it is to go on even having that debate because, from my point of

view, power has always been the key thing I was interested in. I mean, I did audiences work, not out of some kind of romantic notion of proving that the media didn't matter and that ideology "didn't count," because everybody was busy being a kind of "semiological guerrilla" and making radically different creative interpretations of everything. No, I did audience work in order to trace the limits of power. I was interested in how we understand the question of power, how we had to understand the question of hegemony, as an inherently unstable system. So far as I could see, the best way to do that was to operationalize the concepts and see what actually happened in practice at the moment at which the structure of the text or the design of the technology meets the capacities (or the cultural capital) and competencies of the users. I still think that interface is where everything has to be resolved, so that kind of game of intellectual ping-pong where the political economy says "all that matters is the ownership" and the cultural studies chorus replies "no, no, all that matters is the users"... I mean it's just a very boring dispute that could go on forever. There are useful things within both of those traditions, but again, what's interesting to look at is the way in which, over time, those debates correlate with particular technological changes. You get a very interesting turn around, in the mid-1990s, when John Fiske and his concept of active audiences went out of style, big time, and it was criticized to death as "pointless populism", which we were told, apparently had been "a stupid idea to begin with." We then get people like Simon Frith saying that cultural studies were "bound" to lead to this kind of depoliticized (if not reactionary) celebration of the individual, etc. What's interesting, though, is that at that point Henry Jenkins was a little known student of John Fiske's, who was mainly working on a very limited project about fan cultures. But if you think about how the influence of his work, over the years, has come back into the mainstream, in the context of debates about convergence culture, suddenly you've got a kind of Fiskean version of active technology uses, on overdrive, on steroids, which has suddenly become massively fashionable again, years after Fiske was (apparently) dismissed. This has got all kinds of complications, to do with questions of generations and technological change. One of the most interesting PhD students we've had at Goldsmiths was a Taiwanese guy called Vinnie Yu, who was doing a study of the way in which Taiwanese young people, between the ages of about 18 and 22, were really into file sharing and downloading and that kind of creative techno-swapping of things. The project was initially conceived of as a demonstration of how the media

landscape was changing and how much more active this generation was going to be, with its new technological competencies. But for various incidental reasons, he had problems with his funding, and the PhD took much longer than anticipated, and it turned into a longitudinal study, so four or five years later, he went back and interviewed some of the same people that he had interviewed when they were younger, and some of them had now got married, and had kids, and become more domesticated in their lives. And guess what, they were sitting around watching television. It turned out that the kind of high level of technical, creative activity that they'd displayed at that previous time was, in fact, particular to a specific period of their life, that period of late adolescence when people have more disposable time. Once you insert these questions of life cycle as well as generational change, it gets much more complicated, because then you can zoom around the other way and make more sense of phenomena like the "silver surfers"- i.e., old people, who display surprising interest and capacity with new technologies. Why? Because they have a lot of disposable time in which to figure it out. Obviously this is not all old people, only old people with a certain level of income and a certain level of education and technical competence. But it is instructive to think about these intersections between changes in intellectual fashion, technological change, historical change, and also to map that against the question of life cycle changes, and the circular process through which you have to then understand the development and changes in peoples' lifestyles, and also in cycles of product development and replacement. I think it's quite difficult to hold both the "narrative" version of historical change and those cyclical dimensions in your mind at the same time, but without both, you're sunk, because those are the things you have to take on board. That's a very long answer to your question!

MC: No, that is indeed perfectly fine. And, as for Henry Jenkins, there are fans as well as bashers, and you are suggesting that he followed the same trajectory as Fiske. So, in a way we could say, as in this case, that some ideas become very fashionable and have purchase for a while, and then it becomes fashionable to bash those very ideas.

DM: Absolutely, which is crazy, because there is a moment when Henry does get onto something very, very interesting - when he talks about the early point when some of the smartest guys in the big companies began to see how they could actually

mobilize fan culture for their own benefit and when they began to see how, again, the industry and the users could actually construct a sort of strange "marriage of convenience." He's perfectly right about that, I think. The only problem is when he then generalizes to imagine that everybody is doing all this stuff, which is why I told you the story about Taiwan and how it turns out that, even in a situation where a majority of people of a particular class and educational background might be doing something like that, they're likely only to be doing so at a celtain stage of their lives. They might do it again at a later stage (when they're retired, perhaps, and have "spare time" again), but there's going to be a middle period, when they are working like hell, looking after small children, etc., and they are not going to be doing lots of file sharing and downloading. Because you know, these are time-based media - I think that's one of the things that's forgotten again and again. There are only 24 hours in people's days. Even if you introduce the capacity to multitask, which sort of multiplies time in a way (although it also fragments it) there are only a certain number of hours and a certain amount of time that can be devoted to this stuff-and material determinants and cultural and social determinants are terribly important here.

MC: I think that is quite common in academia, isn't it? It is not that we are just trying to capture what exactly is going on. In other words, it is not just an intellectual enterprise. We are always on the look for the next "paradigm shift." Perhaps technology provided just that and, especially initially, we saw technology in a blown-out-of-proportion way.

DM: I think some of the most interesting work on academia and publishing in this country in recent years has been done by John Thomson. He hasn't done quite what I'm talking about, but I think there is a very interesting study to do which, picking up on what you say there, looks at the intersection of the way in which we, as academics, could all be said to be always on the lookout for the next paradigm shift. But I think we can be more precise than that: if I think about the impact of a kind of Thatcherite, entrepreneurial, self-promotional culture within British academia, I see many younger colleagues very much caught up in the need to "make a mark" for themselves, to establish their "brand identity," and so it's partly a matter of career trajectory, but it's not just that, because it also has to do with the effects of the publishing industry. You know, Routledge did John Fiske no favors-when John was

"hot property" he foolishly let Routledge push him into publishing three books in three years, and that's what blew it, it was just too much, it was market saturation, and I think Henry Jenkins has actually suffered something of the same miscalculation in recent years. But publishing pressure is a very strong element, and changes in the structure of university employment, in Britain and elsewhere, are a very serious issue. There is now such a lot of pressure on young academics to demonstrate their "impact" in the field. I've got a very good PhD student who can't even get an interview for a job because he hasn't yet published a major book or got any big grants. But the guy is only 27. If all that had been demanded of me, at that stage, I would have found it very difficult. So, there are huge pressures on people, which drive them toward this exaggeration of the "newness" of their own ideas, and apparently lead to those much-heralded "paradigm breaks" with everything that was ever known before.

MC: Yes, I think in some ways we are manufacturing narratives and one way to make our mark is to come up with a concept or thematic approach. In some cases, the quality of the analysis, which one might have spent 5-10 years on, comes second. If one has written "the" book or come with a catchy concept-sometimes not always-it catches fire. But, that can lead to consuming our credit fast too.

DM: I think it's very sad, but those are important pressures, and in a way I can kind of hear a critical voice in my own head, saying "oh no, you're being very reductive," but I think there is also a serious "sociology of knowledge" perspective on all of this. To put it another way, I can't see how it's going to get done, but if Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar were able to replicate their book on "laboratory life" in an academic setting, that would tell us quite a lot about what actually happens in academic institutions, and the extent to which it genuinely has to do with the exchange of ideas and the development of new paradigms, as opposed to the necessity, especially in this country, under the pressure of the idiotic Research Excellence Framework imposed by the government, of demonstrating your impact, demonstrating how many grants you've got. I mean that's become the name of the game, rather than the actual research. It's now no longer enough that I should do research and that I should publish it. My institution is really rather disappointed that I don't spend the rest of my time tweeting about it. The idea now is that as soon as I do something, I should be tweeting about it and publicizing it and coming up with pictures of it that

can be put on the departmental website to enhance student recruitment, because everyone will see what fantastic interesting things are happening at Goldsmiths, every day, etc. And in a competitive market, maybe the institution has to do that, but then you have to recognize the seriously deleterious effects of that pressure on the actual conduct of intellectual work. And it's very hard for some younger colleagues to resist that pressure, to refuse to comply with what has rightly been called a "system of licensed boasting" about your own, or your department, or your institution's so-called "excellence."

MC: You mean when we cannot invent something new, we go back to the basics and take up those debates?

DM: Well, I mean, the reference I made to Latour and Woolgar might have sounded glib, but I meant it very seriously. I can't quite see how you would get funding for it, but their work pays serious attention to what actually happens in a science laboratory, the extent to which, even there, in the laboratory, it's to do with career calculations, it's to do with what the next grant is going to be about, it's to do with knowing what the next call for applications is going to be about. I think also, although Bourdieu was always a terrible enemy of cultural studies in a lot of ways and quite straightforwardly blocked the development of cultural studies in various French institutions by his denunciation of cultural studies as a "no good, mongrel discipline" with which he didn't want anything to do - nonetheless, there are certain parts of Bourdieu's work which I think are very interesting in this respect, about the labour of being an academic. There's a kind of biographical film about him called Sociology as a Martial Art - don't know if you've ever seen it?

MC: I haven't seen it.

DM: In it, there's some rather interesting material where he's filmed talking to junior colleagues about how they are managing their careers. and he's talking to Loïc Wacquant, who at that point was really quite junior, although he later became a huge star. Bourdieu gives him such a hard time in the film. because it turns out that, as far as Bourdieu is concerned. Wacquant is being too productive, in a "showy" manner-he's putting out too many journal articles, speaking at too many conferences, he's having too much "impact" and. as a result, he's not finishing his major book. So Bourdieu criticises him, and he says "No, don't you do that - this summer, go on

holiday, go somewhere very quiet - by all means swim or play tennis every morning. but spend your days doing the real work, do not do any more of this froth." And to see that now is a real tonic, I mean, no Head of Department in Britain could say that to a junior colleague anymore, they'd say the opposite: "get out on Twitter, demonstrate some more impact, get another grant." The more "froth," the better!

MC: Going back to technology and mediation: do you see differences between regions such as scholarship or research traditions originating from the United States, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, or Latin America in terms of the ways in which technology and mediation are regarded?

DM: I'm not sure. I've actually had less to do with American perspectives on these matters in recent years. There was a period in which I was quite involved in American academia and went there quite a lot as visiting professor at various places. And there are certain people in the States whose work I still have a profound interest in, people like Lynn Spigel, her work on television and technology, old colleagues from cultural studies like Dick Hebdige in California, or in the younger people like Jonathan Gray at Madison, who I think are doing very interesting work. But I don't actually see a distinctive and original set of perspectives coming out of the American academy at the moment. I had someone recently asking me where should they consider doing a PhD in the United States, and I was hard pushed to think of where it would be really good for them to go. I'm not sure that this debate about mediation has quite taken off in the same way in the United States that it has in Europe. As you're very well aware, whether you call it mediation or mediatization, that's clearly become a kind of "hot topic" over here. I find it a bit difficult myself, because when people say to me "mediation," I can recognize it historically - if you go back to Jesus Martin Barbero, when he comes up with the concept of mediation, I think that's a very interesting approach. That's one of the resonances in my mind when I talk about a non-mediacentric media studies, that's precisely what Martin Barbero and Nestor Garcia Canclini begin to do, to set questions about media in a much more interesting, broad dynamic of cultural or demographic change. That I'm interested in. But when people now talk about "mediation," the question I find myself worrying about is: what happened before mediation? When was before mediation? What is it that's not mediated? As far as I'm concerned, this dialogue we're having is mediated by language, it's a social system. The words, as Volosinov says, don't belong

to me or to you, they belong to a system of language. Our interaction, even face-to-face, is mediated, and it always was. So that's a problem. Unless someone can show me the nonmediated, then I'm a bit puzzled as to what mediation is. Okay, so then the argument shifts a little bit, so well, nowadays we've got face-to-face communication, but we've also got this secondary activity of mediated conversation on the mobile phone, or whatever. Well, okay, fine. There is a kind of overlay of virtual and mediated interactions, in that technical sense, alongside (and in some cases substituted for, but more commonly along with) face-to-face interaction. But that's not how people talk about it. They just want to talk about the technically mediated aspects of contemporary communication, which doesn't seem to me all that interesting. I get students who come to me and say "I want to do a project on the social media." My first question is, "Yeah, okay, but what are the nonsocial media?" And you know, if television isn't a social medium, I don't know what is. And radio is a social medium, and so is the newspaper. This idea of there being a new realm of "social" media which should be studied in a specific discipline of "mediation studies" just doesn't interest me. It's the same reason why I never wanted to be part of anything called "audience studies" or "reception studies"--carving the field up in these sort of specialist subdisciplines, I think it's nonsensical. And I know there are a lot of reasons to do it-you referred a few moments ago to conferences and "sections" of conferences. If you take the major institutions in the field, that's exactly what they encourage you to do. They encourage you do be a member of this sub-section of the ICA or the IAMCR on audiences or the section on development or something, and it's just the same issue for "mediation studies," in this case. I think that some of the issues that have been raised in discussions on mediation and mediatization can be very interesting, but I'm very worried by the tendency to abstract it and make it a kind of specialist, freestanding, separated area of activity and enquiry. I don't think that's a good way to do it. I don't think it's productive.

MC: Do you think, in that way, media and communication studies is doing a disservice to itself? Could we say more sobering accounts are coming from other disciplines such as sociology, geography, or anthropology? In other words, do you maintain we have concentrated too much on media and mediation in media and communication studies?

DM: Well, yes I think that's true, I don't mean to criticize people for doing it, I think that's again a perfectly understandable response to the kind of career and publishing and conference- appearance pressures that exist, but the thing is, I'm not really that interested in media studies, I don't really care very much what media studies does or doesn't do. For me, categorizing myself as I do as a cultural studies scholar, I'm interested in wherever the good stuff is, and at present. I would say in the last two years, by far the most interesting work on the media has been coming out of anthropology. There was a period in the mid-1990s, when anthropology was panicking badly about losing students to media and cultural studies and trying to fight against it and claim the terrain for its own, in its terms, and that created a very dull, competitive and sterile debate. But more recently, you've got people like Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou and Don Slater and Brian Larkin in the States-anthropologists who are doing just more interesting work about the media than people who call themselves media scholars. So that's what I'm reading. I don't read very many media journals. There isn't much in them that interests me. I read a lot of anthropology. I read a lot of cultural geography, I read a fair bit of history, but ultimately I'm most interested in work that pertains to the problems I'm trying to understand. Whether or not it comes from media studies or communications studies is actually immaterial to me.

MC: We are also seeing efforts towards defining and redefining what media actually are today. Miller and Madianou, for instance, are talking about "polymedia," not "media." Do such redefinitions have significance from the perspective of critical theory? Are such definitions crucial in our efforts to understand what place media occupy in social life and everyday life today?

DM: Newness is a historical constant. Every generation always believes that the technology of its day really is different. They recognise, sometimes, that other things have been "new" before, but in their case, they believe this time it really is different-and it's just a continual delusion. People talk about ours as a particularly mobile era, or an era of particularly rapid technological change. But if you look at historical work, such as that of Steven Kern on the late 19th century, he demonstrates that, in relative terms, that period was much more mobile than ours and the rate of

technological change was much faster in the late 19th century than it is now. So no, I just don't "buy" any of this stuff to do with the notion that today's "new media" is a whole different topic. To go back to what you were saying about Danny Miller and Mirca Madianou's book, the interesting thing about "polymedia" for me, is that what they do (and they do it very well, and I'm glad they do it) is to take us back to socio-linguistics. In socio-linguistics, the classic study by Fishman is the question of "who says what, in which language, to whom." Well, all "polymedia" does is say "okay, we've all now got lots of communicative choices," we've got a menu of choices and we can decide to use this medium for that topic and another for that purpose or topic - but that's just what socio-linguistics have always studied, it is just that now we can do that in relation to mediated conversation as well. I don't see that as some amazing breakthrough, it's more of a realization of what a classical perspective can still say to us, in a new context.

MC: Precisely. This has to do with the ambiguities that come with new media forms and tools. Are apps interface or technology? The same applies to other artefacts and platforms-hence, perhaps, the need to continuously come up with new concepts and terms.

DM: Well, you see, if we're going to have definitions of fields, I am much more interested in a field that would describe itself as communications than I am in a field that would define itself as media studies. Historically, certainly when I first taught it in the 1970s, communication was a discipline which included interpersonal communication and included linguistics, as a matter of course. The fact that I now teach students who know nothing about language, nothing at all about linguistics, I think is disgraceful. A narrowly defined discipline of media studies risks banality coming upon it with increasing speed. So, I'm more interested in communications than media studies. In my own work, I'm going back to more 19th century classical definition or communications, the one that Marx and Engels use when they talk about communications being to do with the movement of information, persons and commodities. So my definition of communications also includes physical mobilities, and transport, a whole set of ordinary, material infrastructures, and of course, the relation between the material and the virtual. There's a whole terrain of stuff there which media studies, in its incarnation in the last 30 or 40 years, has completely discarded, very foolishly as far as I am concerned. So I think if you look at the work

of people like Brian Larkin, who I referred to earlier, and also Lisa Parks, they are doing very interesting work, to bring those infrastructural or material questions back into consideration.

MC: So it is, in a way, avoiding hard questions we could say. Avoiding that complexity. Mediation perhaps is simpler to deal with than communication.

DM: Well, at that point, the mobile phone plays havoc with that conceptualization. Which discipline is going to claim the mobile phone? Is it claimed simply as a medium, or is it claimed as a mode of speech? Well, it has to be both, surely - to try to conceptualize it as either one or the other is nonsensical. Of course there are often very, very good institutional, rather than intellectual, explanations why things are called what they are. I mean, there's an institution that is part of Goldsmiths that is called the Cultural Studies Centre, it kind of "owns" the name cultural studies within the institution, though it doesn't do anything, as far as I'm concerned, that's related to cultural studies. It teaches a kind of postmodern, highly abstracted theory of Risk Society. On the other hand, people like Angela McRobbie and I have worked for years in something called a Media and Communications department, although we both think of ourselves as doing cultural studies. I tried to get the word "cultural studies" incorporated into our own department's name at a certain point, but I was told it wasn't possible because the name was already "owned" by another department, which is crazy!

MC: Again, going back to technology and empowerment: certain discursive frames keep re-emerging especially during or in the aftermath of certain social phenomena and events such as the Arab Spring. During the latter events, we saw many accounts of how it was a revolution enabled primarily by online platforms and mobile media. Shortly afterwards, we saw more sobering accounts. What kind of scope can cultural studies offer to go beyond the cyclical re-emergence and clash of techno-deterministic versus counter-deterministic debates?

DM: That's actually two rather different questions, let me begin by trying to answer the first part of it, about the debate in relation to the Arab spring. The thing that surprised me most was that there wasn't even much reference to the most obviously relevant text, which was the book by Annabel Sreberny and her ex-husband, Ali Mohammadi, called *Small Media, Big Revolution*, which was a very, very careful study

of the particular way the cassette tapes of Ayatollah Khomeini (recorded in Paris, and imported into Iran by "underground" routes) replayed on little tape recorders, made a huge contribution to the process of social change in Iran. What was astonishing was that even that evidence, which is only thirty years old, wasn't referred to. The hoo-ha about, you know, the "Facebook revolution" or whatever, I mean that was just beyond belief, really. I mean, I remember being in Cairo at some point around then and talking to someone there about it, and they said to me "well actually no, the really important thing was the gossip network between the taxi drivers," that had actually much more of a role to play than Facebook. The problem was that the very small, highly educated, middle class, progressive elite, who had organized themselves through Facebook, was stuck exactly at that level, until they began to think about how their networks of communication could make some kind of effective connection with a much broader population, which is what you needed to fill Tahrir Square. You can't fill Tahrir square with people on Facebook because there aren't enough people in Cairo who are literate and have got access to it. So the thing that becomes much more interesting is when you pay attention to the particular role that specific technologies have played in a given situation. Without getting technologically determinist about it, you can say that a technology with a given set of ·affordances," such as the internet, will have differential significance in settings in which the mass media are more, rather than less controlled, and in which there is more rather than less censorship. I can remember when the Internet began, my friends in Cairo then, back in the 1990s, were terribly excited about it, and they couldn't understand why I wasn't quite so excited. But that was because I was living in London, with a relatively free set of media institutions and with relatively easy access to a lot of information, and some of the best libraries in Europe accessible to me nearby. They were in Cairo, starved of information, in a heavily censored regime. In that situation, a given technology, be it the internet, be it the mobile phone or whatever, can have a quite particular significance. I think it 's important to recognize the different contextual significance of technologies, rather than thinking of technologies simply having inherent properties which will then have automatic effects. As far as the Arab Spring thing goes, we can see it today in relation to Istanbul, clearly, without access to YouTube, without mobile phone cameras and so on, you'd be seeing very little at all of what's been happening in Gezi Park, because the Turkish media certainly aren't going to show it, but that only makes sense in the

much broader context of the political structure of the forces of organized opposition in Turkey and how they relate to a whole set of different social groups and structures. The technologies have to be made sense of in that context. The abstraction that somehow the Middle East was going to be changed by the iPhone or by Facebook, I mean, it's insulting to people to think that-it's not just laughable, but insulting. It's like a return to the long discarded ideas of the 1960s, about how the transistor radio would somehow "modernize" the whole Middle East, in Daniel Lerner's fantasy, as funded by the government.

MC: It is. And, it's astonishing to see some journal issues dedicated to that.

DM: As to your second question about what cultural studies can contribute to these debates, I think I've already said what I think about that. For me, it's not so much to do with what you may think of as cultural studies, as the attempt to use that interdisciplinary perspective to broaden our understanding of communications, to think about the mobilities of persons, to think about cultural geographies, to think about infrastructures, to think about all of those things, and about what we can do to understand those situations better. You know, in Cairo, one of the crucial days was when the people from that initial Facebook network went out into the poor suburbs. It was a very old-fashioned Leninist-style thing, you go to those streets, and go around chanting until you gather enough people behind you to back you up. It was highly organized, and it was, in the end, to do with being physically on the streets and chanting-it wasn't technically mediated at all at that moment. It depended on walking backwards and forwards through the poor neighbourhoods, chanting songs about the price of bread and about corruption in the government, and gradually collecting a mass of people, whose numbers would ensure at least a relative degree of safety before heading for the centre of the city. And that's what I'm interested in understanding, how that embodied activity works, as articulated with virtual technology. A small number of people on the street, at that point, did have mobile phones and were communicating with the other people that were leading groups from other parts of the city. It was a composite set of events, in which media and communications technologies play different roles, depending on the cultural, political and legal context. It's not at all as if media technologies have an inherently decisive role, which is the same in all places and in all contexts, and which needs to

be studied by a specialist discipline of media professionals or media studies academics.

MC: Absolutely. Naomi Sakr, for instance, draws attention to the fact that television talk shows in Egypt were where counter-regime discourses started to seep into the living rooms. Internet and small media became significant later in the process.

DM: Well, that applies also to the publishing industry - The Yacoubian Building, as a novel, made a fantastic impact in Cairo, and then again when it was later televised. I suppose there is that way in which the new media technologies have a kind of cachet, compared with talking about something as "boring" and old-fashioned as publishing or television talk shows. It's not so easy to get people to he as excited about that, but I do remember when I first met the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, he had a line that I liked very much, about how sometimes what's really needed is some "unexciting caution." It's hard to use that as a "rallying cry." But he is so right, and that is certainly what is needed in relation to what happened in Cairo, and is needed now in relation to what's been happening in Istanbul. One has to look at where that event has come from and how it has built up, through what routes, over which periods, to the point where it now emerges as a visible thing, in the form that it takes. So I think that attempt to look not at the way in which virtual geographies replace material geographies, but the differential ways in which virtual geographies are articulated with material geographies and political processes, and infrastructures, in different situations at different times-that seems to me the best way forward. And it's not as obviously exciting as "Oh wow, let's study how the new media is changing the world," it's probably not such a kind of attractive "brand" for winning grants, and it's probably not such a good way to make a name for yourself as a young scholar coming into the field, but on intellectual grounds, that seems to me the only way forward.

MC: To end with two questions: one has to do with the role of interdisciplinarity and cultural studies, and the second, the definition of "empowerment." Is it possible to arrive at a meaningful definition beyond simplistic accounts such as those that define empowerment as a natural attribute of technology?

DM: I don't think "power" is something that can be given to someone by a technology. I mean, there's been a certain amount of discussion about, "Oh look, television isn't dead, it's been reinvented by Twitter," because now people tweet while they're watching television. Well, great, but I can't quite see the difference between that and the rather more familiar idea of people talking to each other in the room, while they're watching television. So I don't think, in that instance, the capacity to tweet can really be said to empower people in a significant way. I can think back to the point when my own children were young-one of them had a habit of going in her bedroom and watching Dallas while on the phone to her friend, so they in effect "tweeted" about Dallas- only they did it by phone, and my phone bill was very high. But empowerment- I mean, it's so difficult to get away from that market liberal consumerist notion that these technologies are going to "empower" you to solve your problems. When Roger Silverstone and I were working on technology use in the late 1980s, the thing that was being talked up then was the computer. Then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker was trying to convince parents in Britain that unless their children learned computer skills, they would be unemployable-so their parents just had to buy them a computer. What was so clearly resonant, historically, was the earlier 20th century period in which that same role was played by the encyclopaedia, because there used to be door-to-door salesmen who would go around trying to persuade parents in working class areas of British cities to part with large amounts of their hard-earned money in order to possess an encyclopaedia. The idea there was, again, rather magical - the idea that the encyclopaedia would be a "magical object" containing the knowledge that would transform their lives. Now whether you're selling encyclopaedias or selling iPhones doesn't seem to me significantly different. The magic has simply shifted, now it focuses on this small, light, beautifully designed object, which can do as much as three shelves of encyclopaedias could have done. But the idea that the answer is "in" the thing itself is crazy. The question you use the encyclopaedia, or how you use the iPhone. So, I really can't see how to be interested in that question, about technological empowerment. Other forms of empowerment, which seem to me much more significant arc not much to do with technology - you know, like an economy in which people would have jobs, in which their children could have a

future, in which they could afford decent housing, in which their health provision would not be as dangerously bad as it is now in the United Kingdom. Those are the really significant forms of empowerment. But I don't think they're going to come through technology. Indeed, if you take the case of health care, technology is consistently being used to disempower people. In the British press, I saw this new publicity, about the way to solve the problem of "overload" in health service was that when you felt ill, rather than going to the doctor, what you should do is email them. That struck me as not quite as good as what we might call the real thing! I mean they're not called "physicians" for nothing. Yes, you can look at a body from a long distance, and you can use a set of technologies, like x-rays, to see into bodies better even than when you are present, so physical co-presence is not necessarily the only question in health care, but it's still quite a big question. It's pretty obvious that what's going to happen in Britain is that, for the poor, there's only going to be virtual health care, where you ring up and somebody will give you advice, "Oh go and lay down, take three aspirins," whatever, and for the rich, there will be an actual doctor or a hospital you can visit, not just a virtual one. Those are the forms of empowerment that interest me and I'm particularly concerned to see the central role that technology is playing in disempowering people in situations like that. Let's take traveling. Suppose you have the desire to go to America. You couldn't do it now unless you had access to a computer-because now the form you would have to fill in to even apply for a visa only exists online. That seems to me quite disempowering, if you think about the extent to which many people in Britain don't have access, on their own terms, to a computer from which they can do things like print out the documentation that the visa application process requires you to do. So I suppose I am much more interested in the question of technological disempowerment, which seems to me a much more important research issue for us to pursue, but I don't see anybody pursuing that. I think Harry Braverman is badly neglected now - his work on how technology "de-skills" the labourer was very important in the 1970s when I was at CCCS. Bill Schwarz and his colleagues there in the State Group were trying to pursue that Braverman line of argument and I think it still has an awful lot to say about what's happening in the labor process now.

MC: About interdisciplinarity: since you gave the health care example, we must add it is very much contextual. If we take the human genome project for instance: it "could" be empowering, one could claim, to have our genetic maps, to know whether one will get cancer or not and tackle it early on. But, it can also be very disempowering especially when we have a commercial health insurance system, which will, in return, deprive us of any kind of health insurance if we happen to be prone to cancer.

DM: Yes, but it also cuts another way as well, a very dubious way. Even if you've got the health insurance, what a commercial health insurance will drive you to do is to be tested for more and more things, which in fact you might suffer from, although you probably don't, bur the profit is in the testing. So there is also another aspect- there's not only the question of those who are completely excluded from the system, but also, what the system does to those who are in it, how it prioritizes those aspects of medicine which are profitable, such as more and more testing. There are lots of diseases, which, at a certain age, you are more likely, as doctors say, to die with than die of. How useful is it that we should all know all of those bad things that might happen in 10 or 15 or 20 years' time? Would that be good? In Britain there's now a lively debate about unnecessary surgeries and the production of "scares" of one kind or another, which are produced by this system of technologically aided, invasive testing. But, as we come to a close in my discussion, finally, let me return to the question of interdisciplinarity, which is not an optional extra for me. I mean, sometimes you hear anthropologists say "well, anthropology is ethnography or it's nothing." Well, I suppose my equivalent would be "cultural studies is interdisciplinarity, or it is nothing." That's why, as I said before, I'm not interested in the question whether a book is published in media studies, I'm interested in the question if the book, published whether in geography, history, linguistics or whatever, is helpful in under- standing the problems of culture and communication. That, for me, constitutes interdisciplinarity. In the United Kingdom now it 's difficult institutionally - you don't get big grants for it easily, but intellectually, interdisciplinarity is the life and blood of things. For me it's the capacity to range across a very wide range of perspectives in trying to understand a problem. It's no guarantee of success, sometimes you can get lost-you can end up knowing a

little bit about a lot of different things and not be able to put them together. But without interdisciplinarity, cultural studies is nothing. The most disconcerting move that keeps being made in these debates is from sociology. Several times, in recent years, we have seen interventions by people like Simon Frith in Britain about fifteen years ago; and in the States by Paul Smith and Jeffrey Alexander, in more recent years - where basically, they talk about a "renewal" of cultural studies, but what they're actually talking about is the reduction of cultural studies to a sort of codified sociology of culture, which wouldn't even be interdisciplinary. I have nothing against sociology, but I don't think sociology, any more than anthropology or any other discipline, has a monopoly on the truth. I'm very, very resistant to those particular kinds of interventions, which want to insistently "sociologize" media and cultural studies and imagine that will somehow solve all our problems - I don't think it will, at all.

MC: Well, these are territorial battles!

DM: They certainly are! But, tedious as it sometimes is, to have to engage in those sorts of disputes, if, like me, you have a strong commitment to cultural studies as interdisciplinarity, then you have to stand your ground against those recurring, ill-conceived interventions by people (whether sociologists or evangelists for some other discipline) who think they've got all the answers!

MC: Thank you.