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Social History through Media History

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A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet
by Asa Briggs and Peter Burke
Malden, MA: Polity, 2002, x, 374 pp.

A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot
by Peter Burke
Malden, MA: Polity, 2000, viii, 268 pp.

¶1:21 In 1961 when I started graduate work in history, professors warned against social theory and other fonts of big ideas. Historiography covered useful techniques for the historian and the reading of diverse exemplars showing "the varieties of history," as gathered, for instance, in a still successful anthology.[1] Stick to the concrete; let the sources speak through lucid narration; perhaps worry about agency and consequences, but leave large explanations to the sociologists, philosophers, and critics. Such advice seemed confining, but young professionals found it hard to ignore. Slowly, professional historians have begun to change their tune.

¶2:21 Over the ensuing decades, historians have interacted more and more with social and political theorists and absorbed the traditions of the *Annales*, of interpretative sociology, and hermeneutic philosophy. Historians have become more willing to venture explaining large-scale historical changes and at their best, the social sciences, history included, are converging in efforts to tackle big and difficult questions.[2] A good historian is by no means any less the master of the sources, but increasingly he or she is free to use command of the particular to test, exercise, and ground a theoretical understanding of major historical developments. The work of Peter Burke is a good case in point, and that of Asa Briggs an illuminating contrast, a throwback to the old school.

¶3:21 Two distinguished historians – Peter Burke, a specialist in early modern cultural history, and Asa Briggs, an authority on modern technologies and communications – team up and inadvertently display this contrast in *A Social History of the Media*. The book fills a need and offers several parts of value – a masterful bibliography, both

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1 Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (2nd. ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

2 For a survey of recent examples of such work see Gale Stokes, "The Fates of Human Soeieties: A Review of Recent Macrohistories," *The American Historical Review* April 2001 <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/106.2/ah000508.html> (14 Jul. 2002).

copious and well-selected, capping a text filled with lucid descriptions of major media changes. Unfortunately, the two authors have written two separate books, each very different in tone and substance, yet concatenated into one. The strengths of the first show up the weaknesses of the second, and suggest that the old caution that good historians should keep big ideas out of mind was poor advice.

¶4:21 Mastery of the sources is a traditional historical virtue that Peter Burke preserves in exemplary fashion. He is steeped in the documents of early modern cultural life, particularly in the historic core of Western Europe, running from London to Venice via Amsterdam and Paris. However, at the same time, he has long exhibited a fascination with social theory and the potential interaction between it and the historical understanding.[3] In the Preface to *A Social History of the Media*, Burke assumes primary responsibility for the opening third of the book, which carries the reader from the late Middle Ages through the French Revolution, indicating that Asa Briggs wrote the remainder. Burke's book is a close complement to his *Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot*. Let us consider these two, *Knowledge* and Burke's *Media*, together, the one concentrating on knowledge itself, and the other on the media through which the work of knowledge in historical society took place. In both books, Burke uses an engagement with social thought to structure his analysis and presentation of material.

¶5:21 Burke introduces *Knowledge* with a concise discussion of the sociology of knowledge in relation to the history of knowledge. For someone who pays homage to Karl Mannheim, a master of muddied expression, Burke crafts a remarkably nimble and direct exposition. He claims that Durkheim, Weber, Foucault, and Bourdieu inform his social history, although he does not make the connections explicit (p. 10). But the way he structures the text, surveying the social roles played by knowledge and those who made and used it, seems to owe more to Florian Znaniecki's *Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*, whom he also cites.[4] At any rate, Burke's exposition follows what the makers and users of knowledge did with it – professing, establishing, locating, classifying, controlling, selling, acquiring, and both trusting and distrusting it. Burke's use of verbs of action to structure his subject makes his primary commitment as a professional historian evident – his book is about historical actions, not theoretical abstractions. The resulting account is very clear, although occasionally prone to repetition. As a stylist, Burke excels in writing, not in an authoritative voice, but with a light, lucid tone, concisely introducing historical developments, both complex and extensive. The result is at once accessible and erudite, but neither authoritative nor moving.

¶6:21 In his part of *Media*, Burke writes in a very similar voice. He begins with an excellent summary of medium theory, starting with the work of Harold A. Innis and Marshall McLuhan and surveying the topic up to the most recent debates about the cultural and intellectual effects of literacy. In a second, fuller chapter, he provides a

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3 See, for instance, Burke's studies of *History & Social Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) and *The French Historical Revolution: The* Annales *School, 1929-89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

4 *Knowledge* (p. 6). Compare the categories of activity that Burke uses to strueture his work with those discussed by Florian Znaniecki, *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, [1940], 1968).

succinct overview of how print-based communication assumed a key place in the intellectual enterprise of early modern Europe. Then, in his third, most important chapter, he uses *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas to organize his exploration of the interaction between media and the conduct of life in early modern Europe. Burke concentrates on four important developments – the Reformation, the Religious Wars and the Revolt of the Netherlands, the English transition from the Puritan Revolution to the Glorious Revolution, and the movement from Enlightenment to Revolution in France. With each he explores the degree to which the uses of media intersect with Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Burke suggests, in a way that some might call economical and others spare, that Habermas's ideas have a general interpretative value, even though history lived in its complexity provided many discrepancies at the boundary between theory and experience.

¶7:21 Burke's *Knowledge* and his contribution to *Media* illustrate some of the limiting characteristics of professional history in relation to social thought. As professionals, historians define themselves through the principle of period specialization. Social theory does not fit well into conventional periodization, weakening efforts to bring it to bear in historical works. For instance, when Burke writes social history, it is Renaissance and early modern European history. When he writes about historians, historical method, and the universe of social thought, his chronological anchor shifts to the present, addressing the character and tools of his profession.[5] By accepting the limitations of his chronological specialty, Burke constrains his engagement with social theory. For instance, at the limit of his chronological expertise qua historian, Burke passes authorship to Briggs, and substantive attention in *Media* to the work of Habermas disappears, even though it continues to be highly relevant to the developments Briggs covers.[6] Habermas aimed substantially to criticize how communications changes adversely shaped the character of public life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Briggs's failure to continue the discussion where it would be most relevant reflects back on Burke's earlier engagement with Habermas, making it look a bit facile, a convenient tactic of exposition, not worthy of follow-through where it could be of even greater import.

¶8:21 Briggs's part of *A Social History of the Media* lacks the lucidity of Burke's. It is twice as long and covers the wide range of media innovations that have transformed communications over the past two centuries. Briggs's narrative has a tumultuous quality to it. One might blame this on the profusion of media changes that he must cover. For instance, *Media* includes a long, not very , chronological listing of events related to media. It takes two and a half pages, one line to an event, to list events in Burke's domain from "Invention of writing," circa 5000 BCE to "Fulton propelled a boat by steam power," 1803. The events relevant to Briggs's sections require nine more pages to get from Fulton up to "Disruption of G8 Summit, Genoa" in 2001 (pp. 334-345). Obviously, Briggs sees a wealth of particulars to touch on. He is also in the later stages of a long, productive career as a historian of technology and

5 See Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

6 There are a few mentions of Habermas in the latter two-thirds of *Media*, but they are tangential and do not come to grips with Habermas's argument. One imagines Burke going over Briggs's contributions, looking for openings to slip in a mention of Habermas's *Public Sphere* here and there.

communication, and he has a wealth of detail and anecdote to narrate and it spills, copiously, from one association to another, onto his pages. Signs of inattention intrude as virtually the same paragraph appears early and late in the chapter on "Convergence" (compare pp. 269 & 312). Thus, the text reflects the garrulity of age.

¶9:21 Throughout Briggs's chapters, technology is in command. Briggs is not a technological determinist, but what we might call a technological opportunist – technologies happen, as need or serendipity mothers invention. As technologies happen, they provide people with opportunities for activities, permitting the actors to achieve fame, fortune, and influence thereby. All this Briggs narrates. His chapters present a cascade of technologies – steam and electricity; railways, ships, telegraphs, telephones, wireless, the moving image, gramophones; the press, radio, TV, communications research; telecommunications, computers, satellites, cable, viewdata, the Internet; all projecting towards a concluding question, "Into Cyberspace?" From this torrent of information, one learns little about the technologies per se, but a great deal about those who created them and became powerful through them. Briggs writes social history in a manner closer to that of the society pages in a good newspaper than to social theory in the grand tradition.

¶10:21 Through the churning particulars, Briggs devotes limited effort to helping his readers grasp reflectively the social effects of media changes. He points out recurring tensions among the putative purposes guiding those who were developing the uses of different media, as some sought to inform, others to educate, and many to entertain. In places he briefly describes the ideas advanced by various analysts of the media, but these are nuggets, not engagements with their thought. For instance, Briggs recurrently refers to Ithiel de Sola Pool's characterizations of media and one could imagine his using Pool, as Burke used Habermas, structuring his chapters on twentieth-century media innovations as an inquiry into how well Pool's concept of "technologies of freedom" helps in interpreting the social effects of media. As Burke managed a wealth of material and made it more memorable through his dialogue with Habermas, Briggs would have made his survey far more effective had he used some theoretical constructs more actively to elicit reflective apprehension of material by his readers.

¶11:21 In these ways, *A Social History of the Media* is a book of two unequal parts that hinge together poorly. We can explain the differences between the two parts by the different interests, backgrounds, and skills of the two distinguished authors. Yet many phenomena can be over-determined. To get at a second, perhaps more productive interpretation of why *A Social History of the Media* is two books in one, consider a question more basic than the accidents of authorship. Let us ask, not whether, together, given their differences, Burke and Briggs were able to write a unified social history of media since Gutenberg, but let us ask instead whether a unified social history of the media can usefully span the period from Gutenberg to the Internet. Does the social and media history of the past five hundred years and more span a reasonably unified period, one that historians might treat as a whole within a single book?

¶12:21 "From Gutenberg to the Internet" is a convenient demarcation of an extended period in media history. It fits well with the conventional divisions into ancient, medieval,

and modern history, coinciding almost exactly with the modern period. There seems as well to be a technical/functional coherence to it, casting printing as the first in a nearly continuous series of innovations, steadily amplifying the scope of communication with respect to both time and space. It is thoroughly in accord with the modern self-perception, clearly enunciated with Francis Bacon's identification of printing, the compass, and gunpowder as the inventions setting the moderns apart from the ancients. "From Gutenberg to the Internet" seems to define a sequence of innovation that falls neatly within conventional periodization. Might an alternative nevertheless make sense? Certainly, a brief essay such as this one is not an appropriate venue to develop fully a different historical schema. It may be useful, however, to sketch an alternative, suggesting its uses but leaving its development and defense to some other occasion.

¶13:21 Consider first the flow of demographic experience; for doing so will at least push from the foreground useless bogeys of technological determinism.[7] Demographically, a boundary between medieval and modern history in Europe is not prominent. European history might make better sense if historians treated the long era from the fall of Rome to the French Revolution as one extended period in which the effective exploitation of land and its products, depending primarily on animate sources of energy, provided the material basis for civilization. Such a period would encompass the slow rise of population from 700 to 1300, when Europeans reached something approaching the carrying capacity of their available land using unmechanized agriculture. There then followed a fluctuating demographic plateau, as climate, disease, war, geographical expansion, and modest agricultural rationalization tuned the basic potentialities. Culturally, that period would culminate in the Enlightenment, the roots of which penetrate deeply through the whole prior period. Politically, it would lead to the formation of nation-states, circa 1800, and the extension of European hegemony through imperialist expansion, driven initially by the basic economic impetus to control the product of more and more land.

¶14:21 Subsequent demographic history – incipient in the 18th century and then both irreversible and inescapable after 1800 – charts an unprecedented expansion of population, initially in the European core and subsequently around the world, combined with a remarkable shift of that expanding population from rural and small town habitats into large urban agglomerations. Although still increasing, as the 21st century begins, both the absolute expansion and the relative urbanization show signs of tapering off. In several further generations, population around the world will likely settle onto a new demographic plateau, with the majority of people everywhere living

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7 Discussions of technological determinism apply to historical change a model of causal explanation derived from 19th-century physical science, which is wholly inappropriate for the phenomena in question. Many of the great problems of 20th-century science are problems investigated not by studying the causal succession in time of clearly demarcated variables, but rather the complex reciprocal interactions of multiple variables as they coexist within a common space and time. There is a web of mutual influences in operation, not causes at work. With such phenomena of complexity, and all historical phenomena are ones of complexity, the object is not to isolate primary causes, but to understand complex interactions in order to possibly take measures that will steer the processes towards more desirable courses and away from undesirable ones. In our present situation, a terrible blindness impeding sound policy formation in important areas is the proclivity to treat phenomena of complexity as if they should yield to a conclusive science of causal explanation.

in very large cities. A predominantly urban demography, at a much higher level of total population, will have displaced the traditional agrarian regime.

¶15:21 As part and parcel of the demographic expansion and urbanization during the 19th and 20th centuries, the importance of using inanimate energy to process the raw materials of the earth greatly increased compared to its importance in the previous era. Even agriculture came to depend on energy intensive mechanization and fertilizers. The resources of the earth remain as limits, however, raising issues of sustainability with respect to food, raw materials, and energy. Hence, a new plateau is necessary, and once on it, the question of *more* becomes one of *better*. On this emerging demographic plateau, the effective use of information in all its forms, and the realization of the cultural experiences the uses of information afford, would seem to provide the material basis (in a very broad sense of the term) for the on-going development of its emerging civilization.

¶16:21 Can we apply this chronology, however briefly sketched, to the history of the media since Gutenberg? One can do so quite well by arguing that printing as invented by Gutenberg and practiced up to the early 1800's was a typical application of animate power to the problem of reproducing the intellectual resources of European culture. The effects of printing in this form did little to change the essential issues within that culture. Historians of print often note that the technology changed little from 1500 to 1800, with perhaps one exception, for the production of paper was receptive to early efforts to harness inanimate sources of power. Looking at printing as an agent of change in this period, judgments of its significance seem to turn on interpreters' perceptions. Let us grant, following a restrained reading of Elizabeth Eisenstein's account,[8] that printing had significant effects changing the spectrum of historical possibility. Printing increased the feasibility of religious reforms in the Reformation and reactions to it. Printing opened opportunities in science and scholarship by facilitating scientific communication and the rebirth of classical learning. In addition, it made the formation of nation-states more possible by helping to consolidate vernacular languages and to make bureaucratic statecraft more effective. The roots of all these developments were already strong in European experience prior to 1450, which gives rise to the interpretative problem. Did print originate much that was new prior to 1800? It is not difficult to read Burke's accounts in both *Media* and *Knowledge* as accounts of how print helped Europeans fulfill the operative purposes long seen as the uses of communication and knowledge within pre-modern culture.

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8 See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-modern Europe* (2 vols., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). A "chicken and egg" argument has broken out among historians of printing and reading as a result of Eisenstein's work. She makes a strong for printing as an historical agent as an important agency enabling the Reformation, modern science, and nation-states to develop effeetively. Critics, most fully Adrian Johns with respect to scientifie developments in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), take her to task for overstating the effects or printing per se. Persons acting shaped the historieal uses of printing, which themselves were rather inchoate. For a good exchange between Eisenstein and Johns, see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "An Unacknowledged Revolution Revisited," *The American Historical Review* February 2002 <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.1/ah0102000087.html> (14 Jul. 2002) and Adrian Johns, "How to Acknowledge a Revolution," *The American Historical Review* February 2002 <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.1/ah0102000106.html> (14 Jul. 2002).

¶17:21 Briggs begins his section of *Media* by noting that in 1814 *The Times* began production with a powerful steam-driven rotary press (p. 111).[9] From then on, printing became more and more a genuinely popular medium. Briggs presents an account of the media history in the 19th and 20th centuries that describes the many ways in which people harnessed inanimate energy to drive the processes of communication, creating the means for an unprecedented cultural integration, a deep transformation that came along with the expansion of populations and their marked urbanization. Without analyzing it as such, Briggs presents the media history of the past 200 years as something unprecedented and *sui generis*, a transformation leading to an entirely new historical context. Unfortunately, in doing so, he predominantly describes the activities that people undertook to effect these technological changes in their media. Who caused what to happen, when and where? To move ahead in history, people need to understand the potential uses of communication in giving shape, purpose, and value to the changing ways they themselves inhabit the earth. To address that purpose, historians need to address a different, fundamental question. Under a regime of interactivity, where everything influences everything else, historians need to ask the question Heraclitus put long, long ago – "what principle steers all things through all things?"

¶18:21 Consider the prestige of causal explanation. Throughout the history of modern science, up to roughly 1950, problems of causal explanation predominated in serious and effective inquiry. Researchers looked for causes in an effort to predict effects, expecting thereby to gain an if-then ability to produce desired outcomes. The results were wondrous in physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology and in their application through industry, technology, and medicine. During the last half of the 20th century, however, science has begun to turn to a different sort of problem, one in which a clear sequence of cause and effect is not at issue, but rather highly complicated dynamics of reciprocal interactions are in question. Here causes and effects are both bi-directional and manifold. The researcher recognizes that numerous phenomena are taking place simultaneously within an extended time and area. The challenge is to understand the dynamics of interaction, less to produce effects than to control the process, perhaps to steer it towards a more favorable course. Prominent examples are the study of ecologies, climate changes, environmental pollution, weather, macroeconomics, and large-scale social change. The human payoff of these studies is not in the ability to produce predictable effects through a given action, but the ability to anticipate complex interactions and to exert adaptive control within them. For instance, people driving create a simple instance of such adaptive control daily: at a certain density of traffic moving at high speed, drivers sense that the available reaction time to respond to the unexpected would be too short and the traffic slows by stages down to a bumper-to-bumper crawl.

¶19:21 Weather forecasting is an everyday example of such studies of complexity. In obeisance to the prestige of causal science, the weatherman's rhetoric speaks loosely of weather *predictions*. If we examine what people do with these "predictions,"

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9 Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, pp. 628-635, concludes by observing, among other things, how the steam press did more to spread the characteristics of modern print culture than had the traditional hand press. He stresses, in addition, consistent with the rest of the work, that these effects arose, not from the steam press itself, but from what people did with it.

however, we see that they are not at all about causal control over the weather, for most hold cloud seeding in quest of rain to be more an act of desperate hope than a rational measure. Rather these predictions are probable anticipations that people use to exert some adaptive control with respect to eventualities over which they can have no causal effect – "take your umbrella" or "dress warmly." Or consider how riding a bicycle exemplifies the difference between causal sequences and simultaneous interactions. Pedaling is clearly an example of causality, imparting motion to you and the bike. Controlling the bike toward some destination requires one to manage simultaneous forces, steering the bike, back and forth, away from your direction of fall, dynamically correcting imbalances while wending your way to some destination, out of sight, but not out of mind.

¶20:21 Why was the law of causality so important? Not by virtue of epistemological necessity, for people could always reflect on simultaneous interactions, as Adam Smith did in hypothesizing the unseen hand of the marketplace. The answer is far more likely to lie with the accidents of opportunity and its costs. Over the past three centuries, investigators have had a wide horizon of opportunity to explore through experimental inquiry the causal connections at work linking diverse phenomena. The costs of such inquiries, financial and intellectual, were relatively sustainable, especially compared to the costs incurred through explorations of simultaneous interactions in complicated domains, where the intellectual demands of dealing with a high number of interacting variables are still extremely daunting. More recently, the costs of causal experiment at the frontiers of knowledge have risen sharply, as for instance with the Supercollider, construction of which was stopped for reasons of its expense. At the same time, new mathematical techniques and expanded information processing capacities are sharply lowering the intellectual barriers to investigations of multiple variables in simultaneous interaction. And as inquiry begins to show how unwitting interventions through human activities in complex interactions are potentially affecting our habitat, people increasingly see the benefit of developing greater foresight and understanding, seeking to exert a more sustainable control over demographic, environmental, economic, and physiological dynamics.

¶21:21 History has been written primarily in the rhetoric of causal description. This is the case in *A Social History of Media*, particularly in Briggs's sections. One thing leads to another. Rarely is there an effort to step back, to consider the simultaneities at work in the whole panorama. Right to the very end, Briggs is caught in musing in the implications of little details, whether the plants purveyed through Crocus.co.uk were real or virtual (p. 333). Historians need to start thinking ambitiously with reference to the principle of simultaneity, searching for the dynamics of control within large spheres of human interaction. Media changes change the spheres of interaction; the media themselves are vectors of simultaneity, channels of interaction. In the end, *A Social History of Media* is too timid a book, a confection for the market. Briggs and Burke do not essay the difficult but important question. As people seek to stabilize the human enterprise, making sustainable a vast, urbanized population, what can serve them as effective regulative principles and ideals in the complex system of interactions at work through the global ensemble of contemporary communications and transportation?