Storia dei media digitali: rivoluzioni e continuità.

LEUZZI, L.

2017

Reviewed by Laura Leuzzi, DJCAD, University of Dundee

Gabriele Balbi and Paolo Magaudda's *Storia dei media digitali. Rivoluzioni e continuità/*'History of the Digital Media. Revolutions and Continuity' traces the socio-cultural history of three digital media that have strongly impacted our lives: computers, internet, and mobile telephones. Balbi and Magaudda focus particularly on the last sixty-five years, from the Fifties to today, but with several references to previous centuries' theories and practices (XV). The volume is opened with a foreword by media historian Peppino Ortoleva, who defines *History of the Digital Media, Revolutions and Continuity* as a

> history book, which interprets a big process and tries to deconstruct it in its components of different duration, and which distances (in time and in interpretative models) a reality that is flowing under our eyes but, or maybe for this reason, makes it tidier. It puts this reality out of the haziness of journalistic analysis, which is captured by chasing latest novelties (XIII).

In the introduction, the two authors detail the complex methodology employed. As they explain, the book adopts an historical approach, which allows the authors to retrace different tendencies in the 'long period (the so called *longue durée*)' (XVI), and capturing digital media's 'dynamic evolution' (XVII).

The adopted socio-cultural historical perspective focuses on the relationship between media and society's cultural structures and entities in their global context, trying to trace their reciprocal influences (the so called 'social shaping' of technologies) (XVII-XVIII). The authors discuss in particular: political agendas and investments that significantly influenced the development of specific national media; cultural representation of technologies; myths, mythologies, and obsession linked to digital media; how users approach, use and modify (or contribute to) media technologies. Several examples and interesting anecdotes guide and lighten the reading.

The authors' interpretative analysis includes elements from three theoretical approaches: Political Economy of Communication, Cultural Studies, and Science and Technology Studies. In the five chapters of this well-structured book, the issue of whether there is a real break or a continuity with the past (two terms evoked by the study's title), between the digital and the analogue, is astutely raised and debated several times. Balbi and Magaudda discuss convincingly that this so-called 'digital revolution' (an expression that became popular in the late Nineties) is 'the most recent and visible phase of a longer process of transformation, that has its roots in the analogue and not in the most recent past' (15).

The first chapter, authored by both Balbi and Magaudda, takes as its departure the very definition of digital and digitization, explaining the most seminal theories and approaches emerged after the Second World War including cybernetics (8), 'information society', 'post-industrial society' and 'media convergence' (9).

Chapter Two, written by Magaudda, retraces the history of computer. The chapter starts from its analogue origins in mechanical calculation machines and the looms controlled by punch cards in the 19th Century. From there, it follows the developments and evolution of computer in the 20th Century: from military and scientific research tool to devices for personal entertainment and communication. This chapter offers a survey stretching from the Turing machine to big mainframes and, finally, to the personal computer. Magaudda examines the pc's massive diffusion in the middle of the Nineties (due also to its identification with internet) (38), and its later crisis, partly caused by the commercialisation of portable devices, such as the tablet, in the new 'post-pc' era (41). The chapter includes also Apple's *1984* commercial and its significant impact on audiences and the fate of the computer in Hollywood cinema in early Eighties (e.g., in *War Games*, 1983, and *Tron*, 1982) (34).

In his retracing of the history of the Internet in the third chapter, Balbi designates six eras: military Internet (46), academic and scholarly Internet (49), counter-cultural Internet (53),

Internet as public service (56), commercial Internet (60) and social Internet (otherwise known as 2.0). The author examines two peculiar case studies: the success of Minitel in France, which offers an example of how a 'lower' technology can meet users' needs (69-71); and China's controversial control over the Internet, which is typically not fully understood in its historical and social context (71).

Balbi continues the historical exploration in Chapter Four, which he dedicates to the history of the mobile phone, retracing its predecessors (the telephone and the walkie-talkie), pointing out differences and similarities (76-80). The evolution of the mobile phone technologies are traced in detail and a section of notable interest is dedicated to the short messaging system (SMS). Balbi is attuned to the influence of governments and political agendas on the enormous diffusion of mobile phones.

The fifth and last chapter, penned by Magaudda, concerns the digitisation of analogue media, including music, printing, cinema, photography, TV and radio (100-141). In these brief overviews, each of which is dedicated to a different medium, the author points out differences and features in common to these processes. Particular attention is salutary to an examination of changes in boundaries between production, distribution, and use, as well as the tensions between breaking with old models and re-enacting practices and forms from analogue media (142-143).

In their final remarks, Balbi e Magaudda review the *fil rouge* of the book, focusing on how and why the so-called 'digital revolution' became a myth (a myth that is in contrast with the historical evidence offered in the chapters) (144). The authors discard both the idea of a non-recognition of the profound change brought by digital media and the theory of a 'neat break' with past are discarded. The authors define it instead as a 'conservative revolution', which at the same time has strong bonds with the analogue past, but holds ground-breaking features.

This 'conservative revolution' has deeply changed communications, relationships and culture and is in constant change (151).

This book well-researched study offers a comprehensive overview of the social history of media. The chronology of digital media offered as an appendix provides a lively and quick source on the topic, with a global perspective. This book will appeal to a wide swath of readers. It is at once a useful entrypoint into the field for the general reader, a manual for students, as well as an effective study tool for researchers and practitioners.