

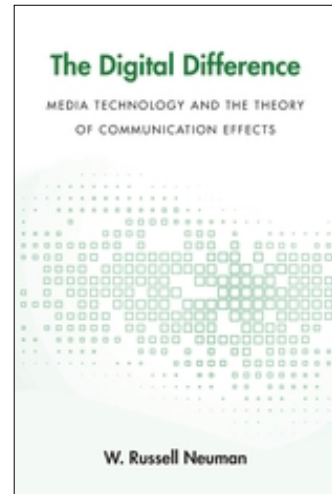
W. Russell Neuman, **The Digital Difference: Media Technology and Theory of Communication Effects**, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, 384 pp., \$49.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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For W. Russell Neuman, the new media environment—what he calls the “digital difference”—is an opportunity and imperative to change the paradigm of media effects research. “Communication science” as Neuman calls it, has been stuck in a rut defined by the propaganda paradigm that emerged under patriarchs like John Marshall and Paul Lazarsfeld in the mid-20th-century United States. The tradition, bogged down by institutional and methodological inertia, has lost theoretical coherence and purpose. Instead of having a grounded and relevant agenda, research has become fixated on refuting the “minimal effects” associated with Lazarsfeld, Joseph Klapper, and the Columbia School generally.



Neuman draws explicitly on James Beniger, who saw the propaganda paradigm in public opinion research shifting to a “process paradigm” beginning in the mid-1970s (Beniger, 1987, p. S54). In **The Digital Difference: Media Technology and Theory of Communication Effects**, he argues that what we have today is not a coherent paradigm so much as “a corpus of theory and research that is contested, fragmented, and diffuse” (p. 42). Though he begins by suggesting the possibility of a “paradigm shift,” in the end what Neuman hopes to see is “paradigmatic reform” (p. 304), as much in the sense of reconstitution as incremental change. While he attributes a persistent obsession with finding “strong effects” to the propaganda paradigm, Neuman finds something worth recovering in its original moment: “the sense of urgency and practical real-world significance of needing to understand how the dynamics of the public sphere actually work in order to protect it from the propagandists” (p. 44).

In a time when the public sphere is being transformed by digital media, communication researchers should be helping to steer the transformation. The goal, which Neuman justifies as a consensus position within the United States, would be a pluralist public sphere, an open marketplace of ideas. Deeming the digital public sphere “off to a promising start” (p. 242) in this regard, Neuman is nevertheless wary of the tendency privilege has to protect and consolidate itself. He notes the decline of journalism, especially print journalism, the global openness of the digital public sphere, and the precarious status of “net neutrality” as causes for concern. He invokes the dialogic ideals of John Dewey and Jurgen Habermas, but follows Michael Schudson (1997) in recognizing that democratic talk is more than spontaneous conversation. Humans’ “predisposition to polarization” means we need to develop public policy, technical systems, and norms that channel human conversation away from tribalism and toward democratic deliberation. Neuman hates to cede all of this important work—what he memorably describes as writing a *Robert’s Rules of Order* for the digital public sphere (p. 302)—to lawyers and economists.

Quantitatively measuring meaning is a formidable challenge. Neuman describes it as “nearly impossible” (p. 89) because of “profusion” and “polysemy”—the sheer volume of messages and the variation in how they are interpreted. Digital media, which intensify these challenges, simultaneously offer new data collecting and crunching opportunities to meet them. For data collection, the promise is not just the volume and range of the data available, but that they are “naturally occurring,” requiring no artificial surveys or experiments to generate. Experimentalists can now manipulate virtually the entire media diet of their subjects for weeks or months, rather than just exposing them to a few texts. For data crunching, the main prospect is building over-time analyses to assess the kind of reciprocal interactions among text, attention, and opinion posited by approaches like the spiral of silence theory. There is even the prospect—still fairly far off—of automating content analysis.

The reformed paradigm Neuman would like is wider, more engaged, and more relevant than the academic “silos” he laments. It emphasizes “resonance” over “mechanistic” effects. This means, for one thing, thinking in terms of “valenced communication” rather than through the “asymmetric” terms shaped by propaganda concerns. It means paying attention to what people choose to attend to rather than seeking to determine if they are persuaded by what is pushed on them. Neuman wants to treat polysemic interpretation as a central variable of interest. Instead of paying attention to the mean or aggregate interpretation, effects researchers should pay attention to the distribution of interpretations—from preferred to “oppositional” readings.

Cultural studies comes into the argument here. If cultural studies would do more audience research, and social science would pay more attention to the polysemy of texts, we might get “a convergent and consilient contribution from both traditions” (p. 8). The allusion to E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience* reflects Neuman’s understanding of the distinction between “critical” and “administrative” approaches as expressing the “two cultures” divide between the sciences and humanities. The poet and essayist Wendell Berry met Wilson’s *Consilience* with eloquent skepticism (Berry, 2001). Humanists per se may not react to Neuman’s *Digital Difference* in the same way. Marxists and Foucauldians almost certainly will.

It is hard to imagine anyone resisting a renewed focus on reception, however. Neuman seems a little too quick to say that cultural studies has abandoned audience ethnography, though it may depend on what counts as “cultural studies.” The most important audience ethnographies of the past two decades have been carried out by anthropologists working outside the United States—for example, Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Dramas of Nationhood* (2004). Particularly given his distaste for institutional silos, one wonders why Neuman insists on separating such work from “cultural studies.” Anthropologists, like lawyers and economists, can be communication researchers too.

A distinguished researcher’s constructive critique of his own field, *The Digital Difference* is rich and informative, and could serve as an introduction for graduate students to the broad concerns and potential of the effects tradition. Though some passages are superfluous to Neuman’s main argument, much of his commentary—about cultural studies, about the methodological challenges of communication science—will be of interest to all communication scholars.

There are notable weaknesses however. The book is not quite what Neuman seems to promise—"a study of a revolution in communication" (p. 1). It would probably be better described as an assessment of the effects tradition *in the context of* a revolution in communication. Mostly retrospective rather than prospective, the book seems motivated more by a desire to refine effects research than by a drive to understand the digital difference. Indeed this latter term—the title of the book—is not elaborated upon much beyond Neuman's indication that it signifies a shift from "push" to "pull" dynamics. "The digital difference is that digital communication *is* communication," Neuman says at one point. Then in the following paragraph, "what is texted, tweeted, posted, and emailed is not a representative sample of what a community is thinking and saying" (p. 297). If digital communication *is* communication, surely what is texted, tweeted, posted, and e-mailed *is* what is said. A more thorough exploration of the title concept might have avoided confusion here.

Other shortcomings have become more evident since the book was published. In the name of an open marketplace of ideas, Neuman writes, "let a thousand Phyllis Schlaflys and also a thousand Gloria Steinems bloom" (p. 230). It is not clear that this approach—that of John Stuart Mill and Oliver Wendell Holmes—will work as intended if most of these blooms are bots, or when inflammatory messages are targeted precisely at those who will be most inflamed, while going unnoticed by the rest of us. A similar point might be made with respect to privacy. Neuman's commitment to informed consent and other standard academic ethical procedures contrasts sharply with the complete indifference to such concerns among those who have built the new digital media environment. Whatever the digital difference may be, it clearly poses a challenge to the nature, value, and function of notions like privacy, audiences, and freedom of expression.

Neuman's thesis—that changes in communication should occasion paradigm reform in communication studies—is strikingly plausible. The quantitative, behaviorist stance underlying the tradition in which Neuman works would seem to align well with the logic and mechanisms of digital media, and big data may well reduce the difficulties of measurement and computation that have rendered so much effects research inconclusive or contested. Readers might wish Neuman had ventured farther along the path he points us down, but it is clearly a promising path.

References

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