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Jesper Verhoef & Tom Sloopweg

Gone but Not to Be Forgotten: 1980s and 1990s Media Histories

Contemporary media scholarship is dominated by ‘always already new’ media, particularly those subsumed under the umbrella of digital media and computer technologies.¹ Media-historical scholarship has responded in various ways, however. For example, media archaeologists argue that historicising media helps to counter teleological perspectives concerning the current media landscape, thereby opening up our view to dead ends and obsolete media.² Others keep expanding our knowledge of so-called legacy media, such as newspapers, cinema, television and radio, or seek to historicise and problematise the current media ecosystem and its conceptual underpinnings to investigate claims of their supposed ‘newness.’³ Over the last decades, media history at large has thus shifted from a central focus on traditional mass media towards a more diverse set of research ambitions, also including the growth of transnational and transmedia histories.⁴

Notwithstanding these important developments in the field, this special issue underscores the need to shine a light on media technologies that emerged, or prospered, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. As the historical distance to these decades grows, it has become apparent that they signified a moment of transition, or a watershed moment; not only in Western contexts, but also from a global perspective. The final two decades of the twentieth century became the breeding ground for the emergence of an information society, but also shifting political, sociocultural and economic dynamics, with the subsequent tidal waves of these changes touching many shores around the world in the shape of such phenomena as consumerism, individualisation, globalisation, migration and neoliberalism. Furthermore, as media sociologists Andreas Hepp and Stig Hjarvard remind us, the continued ‘mediatisation’ of our world makes it exceedingly hard to ignore media to understand the present, and more importantly, as we argue, past societies in all its various facets.⁵

It is therefore high time to embrace media histories of the eighties and nineties – which to date, by and large, are ‘terra incognita’ – in order to offer much-needed analyses of the continuities and changes of this historic moment.⁶ Many of the above-mentioned observations are unpacked in more detail by Jesper Verhoef in his thought-provoking 1980s and 1990s media history manifesto. He

contends that media from the end of the twentieth century have largely been neglected or are what he terms the ‘Cinderella’ in much of the scant histories that *have* appeared. Worse still, they are often explicitly imbued in the popular imagination with a at first glance appealing, but ultimately unproductive sense of nostalgia. As Verhoef shows, this has resulted in a problematic gap in our socio-cultural knowledge. He first teases out shortcomings in and blind spots of extant scholarship, to subsequently offer concrete examples and case studies to further our research agenda. Moreover, Verhoef rekindles the idea that media histories are ideally suited to offer a prism for analysing ‘a rich web of cultural practices and ideas’ within specific historical context.⁷

The other contributions to this issue similarly sketch the contours of the kind of media histories that are required to make steps towards a broader embrace of media histories situated at the end of the twentieth century. The various guises of telephony during those decades play a significant role in three contributions. Adrien Tournier chronicles the processes leading up to the new numbering system of the telephone network in France during the mid-1980s. By doing so, Tournier reveals the persistent technocratic power of the French state through new ‘methods of management, centralisation and control.’ Moreover, the changes in the telephony infrastructure by the French government also led to a renewed ‘guardian’ state attitude towards French citizens. Iben Bredahl Jessen, on the other hand, investigates the early cultural connotations of mobile telephony in Scandinavia through an analysis of various advertisements of the 1990s. She concludes that the early mobile phone spurred such values as ‘availability, freedom, and independence,’ with the important parentheses that these values were specifically directed towards business professionals operating in an increasingly globalised, neoliberal world. Fabian Prieto-Ñáñez, lastly, takes us to Bogotá of the 1990s to investigate the infrastructural changes brought about by Telemonedero. This telephone-network-based ‘media assemblage,’ as Prieto-Ñáñez argues, became an idiosyncratic emblem of Colombian modernisation efforts at the turn of the millennium.

The fascinating media histories of (then-)unconventional, yet highly symbolic entertainment technologies of the 1980s and 1990s also feature in this issue. First, D. Travers Scott scrutinises the Furby ‘freakouts’ during its introduction on the US market in the 1990s. Many of the discourses surrounding this kids’ toy resemble contemporary discussions surrounding the perceived benefits and dangers of Artificial Intelligence, but this historical case also discusses processes of mythmaking

around the impact of media technologies and their potential detrimental effect on children. Second, Myrna Moretti conducts a feminist analysis of early 1980s television ads for the Atari 2600 video game system and reveals the underlying neoliberal discourses about “cultivating routine” and ‘broader fantasies of the “good life.”’ As Moretti contends, this type of analysis is especially fruitful to broaden the scope of video game histories, but also to historicize the technologisation of the routines of our everyday lives through media.

Furthermore, Alexandra Brankova devotes attention to the changing dynamics of ‘legacy media’ in Bulgaria at the end of the twentieth century. By studying a variety of Bulgarian newspapers from the 1990s, Brankova elucidates how the 1990s formed the canvas on which the “emergence of the free market and the influx of electronics in Bulgaria” took shape, but also how these developments ‘affect[ed] identity formation’ in the early days of post-communist Bulgaria. Conversely, Lucinda Davenport hones in on British Telecom’s Prestel and ‘analyses the development, partnerships, marketing, and consumer reception to (...) the world’s first viewdata system.’ Despite the disappointing adoption of this innovative telecommunication system by general consumers, Davenport’s study nevertheless reveals that the UK, in the 1980s, became an influential leader in setting the stage for a ‘ubiquitous networked world’ we nowadays take for granted. Oya Kasap Ortaklan, to conclude, discusses the role of 1980s video communication in Turkey and by Turkish immigrants in the German Federal Republic. The 1980s were known for the so-called ‘video boom,’ symbolising rapid technological innovation and modern electronic consumerism. Kasap Ortaklan’s article casts a different light on this phenomenon, however. ‘Turkish immigrants built a bridge’ via video with Turkey of that period, yet at the same time, ‘video turned into a symbolic apparatus of the conservative ideology’ espoused by the Turkish new right.

The kaleidoscopic nature of the various contributions presented in this issue deliver a rich pallet from which to draw further inspiration. We are similarly pleased with the wide range of countries and regions, from Colombia and Scandinavia to Turkey – although much more work on particularly non-Western cases is required. We nevertheless hope that this issue will lead to a diverse, multifaceted, and more concerted effort to grapple with 1980s and 1990s media. Much work remains to be done and other fruitful avenues need to be explored. For example, as Ann-Katrin Weber has shown, the study of historical new media technologies at exhibitions can reveal highly relevant

insights into the ‘symbolic, cultural, political, and social definitions’ that circulated within a given time and place.⁸ Other projects could focus on lesser-known media technologies such as videodisc, CD-i, Datasette, Teletext, pager/beeper, Discman, or various home computer systems.⁹ What can histories of media that underperformed in one market, but flourished in others elucidate about the end of the twentieth century, or about differing local experiences?¹⁰ In sum, we urge everyone to keep this conversation going and to revive those media that gradually disappeared from view, or are already long gone. They must not be forgotten and we encourage media historians around the globe to make them historiographically relevant again.

Notes

1. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
2. See, for example: Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).
3. Gabriele Balbi, Nelson Ribeiro, Valérie Schafer & Christian Schwarzenegger, ed, *Digital Roots: Historicizing Media and Communication Concepts of the Digital Age* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2021).
4. Marie Cronqvist and Christoph Hilgert, “Entangled Media Histories,” *Media History* 23, no. 1 (2017): 130–141, DOI:10.1080/13688804.2016.1270745. For a recent example in this journal, see the special issue on Transnational Journalism History: Frank Harbers and Marcel Broersma, “Transnational Journalism History: Expanding Boundaries” *TMG–Journal for Media History* 24, no. 1-2 (2021): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.808>.
5. See for example: Andreas Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013); Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
6. Jesper Verhoef, “The Epitome of Reprehensible Individualism: The Dutch Response to the Walkman, 1980–1995,” *Convergence* 28, no. 5 (2022): 1304, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211060297>.
7. Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), xv.
8. Ann-Katrin *Television before TV: New Media and Exhibition Culture in Europe and the USA, 1928-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022). See also Chapter 2 in: Tom Slotweg, “Resistance, Disruption, Belonging: Electronic Video in Three Amateur Modes,” doctoral dissertation, University of

- Groningen, 2018; and also Chapter 2 in: Jesper Verhoef, *Opzien tegen modernisering. Denkbeelden over Amerika en Nederlandse identiteit in het publieke debat over media, 1919-1989* (Delft: Eburon, 2017).
9. Regarding the pager, see: Jesper Verhoef, “The Rise of Chronic Reachability and the Accelerated, Flexible Society. The Social Construction of the Pager, 1987-1999,” *Mobile Media & Communication* (advance online publication) (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579231219>.
 10. See for example: Jesper Verhoef, “Let’s Not Be Cultural Pessimists: The Social Construction of Nintendo’s Game Boy and the Need for Console-Specific Game Studies,” *Game Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023), <https://gamestudies.org/2302/articles/verhoef>.

Biographies

Jesper Verhoef is a historian and media scholar at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has researched a wide array of media – including cinema, the portable radio, Walkman, pager, and Nintendo’s Game Boy and other handhelds – and associated practices to analyse critical sociocultural, historical developments such as Americanisation, individualisation, consumerism, and the advent of neoliberalism. His research has appeared in *Convergence*; *Mobile Media & Communication*; *Game Studies*; *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

Tom Slootweg is Assistant Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Groningen. He wrote his dissertation on the (often utopian) hopes and expectations, but also the everyday amateur uses, of electronic video in the Netherlands and beyond, between the 1960s and 1990s. He is currently exploring various digital tools for doing media historical research and wrote about these and other topics in *Digital Roots* (De Gruyter 2021) and *Doing Digital Film History* (De Gruyter Fall 2024). Tom is the parting editor-in-chief of *TMG-Journal for Media History*.

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