

20TH CENTURY MEDIA AND THE AMERICAN PSYCHE

A Strange Love

Charisse L'Pree Corsbie-Massay

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INTRODUCTION

Why Media?

In 2000, I had an epiphany while watching late-night infomercials: *With enough money, anyone can reach into your home at any hour and convince you to buy or believe something that you had never considered before.* In that moment, through this revelation, my life was forever changed.

Our new relationships with media are often told through generational stories because generational markers capture the experiences of cohorts who live through shared social, political, economic, and technological eras. I was born in 1981, right in the heart of a micro-generation referred to “X-ennials.” X-ennials are situated between Generation X (born 1965–1980) and Millennials (born 1981–1996). Growing up as the digital media environment of the 21st century emerged, we are defined by an analog childhood and a digital adulthood (Wertz, 2018). Although the uniformity of generations can be overstated, growing up with one foot in the 20th century and the other in the 21st gave me a vantage point to understand the relationship between media and psychology, especially in a rapidly evolving environment. I draw on these experiences to understand the intense relationships we form with media in this book.

Media have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. My earliest memory is of playing plastic records on a toy record player for my mother’s friends in our apartment in Queens. I wrote, printed, and bound my own autobiography using Printshop in fourth grade (see Figure 0.1). In sixth grade, I was frustrated that boys always won in the television commercials for board games and I convinced my teachers to write an angry letter to Milton Bradley. In high school, I obsessively made and traded **mixtapes** with my friends. As a freshman at MIT at the end of the millennium, I coded my own website using Netscape, which was full of spelling errors because spell check was not yet the default (Figure 0.2). I didn’t just grow up around media. During my early

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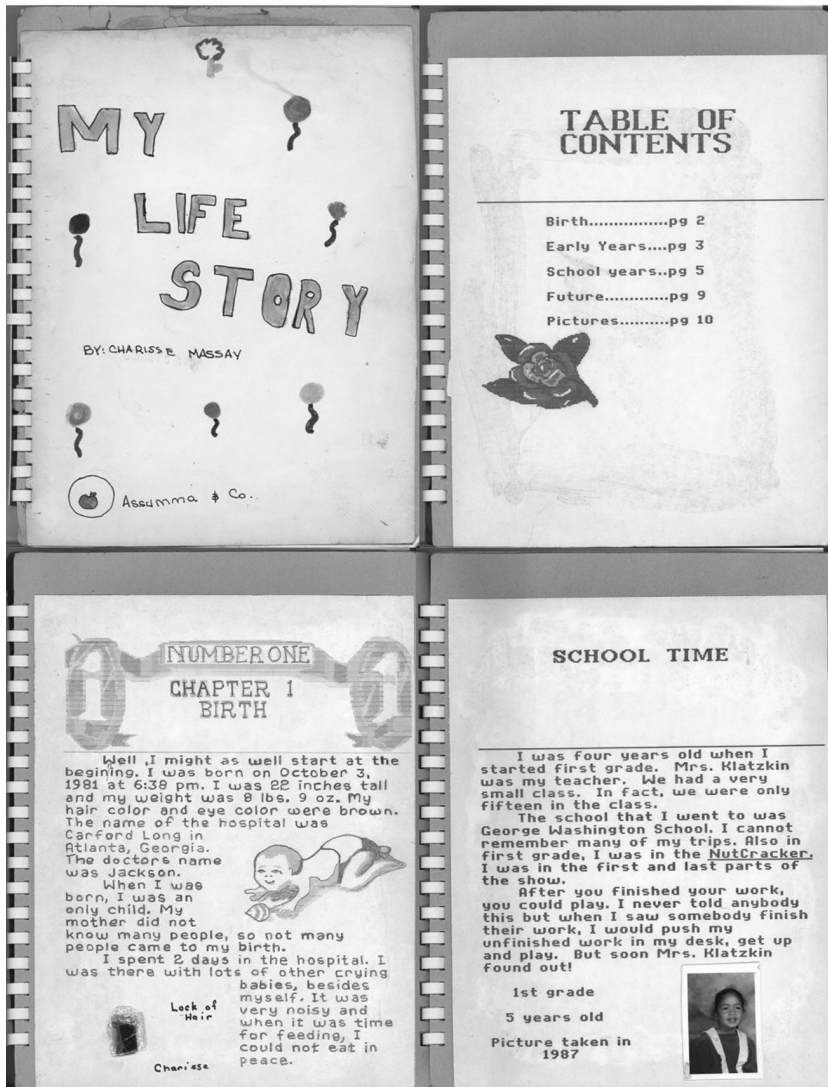


FIGURE 0.1 My Autobiography (1990): The Print Shop (1984) was a desktop publishing program that featured user templates including newsletters, signs, cards, and banners, as well as a library of clip art. In fourth grade, we each wrote our own autobiographies, formatted them using an Apple II, and printed them on the classroom's dot matrix printer. However, in order to use the manual comb binding machine, the printouts had to be glued to construction paper. This was my first self-published book.



FIGURE 0.2 My First Website (1999): Although consumer market internet access was dominated by dial-up internet service providers (ISPs) in the late 1990s, MIT offered all students their own web locker, which allowed us to build and host our own websites. I coded this website in HTML using Netscape Navigator's (1994) editor feature.

life, I came to understand myself, my relationships, and my perspective on life through media.

While watching infomercials on this night, I was already aware of the power of media technologies, but its sheer invasiveness surprised me. I was in my home in my pajamas, completely relaxed and vulnerable, and I had effectively invited a stranger into my house to promote messages for unwanted products. This wasn't an isolated incident. As an adult, I regularly curled up in bed with television, showered with my stereo, and showed my camera things I would never show another person. These personal habits are not uncommon. Today, 29% of teenagers sleep with their cell phone (Johnson, 2019). My relationship with media technologies had become so normalized that I couldn't tell where they ended and I began.

Since my epiphany in 2000, my life's work has been to uncover how my media impacted psychology. I wanted to understand how media affected my thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs. This interest took me on a long journey that helped me formulate this book's argument about the cyclical relationship

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between psychology, media, and culture. At MIT, I earned S.B. degrees in brain and cognitive science and comparative media studies, taught a class on MTV history to middle school students, and led a summer program at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston teaching members to edit video using donated Hi-8 cameras. I continued my education with an M.A. from the USC School of Cinematic Arts and a Ph.D. in Social Psychology, also at USC. I am currently Professor of Communications at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. After 20 years of academic investigation, it has become clear that media technologies gratify my emotional and physiological needs much like a friend or an intimate partner. In turn, these technologies have mediated and shaped my relationships with future technologies.

To describe the relationships that people develop with media, this book builds on an established research tradition in communication. Tens of thousands of studies have investigated **media effects**—the idea that media impacts the way its users think and act. Although popular, there are two key issues in this research that limit generalizability and application. By focusing on specific industries (such as journalism, advertising, and entertainment), content genres, and audiences, media effects research tends to neglect distinctions between media formats and collapses meaningful categories of media technologies such as theatrical film, television, or magnetic tape (Corsbie-Massay, 2016). For example, whereas the effects of violent content *on* violent attitudes or behaviors are well researched, there is a dearth of work comparing differences in psychological impact of violent content *between* movies, music, television, and video games. In addition, media effects research is attracted to new and popular media technologies—and even future technologies—at the expense of older technologies. Together, these shortcomings inhibit our ability to recognize usage patterns across technologies and time. Media effects alone would be unable to explain my own feelings of excitement, ambivalence, and hesitancy about media as I grew up.

Instead, I merge the media studies and psychological traditions in communication to understand the relatively stable psychological relationships humans have formed with different media technologies. Although each media technology is “new”—in that novel engineering enables new opportunities compared to previous technologies—past media trends and communication strategies establish behavioral patterns that impact our relationships with emerging media technology. Reeves and Nass describe in *The Media Equation* that new media engage “old brains” (Reeves & Nass, 1996). That is, we treat new media technologies similar to how we treat (and expect to be treated by) other people because it is cognitively efficient to map established strategies for interpersonal communication onto media technologies, meaning “new media” is never completely “new.”

Several other areas of scholarship reinforce the argument that new media is not new. Media archaeology investigates the interplay between media artifacts

across time, and scholars that embrace this methodological approach investigate new media cultures using insights from earlier media that itself was once “new” (Parikka, 2013; Gitelman, 2006). In doing so, they consider how media extends the physical self and affects how users view the world, each other, and themselves. Similarly, other scholars have explored how the grammar or language of new media—that is, the stylistic patterns present in the early usage of a given medium—are rooted in earlier mediums (Manovich, 1999). Bolter and Grusin label this phenomenon “remediation” and argue that technology *becomes* a medium once it is contextualized within earlier media practices; “a medium is that which remediates” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 98). In these formulations, mediums are defined by the opportunities that they offer to the user as well as the political, economic, and social structures in which they exist and are used, and in some cases, the cultural shifts that they trigger. For example, the term **technoculture** has emerged to describe how the opportunities of digital technologies result in a society that is more interconnected and actively shares content in real time (Penley & Ross, 1991; Brock, 2012).

However, these historical approaches to media have been isolated from the area of psychology. New media dramatically alter the communication environment, thus impacting social and psychological expectations. Considering media history through a psychological lens situates users as constants in a communication environment that evolves at an ever-increasing pace. Therefore, we must be equally attentive to how past technologies and technocultures established psychosocial norms that continue to affect us today. We must be informed by history while still attending to the psychological conditions in which history occurs. For lack of a better term, I will refer to this as a **media psychography**, or an examination of how the collective psyche impacts and has been impacted by media technologies. By looking to our own histories with media, rather than succumbing to the allure of newness, we can further unpack the complex relationships that users develop with media and provide insight into how people might *build* future mediated relationships, beyond anticipating future stylistic patterns.

What Are Media?

Before beginning this exploration, it is essential to define terms that many feel that they understand, specifically the difference between communication and media. **Communication** refers to any conveyance of verbal and non-verbal messages within an individual (i.e., **intrapersonal communication**), between individuals (i.e., **interpersonal communication**), and to many individuals (i.e., **mass communication**). By contrast, **media** are the channels and tools used to store and transmit information or data. They include **media technologies**—the objects and devices that are used to store and transmit information; **media content**—the messages that are stored and transmitted;

and the **media industry**—individuals and organizations responsible for producing and distributing content. In short, media are the tools that aid in or mediate communication, including but not limited to technologies, content, and industry. All media communicates, but not all communication is mediated.

This multifaceted definition of media is rarely embraced outside academia. When people complain that “television is ruining culture” or “video games make children violent,” they are blaming the invention for the conventions. Are they referencing *Masterpiece Theater* or *Dating Naked*? Does *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego* or *Halo*—both video games—make youth violent? This adherence to an overly simplistic definition of media as one homogenous entity eliminates nuance and inhibits a robust conversation about the role of media in society and user psychology. In turn, this silencing impedes **media literacy**—the skills that help users analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media modes, genres, and formats. For us to understand the context within which a message was produced (e.g., time period, technological capabilities, and gender relations) and its deeper meaning, we must be able to read patterns in media technology that constitute the current media environment.

Grammatically, medium is the singular form of media. Combined with the scientific definition of medium as an intervening substance, “**medium**” refers to any singular object or device that conveys stimuli to the senses, including stone tablets, paper, radio transmission, and even song. Compared to the multifaceted definitions embraced in media archaeology, this definition isolates the objective changes to the communication environment that are enabled by new mediums, a classic psychological method, and allows us to assess the impact of new communication opportunities.

Cave paintings, which are generally agreed to be one of the earliest mediums, dating back more than 40,000 years in Europe and Asia, enabled users to document their observations and experiences for posterity. These artifacts feature animals, humans, and narratives such as hunts—many simply include outlines of hands, a prehistoric way of saying “I was here” (see Figure 0.3). Other **storage mediums**, or devices that retain messages, include pots, jewelry, headdresses, and engravings on tools, each of which provides users the opportunity to convey messages across time and space. Alternatively, **transmission mediums** convey messages without storage and allow users to cast messages across great distances and to a broad audience—drum and smoke signals, which emerged around 500 BCE and 150 BCE respectively, may be considered some of the earliest broadcasts. Finally, **memorable mediums** assist in conveying consistent messages by presenting information in structured formats to improve memory and recollection. Often cited examples include oral epic poetry and the songs of medieval troubadours, which relayed stories, history, and culture in preliterate societies and were easily recalled and repeated to ensure message consistency across users and across time. Each of these categories represents a



FIGURE 0.3 Cave Paintings: Mediums contain messages created by a source and encoded with meaning that can be decoded by a receiver who encounters the medium and its messages at a later time or place. Cave paintings continue to resonate with us today because we recognize that someone is trying to communicate and we are eager to decipher their meaning.

revolution in the social and psychological environment by enabling new ways of communicating. Like language—possibly the earliest memorable medium—our means of communication impact how we think about the world, each other, and ourselves.

Our Relationships *With* Media

Over the last few decades, scholars have proposed metaphors to describe the phenomenon of mass media. These phrases and metaphors provide a lens through which to consider social interactions with technology. Marshall McLuhan famously said the “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994), implying that media technologies themselves convey relevant messages apart from their content. Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass (Reeves & Nass, 1996) found that users engage with media technology as they would other individuals. They claimed that “media = real life,” helpfully bringing media together with everyday life. Ken Burke argued that media functions as a window, frame, and mirror: revealing the distant world to the user, delineating what is important and valuable, and demonstrating what the user should expect of oneself (Burke, 1997). Extending to the processes of media and culture, Nick Couldry and

Andreas Hepp explore mediatization, or how changes in media and communication are related to changes in society and culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Each of these concepts and metaphors has advanced the discussion of media in the 20th century. However, each alone neglects the combined cultural and psychological changes brought on by new opportunities for communication. To understand individuals' responses to changing media environments, we must turn to psychology, specifically our cognitive and emotional reactions to the world in which we live.

The 20th century was particularly tumultuous, given the rapid emergence of media technologies and the field of psychology. Mass media was largely stagnant for centuries after the invention of the printing press in the mid-11th and mid-15th centuries in East Asia and Western Europe (respectively). In the mid-19th century, electricity sparked a massive evolution in communication technologies, allowing for the consistent replication of visual movement and audio through film and recorded music, as well as rapid dissemination of messages via wireless and broadcast technologies.

At the same time, researchers began to systematically investigate cognitive processes in humans. In the public discourse, psychology is often associated with individual therapy (i.e., clinical psychology) or unusual patterns of behavior, emotion, and thought (i.e., “abnormal psychology”), but other subfields explore trends in the overall life experience, including cognitive psychology, which investigates mental processes like perception and memory; developmental psychology, an area concerned with how and why humans change over time; and social psychology, which studies social interactions and constructions of identity. In recent decades, media psychology has brought together media studies with psychology, a subfield that focuses on the relationship between cognitive processes and media. Together, these more quotidian perspectives on human behavior are the foundation of my arguments about the evolving relationship between media and individual users.

I argue that media technologies should be considered through a relational lens. We develop relationships with media technologies that mirror those we develop with friends and romantic partners because they satisfy a wide variety of needs, thus encouraging users to depend on and engage with them. Many scholars have investigated how we foster relationships *through* media technology, but neglect the relationships that we foster *with* technology. Media has become a central vehicle for intimacy, regularity, and reciprocity—expectations we typically ascribe to interpersonal relationships. Although the definition of media is broad, each new media technology changes our communication environment because it offers novel means of interacting with information and each other. Over time, these communication strategies become integrated and normalized, in turn affecting psychological expectations, culture, and strategies with future technologies. As with human partners, past relationships with media technologies influence future relationships by affecting our desires and expectations (see Figure 0.4)—we become accustomed to the tendencies of our partners (e.g.,

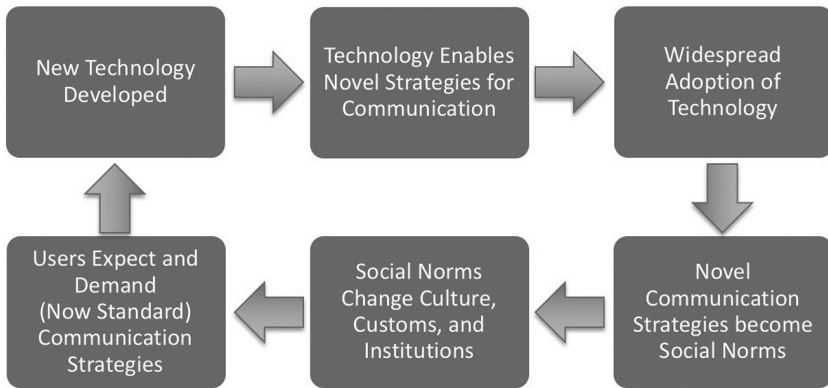


FIGURE 0.4 Psychology and the Communication Environment: How we communicate affects our psychology, and our psychology affects how we communicate. Communication technologies, including everything from language and music to smoke signals and radio, enable novel strategies for communication. As these technologies become normal, so do their associated strategies, thus impacting culture, society, and individual expectations for communicating. These expectations then impact the development and adoption of new technologies.

cooking, love notes) such that we expect and select for them in future partners whether or not we are aware of it.

Therefore, understanding our relationships with media technologies requires a long-term perspective. It took centuries for the printed word to be widely adopted as a normal part of culture after the invention of the printing press. By comparison, we have experienced an unprecedented advancement in the media environment the past 150 years—a blink in the longer history of human evolution. Consider electricity. First introduced to the consumer marketplace in the early 1900s, American homes have been electrified for just over 100 years. In 1915, only 20% of American households were wired with electricity, jumping to just over two-thirds by 1930 and 99% by 1955 (Desjardins, 2018). Since then, users have become habituated to electricity and electronic technologies. Users can produce power by simply flipping a switch, and this expectation of control and convenience was normalized within a few decades. Now, any disruption of this relatively recent opportunity can be frustrating. Dead batteries in one’s favorite device or a blackout reveal our dependence on electricity. Similar to our dependence on loved ones—we cannot imagine life without them.

Describing past media behaviors and their societal impact through an interpersonal psychological lens disrupts a key flaw in popular media effects rhetoric: that audiences are *passive*, or that we allow ourselves to be rapidly influenced. Responding to propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s, communication scholars proposed the theory that media have immediate, consistent, and **direct effects** on audiences. Although communication and psychology researchers no longer consider the individual as a passive consumer, this sentiment still pervades the

public sphere. The assumption of passive audiences is evident in arguments that frame media content or technology as an agent that controls the individual, instead of the other way around. For example, news stories repeat the idea that social media *makes* people depressed without considering that depressed people may use social media more frequently or that other factors may simultaneously increase depression and social media use (Coyne, Rogers, Zurcher, Stockdale, & Booth, 2020). This common refrain is also referred to as **technological determinism**—the belief that technology drives society and culture. Technologically deterministic arguments imply that the individual user is not in control and that technology alone guides the future. By comparison, considering the interdependent relationship between users and media technology acknowledges that the user’s fundamental psychosocial needs are more influential than the opportunities afforded by the technology.

A media psychology approach also disrupts the common saying that *that the current media environment is nothing like we have ever seen before*. Today, we turn to media for information and entertainment, and media technologies satisfy deep intrapersonal psychosocial needs, like self-esteem, belongingness, control, and meaningful existence. But this, I argue, is nothing new. The psychological trends that moderate 21st century conventions are evident throughout the 20th century, including the consistent replication of messages, synchronous experiences, and information on demand. Therefore, it is essential to describe and understand the relationships users developed with 20th century communication technologies. This book eschews the glib assumption that “new” technologies are synonymous with “new phenomena.” I rely instead on the psychological insight that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Just as every past relationship informs and affects future relationships, a close investigation of our cyclical relationships with past technology will provide insight into how we use future technology.

This book addresses two key questions. How do the novel communication potentials of mass media technologies impact our environment, culture, and subsequently psychological processes? And how do these patterns affect the adoption of new communication technologies? By closely investigating the relationships that American users developed with 20th century media technologies, we can better understand our psychological responses to the 21st century media environment and anticipate the relationships that Americans will have with future media.

Book Outline

This book is divided into three sections—intimacy, regularity, and reciprocity—each of which addresses how a cluster of contemporaneous 20th century media technologies provided novel opportunities for emotional connections associated with satisfying relationships. Each section begins with a summary of the

theme as it relates to the associated relationship construct and describes important psychological concepts relevant to the three featured technologies. Each chapter then focuses on a specific medium by defining it and its potential (i.e., what the medium *can* do) in the context of earlier technologies, its promise (i.e., what stakeholders pledged the medium *would* do), and practice (i.e., how the medium was actually *used*). I then analyze the medium through relevant psychological constructs to demonstrate how the technology simultaneously takes advantage of and affects the user's psychology. Finally, each chapter closes with psychosocial trends that emerged in the wake of each technology and connects these expectations to usage patterns and conventions in 21st century digital and social technologies. This format foregrounds users' interdependent relationship with each featured medium, and its impact on users' expectations and future media practices.

Stylistic decisions throughout the book also encourage accuracy in how we talk about media. Although some scholars have claimed that the phrase "mediums" (as opposed to "media") is grammatically incorrect, I use this pluralization when referring to multiple media technologies to counter the tendency to frame media as a singular homogenous entity. Although the terms "older" and "newer" denote the timeline of media technology, the terms "old media" and "new media" are *not* used to denote categories, because all media was new at some point (Marvin, 1988; Gitelman & Pingree, 2003). I use the term "user" (as opposed to "consumer") to refer to any individual engaging with media in order to disrupt assumptions of passive audiences and acknowledge that the individual is always an active media participant in establishing and reinforcing their relationship with media.¹ In addition, each chapter is heavily cited to ensure that the research is readily available; readers are encouraged to interact with and *use* this book, digging deeper into the hundreds of citations to learn more about their own relationships with media technologies.

While this book takes a psychological perspective to media usage, I am sensitized to the idea that technologies are not used by all users in the same way. Disparities between groups have consistently impacted patterns of participation. Since the advent and widespread adoption of the internet, Pippa Norris' notion of a "**digital divide**" has emerged to refer to the gulf between those with ready access to computers and the internet and those without (Norris, 2001). This divide is correlated with social categories, including income, education, race, ability, language, and geographic location. As a result, traditionally marginalized groups are less likely to have fast, reliable access to the internet (Anderson & Kumar, 2019).

However, there have been media divides throughout history because differences in access and participation plague every media technology. For example, cameras were largely unavailable to poor Black Americans in the early 20th century, radio did not saturate rural communities until 20 years after urban communities, and digital technologies like video games and high-speed

internet remain a luxury to many. Interestingly, these divides are replicated in social science research, which demonstrate a dominance of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, such that general knowledge about human psychology is based on one of the “least representative populations one could find for generalizing about humans” (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010, p. 61). These divides are addressed and incorporated to demonstrate the disconnect between the promise and the practice of technologies, as well as their overall cultural impact and future expectations.

Because my research and examples come from American media experiences, this book discusses the American psychosocial relationship. Therefore, I frequently use the term “we” to acknowledge the collective behavior and social expectations of *Americans*. Different countries, communities, and cultures have developed different media practices resulting in different social and psychological expectations—different communities react differently to independent or experimental film, television conventions differ wildly between cultures, and different nations implement distinctive policies regarding internet access and content—therefore, it is impossible to establish an all-encompassing general psychology of media. I actively acknowledge that American or Western trends should *not* be generalized as the standard for psychosocial trends—as is evident in the WEIRD approach to social science (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

This book is written for users interested in the historical relationship between psychology and media technologies, and these choices are designed to disrupt how we think and talk about mass media technologies and media effects. Furthermore, I acknowledge that media history and practices revolve around individuals, and one should not detach oneself as a media user from their understanding of media. Therefore, my experiences are woven throughout the book; each chapter begins with a brief autobiographical anecdote that exemplifies the intimate, regular, or reciprocal power of the featured medium and situates the inherently personal nature of media technology. By providing a robust picture of nine influential mass communication technologies and their role in the evolution of culture and society via a relationship lens, I want readers to critically reflect on their past relationships with media and consider the future of their media habits. In doing so, it is my hope that readers will come away with a greater understanding of the psychological significance of media technology, usage, and adoption across the past 150 years and connect these psychological trends to their current media environment.

Note

1. Other media specific terms, including reader, viewer, listener, or player, are used when appropriate, and the term consumer is used when referring to business or transactional interactions, but user is the default when describing general media usage.

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