



The UKZN Griot. Of Upgrades and Downgrades

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Yes, I admit it. I'm a luddite. Along with many of my generation, I find the headlong rush into social media bewildering. I am in good company – though I do study and use new media. My pal Valentin Mudimbe, a philosopher, describes the Internet as “infernal machines”, while literary and cultural scion, Terry Eagleton, accuses the Internet of slowing the world down. He's never sent an email. He has a son who occasionally sends one out on his behalf.

But I once led the pack of early new media adopters. My Wits MA (1982) thesis, before I got to Natal, had studied the semiotics of computer generated movies. In those analogue days it took a week for a team of nerds (a word that did not exist then) to programme 99 frames – that's about four seconds.

On accepting the post in 1984 of the Centre I still inhabit, I made it a condition of my appointment that I be provided with a PC. The Director of Personnel wanted to know what a PC was. I referred him to the other one in the Natal University Computer Division. I then returned to stores the electric IBM golfball typewriter with which I was provided and asked instead for an electronic typewriter with a daisy wheel. Why, I was asked by the Finance Division? Because, I retorted, the manufacture of golfball machines had just ceased. The electronic typewriter could be hooked up to the PC. The use of daisy wheels offered the proportional spacing that we needed for book and journal publication purposes. Wow, is that really necessary? was the reply. (This was in the pre-SAPSE days!)

While a visiting professor at a US university in 1990 I discovered email. On hearing my complaints about the cost of faxing (the phone charge, a service fee charged by the university, and the need for the document to be taken to a transmission station in a distant building), my teaching assistant, previously an IBM Engineer, revealed the wonders of email to me. Very simple, he assured me. Type your letter on one of the two departmental PCs (i.e. stand in line for your turn). Then, via some very complicated keyboarding on a DOS programme transfer the typed message to the university's mainframe via a modem and telephone lines. Make sure that my Centre's secretary in Durban (yes, we were administratively well provided for then) goes to the computer centre in the Shepstone

Building to retrieve the message from the mainframe. She repeats the process in Durban to respond. Lotsa walking and manipulation of computers on two continents.

In 1991 I was the first academic at Natal University to request a laptop. My motivation, typed out on the daisy wheel, and sent by internal snail mail, caused great mirth in the Finance Division. My A4 letter had been enlarged on a photostat machine to A3 and adorned a pinboard in the Admin Building, with “Ha Ha!” written on it. So, in words of one syllable I explained to the admin folks that the laptop would be paid for with two SAPSE articles, and that it could be used on planes, trains and in airports and in bus stations, when I was travelling. Few South African academics actually travelled much in those days. To this day I get more productive work done in these travel facilities because there are no interruptions from students, managers and administrators, walk-ins, or phone calls. I would be working while I was travelling, not just sleeping and staring at the passing parade. Nowadays, folks stare at their cell phones. They don’t see the passing parade anymore.

My Centre was amongst the first to set up a website. That old design has since disappeared, and the new one attracts browsers from all over the world - over a million in just three years. I have no idea why it is so popular – there’s nothing dodgy on it, though in the early days I did warn students about overexposure – privacy settings were then unheard of. Nowadays, we know that predators are lurking everywhere and that electronic media cooperate with surveillance systems for both the commercial sectors and America’s National Security Agency. Careless users of these “infernal machines” cede their privacy to both the corporate and government spooks and also to the phishing scamsters. But then, everybody wants to be a celebrity, so users don’t care until they tweet something stupid and lose their jobs.

And that’s the problem. Impulsive remarks, ill-advised photos, and button pushing have resulted less in users watching the media than in the media watching them, building individualised psychographic consumer profiles, choosing for consumers/viewers/voyeurs what they watch, what ads to target them with, and then handing these over to the spook agencies and 419ers. It’s a multiple surveillance.

So, when I read cultural studies rabbiting on about “active consumers” I blush at the banality that sections of my field have become. The idea of “active” comes from a paradigm shift in media studies away from deterministic political economy notions of ‘You are what you watch’ to the realisation that even couch potatoes are cognitively active when watching TV and fiddling with their phones. But consumers are rarely critically “active” when responding Pavlov-dog style to marketing strategies; they are invisibly shaped to consume, to upgrade their software and to cede their rights as critical citizens. Consumption tames, it is the new hegemony. One of my PhD students wrote a whole thesis on this.

Similar processes are at work in the academy also. Once academics were the policy makers, the critical thinkers, the debaters, the dissidents. Now they are just button pushers – but at least we don’t have to beg – and then explain to finance officers why we need regular upgraded computers and software. Managers need these “infernal machines” to watch us also. We’re all voyeurs in this together. We’ve lost our privacy – in the pursuit of consumption – willingly.

* Keyan G Tomaselli founded The Centre for Communication, Media and Society in 1985 on the smell of an oil rag. He kept the daisy wheels in motion through many technological revolutions.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.