

### *Abstract*

Despite its recent ubiquity in scholarly and popular publications, relatively little attempts have been made to interrogate the meanings and implications of the notion of “old media.” This article discusses this notion in the context of theoretical debates within media and communication studies. Defining old media as artefacts, technologies, or in terms of their social use is problematic, since media constantly change, resisting clear-cut definitions related to age. The article therefore proposes to treat new media as a relational concept: not an attribute characterizing media as such, but an element of how people perceive and imagine them. Rhetoric, everyday experience, and emotions are key contexts where new ground can be found to redefine the concept of “old media.”

### Keywords

Old media, new media, technology, materiality, social use, rhetoric, everyday experience, emotions, nostalgia, media change

## **There are no old media**

Public reactions to the rise of Amazon within the book retail industry are exemplary of the polarization of debates on new media: on the one side, critics condemn Amazon's allegedly monopolistic approach and fear for the end of the paper book; on the other, techno-optimists praise its innovative commercial strategy, contrasting it to the immobility of traditional publishers and retailers (Striphas, 2009). Despite their distance, however, both fields share a common interpretational framework: the idea that what is at play is essentially an encounter between old and new media – the “old” book industry, on the one side, and the “new” business of Amazon, based on online commerce and e-books, on the other. A loss for Amazon, some point out, means a triumph for old media (Bangeman, 2010; Benigson, 2015). Yet, an examination of the relevant actors reveals the problematic character of such assumption. Although their business strategy and structure differs sharply from Amazon, “old” publishers have nevertheless embraced new digital technologies in the production, marketing, and commercialization of books. Amazon, on the other side, combines innovations with long-standing corporation strategies, and markets both e-books and “old” paper books (Stone, 2013). Observing more closely the interplay between the two, it becomes impossible to define one or the other on the basis of their adoption of old rather than new media technologies.

Throughout the last two decades, one of the most widely debated notion for the field of media studies has been “new media.” Scholars have interrogated its meanings from a historical, sociological, anthropological, and ontological perspective, exploring the problematic implications of novelty in relationship to media change (Gershon & Bell, 2013; Peters, 2009). Much less attention, however, has been given to the related notion of “old media.” Although this concept is now ubiquitous in both scholarly and popular publications,

the question of what it means to talk about “old media” has been until now largely disregarded. While a number of scholars have provided essential contribution to discussions of issues such as obsolescence, oldness, and memory in regard with media (e.g. Acland, 2007; Gitelman, 2006), little or no attempts have been made to interrogate if and how such a notion is still acceptable and useful. Yet, this question has important consequences on a theoretical but also on a practical level, since the ways we understand and define media, as many have demonstrated (Crawford, 2007; Flichy, 2007; Mansell, 2012), have legal, social, and political consequences that may inform the behaviour and policies of institutions and stakeholders.

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to fill this gap by reviewing the existing literature of the topic and by measuring the notion of old media against theoretical debates in communication studies and related fields. As I will show, such an endeavour leads to the conclusion that there is not, after all, such a thing as “old media” – or, to put it in more nuanced words, that we should refuse binary and progressive distinctions between old and new media in terms of artefacts, social use, and technology. The attempt to define “old media” is jeopardized by the extent to which media constantly change throughout time, resisting clear-cut definitions related to age. Yet, somehow paradoxically, recognizing that there are no “old media” opens up the opportunity to understand why this term has been so widely employed to characterize certain phenomena, institutions, technologies, and objects. I propose, in this regard, that the notion of old media should be considered not as an ontological, but rather as a relational term, which relates to the way we perceive, experience, and integrate media in our everyday life. Ultimately, the notion of old media may tell us more about our relationship with media, than about the media themselves. Identifying a key moment of rhetorical invention in the publication of Carolyn Marvin’s *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988), I point to the fact that Marvin’s original emphasis on the

level of discourse was subsequently superseded by “hard” definitions of old media as technologies and artefacts. I propose therefore to return to Marvin’s original spirit, examining the possibility that the oldness of media might be searched not in the media themselves, but rather in our perception and imagination of technological change.

One might object that the concept of old media is indissolubly bound with the idea of new media, and therefore a critique of the former is indistinguishable from a critique of the latter. Indeed, since the earliest occurrences of the term that I have found, old media has most frequently been contrasted with new media, whether the issue at stake was education in the classroom (Schueler & Dobbins, 1967: 17; Wiman & Meierhenry, 1969: 29), the transmission of culture in public libraries (Ternes, 1969: 141), or the diffusion of religious values (Collins, 1978: 3). Yet, the fact that there is an undoubtable relation between the two should not lead us into thinking that such contrast is merely a given, and not a cultural and social construction (Balbi & Winterhalter, 2013). To give a very basic instance, if we buy a new tablet, we are not forced into considering that other devices we already had, such as a personal computer, a television, or a smartphone, are “old.” Defining a particular media or artefact as old is a decision that is culturally driven and that, crucially, may inform debates about technologies in the public sphere as well as the process of media domestication in everyday life – conceived, as proposed by Lehtonen (2003: 364), as “a learning process where things and people reciprocally influence each other.” It follows that we should refuse binary and progressive distinctions that differentiate between old and new media in a rigid and acritical way.

The article is organized in two main sections. In the first section, I interrogate to what extent it is possible and useful to talk about “old media” in terms of artefacts, social uses, and technology. I show that approaching this question from these three different perspective does not help to define the term, but instead renders the arbitrary and problematic nature of such

distinctions more and more evident. In the second section, I interrogate how the notion of “old media” can still be meaningful if considered from a radically different perspective: the study of perceptions and representations of media change. Rhetoric, everyday experience, and emotions are the key contexts where we can find new ground to comprehend, discuss, and redefine the concept of old media.

### **Searching for old media**

In recent years, the expression “old media” appears extensively in the scholarly debate. Marketing researchers have come to question the advantages and drawbacks of advertising on old media rather than online channels (Pfeiffer & Zinnbauer, 2010); clinical paediatrics ask if violent videogames produce the same “old media problems” that characterize youth’s exposure to TV (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2014); studies in journalism reflect on the future of the press by comparing “old” and “new” media (Hindman & Thomas, 2013); and it has become common to talk about “old media companies” (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Dennis, Warley, & Sheridan, 2006; Meisel & Sullivan, 2000), as if different business models could be distinguished according to the use of obsolete or newer technologies. Considering the ubiquity and variety of its use, it is surprising that by surveying the relevant literature, very little ground is found for identifying and clarifying what old media are, and where their purported oldness resides. It has become customary and common to talk about old media, and yet we know so little about what “old media” really are. In this section, I inquire the possibility to conceive a working definition of old media in terms of their materiality, social use, or technological nature. As I show, however, none of these three different viewpoints help to find an answer to the problem – on the contrary, they reveal the many complications that are generated by the use of this notion.

### *The oldness of things: media as artefacts*

Let us start by approaching media as material artefacts or things. In this regard, the notion of old media might be used to indicate artefacts that are old or obsolete – say, an old book, or a radio set in your basement which has long stopped to work. Social anthropologists such as Armin Appadurai and Alfred Gell point out that not only humans, but also artifacts can be regarded as agents with their own social life (Appadurai, 1986; Gell, 1998). One might ask, in this sense, if things can be attributed a particular definition of age and more specifically, the quality of oldness. Yet, a closer reading of Appadurai, Gell and other authors involved in biographic approaches to artefacts and things (e.g. Edwards & Hart, 2004; Kopytoff, 1986) shows that one of the main points of this body of literature is that the social meaning of things is constantly renegotiated. Things always bear the potential to acquire new meaning and application – to be, in a sense, novel again. Additionally, Bruno Latour has criticized the tendency to attribute human agency and qualities to technologies. He contends that scholars in science and technology studies should conceive of agency without the baggage associated with human life and intention (Latour, 2005). The relationship between humans and things should be considered as a complex set of trials through which actors, humans and non-humans, transform each other in a circuit that is constantly redefined by their reciprocal interaction (Latour, 1999: 124-25).

Similar conclusions are reached by communication scholars and historians of technology who approached similar problems. Charles Acland (2007) underlines the difficulties in conceptualizations of obsolescence related to media artefacts. Media often survive their demise or obsolescence in private and public storage facilities and even in trash, from where they can be recollected, revived, and prepared for new uses. Media archaeologists Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka have further elaborated this point, noting that “far from being accidental, the discarding and obsolescence of technological components is

in fact integral to contemporary media technologies” (2012: 425). Technological objects and gadgets are produced with the assumption and the expectation that they will become obsolete in the short or medium term (Slade, 2009; Sterne, 2007). Take, for instance, the case of digital storage devices such as CD, DVD, portable hard drives, and USB sticks (Kennedy & Wilken, 2016); but also programs and file formats that in the course of just a few years may become not only obsolete, but practically unusable, as software and operative systems evolve (Chun, 2011). On the same token, technological artefacts that are discarded and considered obsolete in one place can be valorised, reused, and recycled in another location (Edgerton, 2007). As a consequence, definitions of oldness cease to be meaningful as soon as the mobility of artefacts and the geography of media are taken into account (Parikka, 2015; Pickren, 2014). In such a context, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish if a media artefact is “new” or “old.” They operate in circuits of value where their attributes and qualities, including newness and oldness, are constantly renegotiated.

*From obsolescence to oblivion: the social use of media*

A second potential pathway for defining old media refers to the circumstances of their use. “Old media” in this sense would define those media which are discarded, or are not as widely employed as they were in the past. Yet, also this second characterization creates further difficulties, rather than solving problems. As historians of technology have shown, the success of a technology is something that can be assessed only at a circumstantial level; failure or marginality are first and foremost cultural constructions, rather than phenomena inherent in the dynamics of technological change (Gooday, 1998; Lipartito, 2003; Thibault, 2013). This applies well to the case of media technologies. As shown by the renovated significance of the “obsolete” vinyl records, which are valued for the particular “grain” of their sound (Davis, 2007), media that have been around us for a long time can undergo deep

transformations. Moreover, the social use of a medium can never be examined in isolation from the use of other media. The implication of this may be observed, for instance, by looking at the introduction of digital photography, which has resulted in a reorganization of the practices and uses associated with analogue photography, too. As shown by a recent study, the impact of both analogue and digital photography can only be understood in terms of an interplay between them, since the consequences of technological change are bound up with long-term social uses and cultural values (Keightley & Pickering, 2014). Similar results were found in empirical research exploring the integration of new devices into established practices of music consumption: as showed by Paolo Magaudda (2011), the use of such digital devices for music listening is inserted into a “circuit of practice” that makes it hard to erect a strict divide between analogue and digital media.

A further potential characterization of the oldness of media in terms of social use concerns not their disappearance or obsolescence, but rather the fact that old media are taken from granted, disappearing from view as they become an integral part of everyday life (Weiser, 1991). Yet, considering the rapidity through which media enter into everyday use, becoming mundane and ordinary (Herring, 2004; May & Hearn, 2005), one wonders if this has any link to the reputed oldness or newness of technologies. Furthermore, with the introduction of new digital media such as e-readers, “obsolete” media such as paper books are perceived as special objects with nostalgic tones (Chivers Yochim & Biddinger, 2008; Darnton, 2009; Davis, 2007). In underground cars where everybody is gazing into their smartphone screens, a person reading a paper book may attract more attention than anyone else. Virtually any medium, in this sense, may be regarded in different contexts as either ordinary or unusual.

*The paradoxes of innovation: media as technology*



The third potential pathway to define “old media” lies in their relationship with technological change. Oldness and newness might be defined in terms of the moment of introduction or technological innovation. According to this logic, in contemporary scholarly and popular publications, new media are often identified with communications technologies related to computation and the digital, such as computers, smartphones, or e-books, while technologies that pre-existed the digital turn, such as books, newspapers, cinema, radio, and television, are labelled as “old” (Dizard, 2000: xiii). Yet, such distinctions are oblivious of the fact that the latter fully participate in the so-called digital turn (Berti, 2015). Only to mention a few of the ongoing processes, books circulate in both print and digital form (Striphas, 2009); newspapers disseminate contents through different digital platforms, including mobile phone apps and websites (Doyle, 2013); the film industry incorporates the digital into existing modalities of production and distribution (Belton, 2002); radio and TV networks disseminate contents in digital form and on streaming in the Internet (Evans, 2011). In such context, it is rather arbitrary to distinguish in a rigid way between old and new media forms.

Additionally, one might wonder about the chronological accuracy of such distinctions.

In new media studies, the boundary between old and new media has sometimes been conceived alongside the divide between analogue and digital media. This is the case, for instance, of Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* (2002), one of the most influential works in the field. Yet, notwithstanding the importance of Manovich’s pioneering work on the subject, other scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser (2004) have criticized this solution, pointing to the fact that the divide between old and new media can hardly be reduced to a contrast between digital and analogue technologies. The process of digitalization, after all, is never complete, as analogue technologies and forms continue to coexist with digital ones for the production, distribution, and use of media contents. As underlined by Chun and Keenan (2006), even computation is not indissolubly bound to the digital. Computing has existed,

exists, and will exist in analogue form (Ceruzzi, 2003); current research in computer design is exploring the possibility of devices, such as quantum computers, which would outperform present technologies while moving beyond a strictly digital logic (Simonite, 2015).

Furthermore, binary and progressive distinctions such as analogue/old vs digital/new may prove unfit to describe technological changes. Let us take, for instance, the case of computing and television. Computing is usually considered to pertain to the realm of new media (Peters, 2009: 16), while television is often labelled as an old medium (Spigel, 2005). It is certainly true that these two media reached the wide public in very different moments: television became a “mass” medium in the 1950s, while computing succeeded to reach the wider public only around thirty years later, with the commercialization of personal computers (Ceruzzi, 2003). Yet, even if we take aside the mechanical calculators which preceded modern digital computers for more than a century (Spufford & Uglow, 1996), both digital computers and television were conceived, developed and introduced during the first half of the twentieth century. If television is an old medium, the computer should also qualify as one (Park, Jankowski, & Jones, 2011).

Such problems are also connected to the particular narratives through which the process of technological change is represented and understood (Natale, 2016). As David Edgerton (2007) effectively underlines, we tend to give emphasis to the moment of first design of a technology, failing to grasp that technologies continue to change after they are introduced, and that the history of innovation does not concern just “new” media. In media history, scholars have recently discussed what it means to state that a medium has been introduced in a particular moment. Film historians Gaudreault and Marion (2005, 2013) point out that media are born not just once, but twice or multiple times, as their institutional and technological frames are redefined throughout time. From a different standpoint, Lisa Gitelman (2006) has shown how the formation of new media is a blurred process in which

technological innovations interact in complex ways with the development of the institutions that are connected to them. Indeed, technologies that have been around us for a long time, such as analogue photography or television, may display a high degree of innovation. Jonathan Coopersmith (2010) employs the example of telex and facsimile transmission to show that “old” technologies often become contexts of innovation – especially when their position in the market is threatened by the introduction of “new” media, such as emails. While technological change may provoke the failure and demise of companies that were based on different models of business (Christensen, 1997), it might as well convince such companies to adapt to new conditions, for instance by combining the existing and the emerging technologies (Spar, 2001; David Thorburn & Jenkins, 2003).

Theoretical approaches to media change tend to add complexity rather than clarity to the boundaries between old and new media. Marshall McLuhan’s famous assertion that “the content of a medium is always another medium” (1964: 8) already conceived of media history in terms of continuity rather than rupture only. From Carolyn Marvin’s contention that “all the communications inventions since have simply been elaborations on the telegraph’s original work” (1988: 3), to the concepts of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and “media renewability” (Peters, 2009: 22), later media scholars have followed this suggestion, conceiving new media as evolution or continuation of other ones. As James Carey famously pointed out, “the innovation of the telegraph can stand metaphorically for all the innovations that ushered the modern phase of history and determined, even to this day, the major lines of development of American communications” (Carey, 1989: 203). While similar claims might sound exaggerated, one should consider the extent to which newly introduced technologies tend to take up or imitate several aspects of existing ones. When wireless telegraphy was introduced, for instance, it took up the name of the telegraphic system, which in turn had taken it from the optical telegraph that preceded it (Balbi, 2015:

232; Taws, 2014); in terms of institutions and laws, television broadcasting took up many elements that already characterized radio as well (Barnouw, 1990; Sewell, 2014). It follows that media, rather than becoming old, are constantly in transition (Uricchio, 2003).

### **Understanding old media: rhetoric, everyday experience, emotion**

If definitions of this concept are so problematic, how did we come to believe that something like “old media” actually exists, and play a meaningful role in the dynamic of technological change as well as in everyday life? Looking at how the notion entered into the vocabulary of studies and discourses about media may help answer this question.

Before the 1980s, the phrase “old media” was employed quite sporadically (e.g. Collins, 1978; Cook, 1968; Schueler & Dobbins, 1967; Ternes, 1969; Wiman & Meierhenry, 1969). It was only during this decade that it started to enter consistently in the vocabulary of scholarly and popular publications, when a lively debate ensued about how “old media” react and transform in response to the introduction of new ones. In this context, the relationship between the two was increasingly understood in terms of competition. For one, leading communication scholar Ithiel De Sola Pool (1983: 22), reflecting on the decline of print media, noted that “the new media are not only competing with the old media for attention, but are also changing the very system under which the old media operate” – an argument that resonates in later debates about convergence and media evolution (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Lehman-Wilzig & Cohen-Avigdor, 2004).

The veritable turning point in the use of this notion, however, was the publication of Carolyn Marvin’s book *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988). The impact of this work is evident in later discussions within media history and media studies (Balbi, 2015; Chun & Keenan, 2006), and is corroborated by the fact that the incidence of the term in publications

raised sharply in the following years, as clearly shown by an elaboration of data retrieved through Google Books (fig. 1). Marvin's book can be regarded as one of those moments of "rhetorical invention" (Simonson, 2010) when new notions and conceptual tropes emerge or acquire new meanings. It is quite interesting, in this sense, that the primary focus of Marvin's book were not technologies *per se*, but instead the discourses surrounding technology.

Pointing to the public debate that accompanied the introduction and implementation of electric light and the telephone in the late-nineteenth-century America, Marvin argues "that the early history of electric media is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life" (1988: 4). According to Marvin, the history of how "new" media become "old" is first and foremost a history of how individuals and groups came to consider them as such. Media "are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication" (8). It is in this sense, which contrasts with attempts to identify "old media" as specific technologies and objects, that her incitation to study the relationship between "old" and "new" media should be considered.

In the following years, however, Marvin's approach has been mostly overlooked in scholarly and popular publications that conceived old media in terms of artefact, social use, and technology. Although some scholars have continued to underline the fact that such categories are also cultural constructions, the debate's focus has shifted from how media were perceived and represented in terms of novelty or oldness, to the observation of the dynamics through which specific technologies and social practices change and interact throughout time (see, among others, Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Jenkins, 2006; for an overview, see Balbi 2015). In what follows, I propose that we need to return to a definition of old media in terms of perception and imagination, such as the one characterizing Carolyn Marvin's pioneering book on the topic. This entails recognizing that there is not, in fact, anything like

“old media”; or more precisely, that oldness should be understood as an attribute related not to media in themselves, but rather to how we experience, perceive, and feel about media.

Examining the mythical components of the discourse surrounding digital media, Vincent Mosco points out that “to understand a myth involves more than proving it to be false. It means figuring out why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about people’s hopes and dreams” (Mosco, 2004: 29). Mosco’s point applies very well to the case of old media. As I have shown, this concept can not effectively describe media in terms of artefacts, technologies, and social uses; yet, the fact that it has become part of our vocabulary tells us much about the expectations, the emotional strategies, and the narrative patterns that help us cope with media change. “Old media” should be regarded as a cultural construction through which people make sense of the impact of media change within their social and material environment. In contrast to the “hard” definitions of old media that I discussed in the first section of this article, I propose to discuss the term from three different perspectives: rhetoric, everyday experience, and emotions. While my examination will be for reason of space far from comprehensive, it aims to provide a framework through which to question the wider impact of the discourse on “old media,” and start redefining its meanings.

### *Rhetoric*

Since at least the invention of the electric telegraph, media have been at the center not only of a growing system of infrastructures and communications, but also of a particular rhetoric through which public persons and institutions offer the vision of a society in constant revolution and progress (Carey & Quirk, 1970; Boddy, 2004). In recent years, the myth of the digital revolution has been animated by the rhetorical efforts of politicians, entrepreneurs, and technologists (Balbi & Magaudda, 2014; Andrea Ballatore, 2014; Flichy, 2007). As

Susan Crawford points out, such discursive formations have substantial consequences in policy-making: different understanding of the Internet, for instance, determine “which actors’ voices will be listened to, what arguments will be respected, and which goals will be considered legitimate” (Crawford, 2007: 467).

In this context, it has been noted so often and by so many scholars that the introduction of digital media in everyday life has been accompanied by a rhetoric of the new, which characterizes contemporary approaches to media and technological change both within and beyond the academic field (Gershon & Bell, 2013; Liu, 2007). On the contrary, the presence of a “rhetoric of the old” has been widely disregarded. Yet, it is arguably impossible to comprehend the social, political, and cultural impact of media in contemporary societies without taking this into account.

A relevant example is the rhetoric employed by political groups such as the Pirate Parties in Sweden and Germany or the 5-Star-Movement in Italy, whose message is strongly informed by a perceived contrast between old and new media. Not only these political movements propose to be the harbingers of new forms of politics and web-based democracy; they also identify the members of the political establishment with “old media” such as television and print journalism. Thus, in the rhetoric of the 5-Star-Movement, the country is seen as divided into two contrasting blocks, “one which finds information in the Web, the other which finds disinformation in newspapers and television” (Grillo, 2008). In this context, the “old” political parties are explicitly associated with the “old” media, while both are depicted as destined to be superseded by a web-based direct democracy embodied by the movement (Natale & Ballatore, 2014).

Addressing the role of the rhetoric of obsolescence and oldness might help, therefore, to gain a more informed and multifaceted look at discussions of technological and media change within the public sphere. Myths and narratives related to the idea of technological

progress are not only activated through the representation of certain media as harbingers of the new; they are also constructed by labelling certain technologies, companies, and institutions as obsolete. This is the case, for instance, of the debate about the encounter between “new” and “old” media companies in fields such as publishing, to which I referred in the opening paragraph of this paper. Recognizing the presence of rhetorical tropes based on oldness might help, in this regard, to assess discussions and litigations that are related to the political, social, and economic interests of particular groups.

### *Everyday experience and storytelling*

As technologies are introduced, changing established social habits and affecting our material and social environment, people also develop particular strategies to insert them into the fabric of everyday life and experience. Anthropological and micro-sociological approaches to the study of design, diffusion and use of technologies have placed particular emphasis on this process (Lievrouw, 2004: 13). Roger Silverstone points to the centrality of domestication, defined as what human beings do to enhance and secure their everyday life, including the emotional and intellectual work through which they adapt to new conditions and situations (Silverstone, 2006: 231). The insertion of a new technology into a private and social space is in fact “a social and cultural as well as a technological event,” which challenges established routines and rituals in our everyday life (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996: 68).

While much attention has been given to the the process of domestication related to new media and technologies, less emphasis is usually given to the fact that, as noted above, not only “new” but all media constantly change, renegotiating their meanings and use (Acland, 2007; Hertz & Parikka, 2012). It follows that the process of domestication cannot be properly studied and understood if not by looking at the plurality of media that are present in a social environment, and at the various and interwoven ways through which people negotiate



their relationship with them (Keightley & Pickering, 2015: 6). Not only the perceived novelty, but also understandings of oldness are key elements in the cultural and social process of domestication. It is also by labelling media as old rather than new that we insert them into the fabric of everyday life. It is not by coincidence, in this sense, that experiential events such as birth, aging, and death are among the most common metaphors to describe and narrate media histories at both a macro and a micro level (Gaudreault & Marion, 2013; McRae, 2006; Reeves & Nass, 1996).

One of the main ways through which this process takes place is storytelling. As approaches in disciplines such as philosophy (Cavarero, 2000), anthropology (Mattingly & Garro, 2000; Stevenson, 2014) and media studies (Bassett, 2007; Fulton, 2005) have shown, narrative is a fundamental way to give meaning to experiences and events. As I argue elsewhere (Natale, 2016), narrative patterns regulating the relationship between “old” and “new” media contribute to the processes through which media are domesticated and incorporated within our everyday experience (see also Lesage, 2013). The insertion of media within genealogical or chronological trajectories based on oldness and newness may be complementary, in this sense, to the creation of personal and collective narratives that contribute to form or coalesce the identity of individuals and groups (Cavarero, 2000; Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011; Olney, 1972).

### *Emotions*

The role of emotions and feelings has recently been the subject of much attention across the humanities and social sciences. In his history of media technology and emotions, Brenton J. Malin (2014) shows that the social and cultural impact of media also concern the emotions and feelings invited by different media throughout time and in different places. Media, moreover, create specific ways to communicate and share feelings across space and time:

think of the impact of communications technologies in the relations between partners and family members at a distance (Cantó-Milà, Núñez-Mosteo, & Seebach, 2015; Shapiro & Humphreys, 2012), or how a medium such as the telegram became closely associated to the delivery of condolence messages (Ortoleva, 2002). Finally, the social use of media also entails the construction of emotional and even affective links to specific artefacts and technologies (Keightley & Pickering, 2015; Silverstone, 2006).

The perceived oldness of media contributes, in this context, to inform the emotional impact of media technologies. Bolin (2015) shows that nostalgic relationships to past media experiences are activated by the remembrance of media habits connected to earlier life phases of one's own. Others have noted how the emergence of melancholic feelings and nostalgia characterizes moments of technological and social change (Bevan, 2013; Sobchack, 1999). Katharina Niemeyer (2014) argues that the sharp increase of nostalgic feelings in the twenty-first century is an ambivalent reaction to the fast pace of technological change, which exposes the desire to slow it down even while exploiting the opportunities offered by novel technologies. In everyday life, understandings of oldness, with the emotions that are linked to them, may help people manage the changes related to the use of media technologies. Rather than considering nostalgia in a negative sense as a desire to return to an idealized past, looking at conceptualizations of oldness may lead to conceptualize nostalgia as “the desire to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006: 921).

Nostalgia is in this sense a resource to establish an emotional relationship with “everyday entitlements” (Striphos, 2009: 11), such as books and other media that ensure the stability of our environment and with which we interact in our everyday life. If the excitement for novelty may trigger particular forms of interaction between consumers and a newly acquired gadget (Lehtonen, 2003), nostalgia also contributes to the circuit of value

through which the relations between humans and technological devices are constantly shaped and transformed. In this sense, identifying certain media as “old” represents an opportunity for emotional reward that is strategically located within particular artefacts and technologies. To give one instance, the recent commercial success of e-readers and its insertion into the everyday experience of many people around the world has been strongly informed by comparisons with print media and by fears about the possible disappearance of the print book (Ballatore & Natale, 2015).

The contemporary incidence of “technostalgia” (Van der Heijden, 2015), therefore, should also be understood as a manifestation of how people integrate technologies into their own life. Nostalgia is often connected to aging, and because media employed in everyday life are constantly integrated within one’s identity and experience, technostalgia can be understood as a fascination with things that link to their, their parents’, or previous generations’ past. Not unlike fashion, technological change creates a thread through which the past is represented and embodied by different media technologies and artefacts, from polaroid to writing machines, from second-hand books to early personal computers. Looking at old media in terms of discourse and imagination, in this regard, may open the way to look with fresh eyes at the phenomenon of technological nostalgia, understood also and perhaps especially as a way in which media are integrated within personal and biographical narratives.

### **Conclusion: Imagining old media**

Media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst points out that there is an inescapable divergence between the time of technical media and the historical narratives that we construct to make sense of their change throughout time (Ernst, 2013: 58). The time of media – intended as artefacts, social systems, and technologies – is incompatible with the narratives through

which we domesticate and humanize time (Kermode, 2000). As a consequence, the contemporary incidence of the notion of “old media” to thematise and understand technological change should not lead us into thinking that oldness is a quality of media artefacts, technologies, and systems. We should refrain from exchanging the narratives we create about media with the media themselves.

A lie or a half truth is often the sign that there is something hidden behind the appearance of things. In this article, I have argued provocatively that “there are no old media.” Yet, the fact that this notion enters so often and pervasively in debates and narratives about media helps unveil some important issues regarding contemporary perceptions and reactions to technological change. “Old media” have acquired such a strong and stable position in our imagination, that they contribute to define how media enter into the public sphere, the everyday life, as well as the inner life of perceptions and feelings. Media, after all, are not only “things”; they are also cultural constructions that shape our everyday life and experience, and provide us with meanings and narratives to make sense of the transformations and changes experienced throughout life (Natale, 2016; Natale & Balbi, 2014).

Employing a similar approach entails moving away from “hard” conceptualizations of old media that equate them to particular media objects, technologies, and institutions. It means returning to more nuanced characterizations locating “old media” within the realm of the cultural imaginary and the social perception of technologies, and focusing on the role of rhetoric, narrative, and emotions in the construction of media as agents of change. As I have shown, when media historian Carolyn Marvin brought the notion of old media into the core of the scholarly debate about media and communication almost thirty years ago, she was referring to the way technologies were *perceived* in terms of novelties or oldness, rather than to the character of certain technologies in a certain moment and place. Marvin is one of the

key contributors within the tradition in American media and cultural studies that points to the role of imagination in media history, alongside authors such as Leo Marx (1964), James Carey (1989), and David Nye (1994). Following from this tradition, this article calls for the need to consider the role of oldness and obsolescence in the technological imagination, complementing more common approaches that look at the imaginary constructions and the cultural myths associated to “new” media (Boddy 2004, Sturken et al. 2004).

Old media are ultimately the media that we *imagine* as fading, superseded, or surpassed in the particular context in which we live. They are, in a certain sense, ghosts – presences that are generated within our imagination, but can have real effects and impact (Blanco & Peeren, 2013). It is only apparently a paradox: by acknowledging that there is not such a thing as old media, we may finally understand the real extent to which old media are present in our social world and experience.

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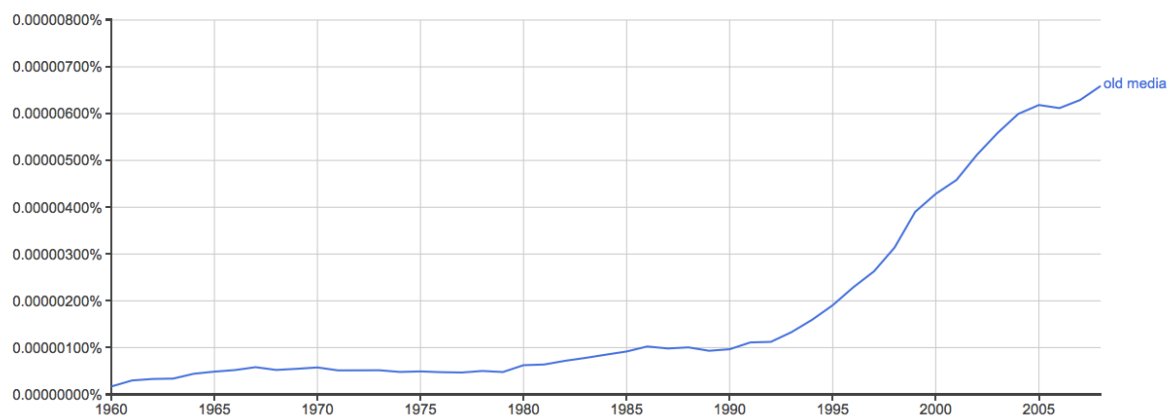


Fig. 1. Percentage of documents where the phrase “old media” appears in the corpus of Google Books, 1960-2010. Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, retrieved from <http://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 10 December 2015).