Digital Technology Media in the Humanities

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THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM, Twitter and YouTube, now part of our everyday lives, are also a manifestation of how digital technology has changed the way we live, work, study and play. These innovations allow us to create and share content – videos, photos, text and audio – in ways that, decades ago, were only available to professionals and media organisations. At the Caribbean School of Media and Communication (CARIMAC) at The University of the West Indies, Mona, the new digital technologies have had a significant impact: they present new possibilities for teaching and learning, they have driven changes in course content and they have spawned vital questions and issues that the institution, of necessity, must address.

Innovation is commonplace in the fields of information, entertainment and audio visual applications in media, but whilst there has always been a constant upgrading of equipment, digital technology, the computer's hardware and software, and the internet, have had a tremendous impact on our lives. Just think back ten years ago to what you were doing online, on the computer, or how you were watching television. Then think about how that has changed. Ten years ago, Twitter was just emerging and Facebook was just a toddler at three years old.

When I started working at the UWI in 1999, digital technology was just emerging for use by media professionals and consumers. This was something of a hybrid period when both analogue and digital technology existed side by side. Analogue technology, such as cassette recorders and players, VHS video players and recorders, and reel to reel tapes, work to create a copy or an analogy.

Digital technology converts information to binary code or bits and allows for the transmission and storage of large amounts of information or material that can be compressed so that it takes up less space and can be moved around at greater speeds. I entered the digital age when I swapped my professional cassette player/recorder for a small mini disc digital recorder that was a cross between a CD and a floppy disk. Audio material on this device could be easily transferred to a computer for editing, and that editing was nondestructive as it did not affect the original material. It could be done, undone and redone with keyboard and mouse. All this was a far cry from the analogue editing of magnetic tape that involved cutting the tape, removing what was not needed, and sticking it back together with a special adhesive tape.

In the digital environment, change is constant for the student and teacher. The new tools allow teachers to do more with content and to operate at higher standards, closer to those of the professional. Students can now work with media content, not only in the laboratories at the university, but also on their own personal devices at the location of their choice. The cellphone, once banned from classrooms because it was regarded as a distraction, has now become an essential tool. Students use it to practice techniques in the composition of images, to record audio and video, to collaborate with each other and to create and access content such as podcasts, training videos and news feedback. Students working on video and audio interviews transcribe and log the material in their own time on their own devices, and use their phones to keep visual and audio notes of conversations, presentations, and documents. The journalist's contact book of old is now a device, and the personal device used at home or on the move, is now a link to worldwide information and media; it is also an audiovisual recorder, a camera, a games console, a sound, vision and text communication device and much more with the addition of any of the many apps available. The tools we use professionally and for leisure have now become integrated.

Who could have predicted that Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms would become more than just a way to make contact with others and share information? Some 300 million people use Twitter every month and it is now not only a major source of news and commentary, but also a marketing tool for companies. These new tools not only bring a world of media and news

to the consumer, they also enhance the ability to incorporate feedback into the conversation – an important aspect of the communication process that the traditional media could not so easily accommodate. Audiences now have a chance to give feedback, become part of the conversation, direct it and even create it.

These new opportunities raise new dilemmas with which the digital humanities are vitally engaged. We can do things at greater speed, but that also means we have less time to think before we act. We are now more connected than ever to information and to the rest of the world, but this can also make it more difficult to switch off, disconnect and relax. We can now record our experiences and share but we also run the risk of spending more time documenting our experiences than enjoying them. The advances also bring new concerns like cyber stalking and bullying, abuse and threatening tweets, hacking, fake news, and privacy issues.

In our media courses at CARIMAC students are not only taught how to use and apply the new and exciting digital tools, they are also encouraged to take a holistic look at them: to consider the benefits they offer as well as the challenges they present and the impact they have on our way of life in the Caribbean. In effect, we seek to produce critically thinking citizens of this brave new digital world who know how to manipulate its tools, and who have the insight, awareness and knowledge to successfully negotiate its pitfalls. New tools, new rules. Some of the old rules still apply but some change with the tools. How we maximise engagement and extend what we do in service of learning and opening up communication possibilities involves not merely having the tools and using them, it must also include thinking about the change that technology brings and understanding what these changes mean for us as Caribbean people.