CHAPTER 1

Media Resistance: Connecting the Dots

Abstract The chapter introduces the analysis of media resistance and presents the research questions: What is at stake for resisters, how did media resistance inspire organized action and how is media resistance sustained? Media resisters are often seen as moralists, Luddites, laggards or cultural pessimists, but this book argues that media resistance is grounded in broadly shared values: Morality, culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health.

Keywords Media resistance · Luddite · Laggards · Moral panic · Media panic

GROWING UP WITHOUT TELEVISION

I grew up without television. My parents believed that television was a bad thing; it cost too much, would take attention away from other activities, would lead to passivity and obstruct family life. This was in Norway in the 1960s and my parents' beliefs resonated with the dominant misgivings about television at the time.

As a child, I was proud of our TV-free life. But the resistance did not stick. I moved in with others who had television. I did media studies in the 1980s and began to appreciate television as both an object of study and an object of fandom. When I began to teach television studies in the 1990s,

I would customarily refute claims that television was bad, being more interested in the actual operations of television institutions in society.

Then two things happened that (re-)kindled my interest in media resistance. I became dean of a diverse humanities faculty in the 2000s and experienced first-hand the deep ambivalence many in the humanities feel towards the media and media studies. There was still a sense that mass media objects were not worthy of academic attention, and that the discipline was slightly suspect, too celebratory and getting too much attention.

The second thing that happened was social media. After an initial warm welcome, online and social media began to provoke diverse expressions of resistance. In the 2010s, complaints began to pop up in conversations that reminded me of the anti-television stance of my childhood. As statements and confessionals about invasive media proliferated, the labels customarily used by media scholars and liberals to describe media resistance, of "media panic" and "technophobia" did not really seem to fit. In an era of ubiquitous media, it seems like we all need a measure of resistance, or at least a strategy for self-regulation, to keep our engagement with media in check.

And so the tables keep turning. I have written this book because I am curious about those who resist, and how media resistance is sustained as a powerful presence in our culture. I have also written it because I believe that media studies should devote more attention to expressions and acts of resistance, how they connect, persist and change.

THE BOOK

New media divide opinion; many are fascinated while others are disgusted. This book is about those who dislike, protest and abstain from media – both new and old. The aim is to explore media resistance across media and historical periods, explain continuities and differences, and discuss how media resistance is sustained. The discussion is based on two questions asked in each chapter: What is at stake and what to do – how does media resistance inspire organized action?

Many current and historical works refer to media resistance. Books on digital media discuss the arguments of both enthusiasts and sceptics (see, for example, Bauerlein 2011; Creeber and Martin 2009; Baym 2010). Media and cultural historians describe "media panics" (Drotner 1999) and protests against controversial genres (see, for example, Nicholas' and O'Malley's 2013; Rowbotham and Stevenson 2003; Ferguson 2013).

Policy and censorship studies describe campaigns to restrict and limit media (see, for example, Heins 1993, 2007; Barker 1984a; Black 1994; Grieveson 2004). Studies of adaption and use describe and characterize the motivations of non-users and slow adopters (see, for example, Carey and Elton 2010; Helsper and Reisdorf 2013; Wyatt 2003).

Yet, despite the interest in media scepticism and dislike, few address media resistance as a more general phenomenon transcending types of media, historical periods and national borders. Few have also studied resistance as a common form of media reception: investigating motives, sources of inspiration and forms of action. As media becomes ubiquitous, more studies of voluntary abstention emerge, such as Krcmar's (2009) study of non-television families, Portwood-Stacer (2012) on Facebook rejectors and Woodstock (2014) on media resistance. There is also a relevant strand of studies focusing on resistance to new technology (see, for example, Bauer 1995a; Wyatt 2003). But media resistance has a long and complex history that deserves more intellectual scrutiny.

This book explores resistance from the early phase of mass media to present-day digital media. A retrospective perspective is particularly interesting nowadays, as new debates over digital media illuminate qualities of previous debates. Media history is not written once for all; new modes require new historical scrutiny and may change the way we understand the past. As today's media users struggle with aspects they are uncomfortable with – whether it is invasiveness, surveillance, content perceived to be problematic, or other features – a new look at the history of media resistance is fruitful in order to discuss what is recurring and what is changing over time.

Drawing on cases and examples from both sides of the Atlantic, media resistance is discussed as a diverse phenomenon encompassing political, professional, networked and individual arguments and actions. Based on sources such as political documents, press clippings, websites, organizational documents, non-fiction bestsellers and personal testimonies, the book explores narratives of resistance and how media is placed in a villainous and destructive role. The analysis also draws on dystopic fiction and film to show how themes in media resistance are depicted in popular culture. While resistance to media has inspired writers and film-makers, resisters have in turn been inspired by dystopic depictions. As will be noted throughout the book, media resistance does not depend on specific, detailed or even empirical evidence, whereas dystopic fiction remains a recurring source of inspiration.

Moralists, Luddites and Laggards

The study of media resistance cuts across fields and disciplines: cultural studies, sociology, media policy, and audience and technology studies. Although the approaches vary, there is a tendency to conceptualize resistance to media in rather negative terms: resistance is seen as a form of panic, an irrational reaction, caused by technophobia, fear, hysteria or social marginalization. The underlying premise is often that those who resist are moralists (subject to irrational moral "panics"), Luddites (against technology and progress), laggards (marginalized, slow adopters) or cultural pessimists (sceptical of popular culture and modern life).

Historically, much protest against the media has been grounded in moral judgements, and churches and moral movements have favoured censorship and restrictions (Ch. 2). In this sense, it is no surprise that media resistance is linked with moralism. However, those who study and discuss moral reactions often go further; characterizing campaigns and protests as "moral panics." Marshall McLuhan used the term "moral panic" as early as 1964 to describe the reactions of many "highly literate people" to the new "electric" media (McLuhan 1968, 91). British sociologist Stanley Cohen (1973) made the term widely known in his studies of reactions against youth behaviour in the 1960s. Since then, "moral panic" has been used to describe a wide variety of social protests, including protests against popular culture and new media. The concept is not just used in academia, but flourishes in journalism and public debate where it is used to describe a diverse set of reactions (see Barker 2013; Rowbotham and Stevenson 2003; Nicholas and O'Malley 2013; for overviews). Criticism of "moral panic" is also used by media operators as self-defence, indicating that critics are merely moralists and there is no need to take notice.

Academically, the tradition of "moral panic" deals with "mobilised and orchestrated scares," how fears are promoted to prepare the ground for political and legal interventions (Barker 2013, xv). The media have often contributed to public fears: Williams (2013) observes that the British press in the eighteenth century "heightened fear, anxiety and threats" (29), while McRobbie (1994) argues that increased competition in the late twentieth century made it "a standard journalistic practice to construct moral panics in the media" (198). Also the parallel concept of media panic deals with orchestrated scares, in this case, scares about the negative effects of new media. In media panics, media are

"both instigator and purveyor of the discussion" (Drotner 1999, 596, see also Biltereyst 2004; McRobbie 1994).

Although the tradition focuses on orchestrated fears, there is a tendency that the labels of "panic," "hysteria" and "fear" rub off on those who protest. For example, in an article comparing social fears surrounding popular literature and Internet, Sutter (2003, 162) poses a typical dichotomy between the rational and hysterical:

> A balanced, cautious approach to new technologies and the uses to which they may be put, is of course sensible. However, not all critics of new media throughout history have been rational and balanced in their judgement. Both the arrival of cheap weekly publications in the Victorian era and the internet at the end of the twentieth century were subject to much hysteria, emphasising their supposed negative social effects, even blaming them for a range of social ills.

The distinction between the rational and the emotional/hysterical often appears in literature and public debate without much discussion. For example, Majorie Heins (1993), who has written extensively on media censorship, attributes popular protests and interventions to "emotions so powerful that they may interfere with rational thought" (2). Ironically, the idea that the masses were hysterical legitimated early media censorship; for example, there were concern for the allegedly "panicky" crowd drawn to early cinema (Grieveson 2004, 12). In recent times, those who want to restrict media are the ones seen as panicky moralists. Whether used about cinemagoers in the early 1900s or todays' media resisters, I would question whether the panic-label is adequate and suitable; it is always risky to place one position in the rational corner while hypothesizing that the other is irrational.

In this book, the concern for morality is discussed as only one of several motivations behind media resistance; just as important are concerns for culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health. Concern for these values has led to reactions not just against content, but also against media technology and the media's functions in society. In this, as in other fields, those who resist new technologies are often conceptualized as Luddites; which has become shorthand for being anti-modernity and prone to simplistic technological determinism. The Luddites were British textile workers breaking mechanized looms in the early phase of the industrial revolution, and although their protest was more complex, the

label is used generously to characterize any resistance to change (see, for example, Randall 1995). As the author Jonathan Franzen (2013) comments after having been called a Luddite for criticizing twitter:

> Not only am I not a Luddite. I'm not even sure the original Luddites were Luddites. (It simply seemed practical to them to smash the steam-powered looms that were putting them out of work).

Also resistance to communication technology tends to be explained in psychological terms. Bauer (1995b) shows how a confined body of literature in the 1980s and 1990s "employs 'anxiety' and 'phobia' as core concepts for understanding resistance to computers at school, at work and at home" (97). Resistance is seen "as a structural and personal deficit," it is "irrational, morally bad, or at best, understandable but futile" (Bauer 1995a, 2, see also Selwyn 2003, 103).

I will show examples of positions that both fit and do not fit the popular image of a Luddite, but will not attempt to determine whether protesters really are Luddites. Instead, the discussion will show how accusations of Luddism influence the way writers and activists frame their arguments and how they try to distance themselves from assumptions that they are simplistic and anti-technology. While it is of course, legitimate to discuss whether an argument is technologically determinist or anti-technology, this might not be the most interesting aspect of a text expressing media resistance. In this book, I attempt instead to understand such texts as sense-making efforts, drawing on an eclectic mix of perspectives and ideas in order to warn about, or explain, potential damage resulting from media's presence.

The label of "laggard" is also used about those who resist the media (see Selwyn 2003, 105). The theoretical definition of laggards comes from diffusion theory and the classical work *Diffusion of innovation* from 1962 (1995), which divides adopters into five ideal types (263–266). While the first three: innovators, early adopters and early majority, are described in positive terms, the two last: late majority and laggards, are described in negative terms. Laggards are described as backward looking:

> Laggards are the last in a social system to adopt an innovation. They possess almost no opinion leadership....The point of reference for the laggard is the past.... Laggards tend to be suspicious of innovations and of change agents (265).

Rogers acknowledge that resistance may be "entirely rational" from the laggards' viewpoint, but that is because they are marginalized, or, as he puts it: "their resources are limited" (265). The tradition leaves little room for those who do not want to connect; as Selwyn (2003, 101) points out, questions regarding those who do not voluntarily use technology have "remained on the periphery of academic work on technology and society." With intensified emphasis on closing the digital gap, those who do not hook up are predominantly studied in order to identify barriers that can be overcome. Yet non-use cannot just be explained with reference to economic or social marginalization, non-users also report a lack of interest and a positive will not to connect (Reisdorf 2011, 408, see also; Helsper and Reisdorf 2013, 95). As media scholars, why someone is "not interested" in online communication should excite our intellectual curiosity, and it is important to examine motivations and arguments with an open mind rather than a pre-determined political goal.

Doomsday Prophets and Cultural Pessimists

Mass media are often awarded a central place in doomsday scenarios that "substitutes a catastrophic or a cyclic view of history for a progressive one" (Brantlinger 1983, 51). There are predictions of doom in many media-critical works, ranging from early condemnations of popular literature, to critique of the culture industry in the 1930s and 1940s, to anti-television-manifestos, and fictional portrayals of risks and dangers of media engagement. Those who resist media often use strong language and apocalyptic metaphors; hyperbolic discourses reinforce the impression of impending doom. In the book I refer to a range of predictions of bad media having bad consequences, and show how such predictions may travel across genres and historical periods. However, the point is not to evaluate the predictions or criticize them for being exaggerated or wrong, but rather to discuss media doomsday predictions as an integrated, often entertaining and inspirational element of culture itself.

An important point in the book is that one has to look beyond actions and arguments to understand how media resistance is sustained in our culture; the prevalence of resistant sentiments in society implies that themes in media resistance also pop up in works of art. Media resistance can be seen as a cultural resource, inspiring, among other things, entertaining (and scary) plots and storylines in dystopic fiction and film. From the all-out apocalypse described in *Brave new world*

(1932), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) (see Ch. 3), to the more limited doomsday scenarios in films such as *Being there* (1979), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Truman Show* (1989), *Disconnect* (2013) and *Her* (2014) (see Ch. 6), works of dystopian fiction and film provide speculative and fascinating answers to the question: What will happen if media continue to evolve along paths perceived to be destructive. In the same way as fictional accounts draw on real debates, participants in such debates, who express media resistance and scepticism, may be inspired by works of fiction. Indeed, another reason why this book include analysis of fictional sources is that many works of resistance refer more liberally to fictional predictions than to (empirical) media research (see Ch. 7).

While Brantlinger (1983, 37) argues "[d]oomsdaying, present to a greater or lesser extent in all ages, has become the chief mode of modern culture," Solomon and Higgins (1996, 236) see doomsday scenarios as particularly prevalent in American thought. In terms of media resistance, there are comparatively more pronounced predictions of doom in the US compared with Europe, and much of the material in this book comes from the US. However, this may also be due to the much stronger position of commercial media in the US, particularly commercial broadcasting. As critics often point out, the US was founded by believers in the Enlightenment who struggled for freedom of expression, but disappointment set in as media were seen to betray their mandate (Pierce 2010; Postman 2005a; Gore 2007). In contrast, European cultures draw on not only Enlightenment ideals but also come from a history of religious censorship and absolutist monarchy, their modern media traditions more influenced by Victorian ideas of "uplift" (Rowbotham and Stevenson 2003; Scannel and Cardiff 1991). Both in Britain and the Nordic countries there is a strong tradition of public service broadcasting, which have acted as a normative influence to a much larger degree than the public broadcasting service in the US (Croteau and Hoynes 2012, 81). In Scandinavia, media have to some extent been seen as part of the welfare state project; epitomized in terms such as "the media welfare state" (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

Instead of studying media resistance as moral or media panic, Luddism, lagging or cultural pessimism, this book sees media resistance as rooted in deep-seated values, from which the media are seen as destructive and counter-productive. A reaction against the media is always a reaction in favour of something else – something considered more important,

tangible and valuable. Media resistance is a way of connecting the dots about what goes wrong in society; a form of theorizing or paradigm-construction that generates narratives of warning and explanation. In the book, I point out how resistance is grounded in the same broadly shared values as acceptance and celebration of media, and how the impression that such values are threatened or lost, resonate with writers and activists from different eras.

To say that media resistance is grounded in values is not to say that all is rational in media resistance, there is definitely a place for emotions here as in other historical and social theorizing (Rosenwein 2002; Williams 2013). But as emotions go, fear, hysteria and panic are not the only sentiments, and not the most common. Williams (2013) argues that media scholars have looked at different emotions, "[b]ut the predominant emotion that has taken up by the discipline has been fear" (29). In the material examined, a wider range of emotions emerges, including bewilderment, ambiguity, apprehension, cynicism, sadness and resignation. Perhaps the most prevalent emotions expressed in the texts are disbelief, distrust and disappointment; disbelief at what the media can do and portray, distrust in the media for not being a force of good, and disappointment when high hopes are thwarted. I also identify a high degree of reflexivity and self-reflexivity; at least in the later decades, sceptics and protesters are aware of the labels used to describe them and reflect on how these labels make it more difficult to develop a critical stance.

MEDIA RESISTANCE

The term "media resistance" is used as a broad term to discuss a range of negative actions and attitudes towards media. The Oxford English Dictionary defines resistance as "the refusal to accept or comply with something," and media resistance describes a refusal to accept the way media operate and evolve. Although resistance and criticism go hand in hand, media resistance implies more than a critique of the media; it is an argument linking the existence and functions of media in society with social ills and social change to the worse, and as such an imperative for change. Although media resistance may be triggered by specific media items (see, for example, Phillips 2008 on controversial films), the emphasis is on generalized forms of resistance; statements and protests against entire media or communication technologies, genres, platforms, systems or functions.

Writers and protesters may well be discussed in this book without self-identifying as media resisters; indeed the purpose is not to draw a firm line between resisters and non-resisters. Themes in media resistance overlap with themes in general media debates, and my point is to discuss media resistance in a broad rather than narrow sense. The term "resistance" is used because it alludes to more neutral research traditions than those equalling resistance with moralism, panic or Luddism (above). For example, Wyatt et al. (2002) use the term "resisters" to describe people who do not use a certain technology because they do not want to, and "rejectors" to describe those who have stopped using it because they find it inadequate. These two categories are separated again from the "excluded" and the "expelled" (Wyatt et al. 2002, 36). In a study of people who do not use *Facebook*, Portwood-Stacer (2012) distinguishes between passive and active forms of rejection and labels the active forms "refusal" – alluding to a broader cultural struggle (6). Woodstock (2014, 1983) uses the term "media resistance" to describe informants "who intentionally and significantly limit their media use," without necessarily implying that these are part of a wider cultural movement. I use the term "resisters," but also terms such as "sceptics," "protesters," "abstainers" and also "critics" indicating that there is a porous border between different forms of resistance and scepticism, as well as between discourses and activism.

In this book, I am less interested in fierce reactions and fundamentalism, and more interested in media resistance as an everyday phenomenon. In media history, there are plenty of incidents of media destruction, from sixteenth century book burning to the Taliban's destruction of TV-sets in Afghanistan. There are also societies such as the Amish, who "remain resolute in their refusal to tap certain technologies," including television (Kraybill 1994, 49). In the last centuries, physical destruction of media has been rare in the West, although there have been symbolic protests, such as the burning of 44 sets in 1975 in San Francisco in order to give spectators a "cathartic explosion" and "be free at last from the addiction to television" (cited from Winn 1980, 28). Ferguson et al. (2008, 311) describe an incident where protesters pulled game consoles out of arcades and set them on fire. Although such incidents are rare, they remain part of media resistance symbolism and folklore, and destruction and obliteration of various forms of media products also surface in dystopic fiction and film.

Resistance to cultural expressions and modes of communication can be dated back to the ancients, and most forms of communication have been subject to negative reactions (Fang 2015; Brantlinger 1983). In this book,

the emphasis is on three phases that are particularly important for the understanding of resistance today: Resistance to media at the point of breakthrough for modern mass media in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (print, mass literature, cinema, radio, comics) (Ch. 2); resistance to television in the second half of the twentieth century (Ch. 4); and resistance to online and social media from around 2000 (Ch. 5). But the book not only discusses media in actual historical phases, it also deals with resistance in different phases of a medium's life: In Chapter 2, I discuss reactions to new media, in Chapter 4, resistance to television as a mature medium, and in Chapter 5, how resistance to online and social media evolved with new genres and services. Finally, the book deals with speculation and fantasies about all the bad things that can happen in a media-saturated society. Chapters 3 and 6 discuss dystopic fiction and films that portray the media as dangerous and destructive in different societies and eras, including the distant future.

The book does not attempt to define neither "media," nor "new media" precisely. Instead, the aim is to identify what types of media elements that provoke reactions and resistance, and how various forms of communication are lumped together by critics and sceptics. The book reflects the move from distinct media products and services, to electronic flow-media and developments towards convergence and ubiquity where "[a] clear-cut dichotomy no longer exists" between person-to-person and mass media (Carey and Elton 2010, 1). In the final phase, protesters and abstainers struggle to distinguish between useful and detestable aspects of increasingly converging media.

What is at Stake?

For each of the periods discussed in the book, I ask two questions. The first question is: What is at stake? Or more specifically: What are the underlying values and concerns that motivate resistance and scepticism?

The preoccupations in media resistance are not some peripheral concerns, but rather central narratives familiar from other political, cultural and social struggles. Based on a discussion of early mass media resistance in Chapter 2, I identify six concerns that are recurring for the different media discussed: Morality, culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health. In the remaining chapters, I discuss how these values are interpreted in relation to later media and point to continuity and change.

The concerns for *morality* are grounded in the belief that media and cultural expressions should guide individuals in how to live a virtuous life (Brantlinger 1983). Resistance is based on claims that media do not fulfil this purpose and instead undermine moral values. The concern for *culture* is similarly based on the idea that media should aspire to raise cultural standards, but that print and electronic media rather produce cultures of mediocrity (Ward 1989, 79).

The third concern is for *enlightenment*. Enlightenment philosophers fought archaic political and economic structures, resisted dogma and superstition, and believed in each individual's ability to rise to a higher level (Solomon and Higgins 1996, 198–199). Resistance is grounded in criticism that media fail in its role as a public educator, and indeed may undermine educational efforts more generally; instead stimulating escapism, silliness and distraction. The call for liberty of the press was a vital aspect of the democratic revolution and a free press was considered a critical ingredient of politics (Keane 1991, 26–27). But instead of promoting truth, the media has been seen to undermine *democracy* through indoctrination, propaganda and "the manufacture of consent" (Lippman 1922).

The fifth concern is for *community*. Media and communication technology is often depicted as bringing people together, but to those who resist, media brings isolation (Fang 2015, 4). Resistance is linked with notions of mass society and the concern that industrialization, urbanization and mass media have undermined the communal basis of society (Dewey 1991). Finally, there is the concern for *health*. Resistance has been grounded in concern that media would destroy physical as well as mental health, leading to anything from "psychic infections" (Grieveson 2004, 12) to changes in brain structure, impoverished eyesight, addiction, obesity and many other ills.

In this book, I draw on a wide range of material to discuss how the concerns of media resistance are expressed and alluded to across genres, types of media, historical periods and national borders. I also pay particular attention to the evolution of rhetoric and metaphors used to describe bad media – from "penny dreadfuls," via "the idiot box," to "The Internet is today's toilet wall" (see summary in Ch. 7).

What to Do?

The second question discussed in each chapter is this: What to do – what kind of action do statements of media resistance point to in order to remedy the problems identified, and what methods are used by activists, networks

and individuals to deal with problematic media? In the chapters about dystopian literature and film, I have tweaked the question a little, asking instead to what degree the fictional works depict successful paths of action for characters, and where hope lies, if there is any, in the novels and films.

Media resistance is directed at many different entities: industry, legislators, content, genres, technologies, effects, users. Actions of resistance and protest can be classified along a continuum, from the political and legal protests to individual actions. In this book, I discuss political campaigning, aiming, usually, at prohibition, censorship or other forms for legal action. Furthermore, I discuss professional and institutional reactions; pointing to how educational, medical and religious professionals have endorsed media-resistance activities, and how these professions have been joined by writers, journalists and "techies" feeling overpowered by digital media in the last phase. The third type is networked resistance; I discuss organizations and networks that have provided platforms for and supported resistance activities. Finally, I discuss actions performed by or directed at individuals and families, from efforts to convince parents to restrict the use of media among the young, to more recent examples of media abstention, fasting and detox.

In the book I distinguish between arguments that the media are bad, but "tameable," and arguments that certain media, genres or technologies are irredeemable. To some extent, this parallels a distinction between resistance to content and resistance to the media's functions, which again parallels a distinction in media studies between studies of media effects and so-called medium theory. The latter tradition attributes more meaning to the mode of communications than to content (Meyrowitz 1985, 16; Croteau and Hoynes 2012, 299, see also Ch. 4). However, while such distinctions are easily made on the level of discourse, they are less useful in terms of distinguishing between different types of activism, as those who take action against or voice strong opposition to media, tend to dislike them for many different reasons.

Whether a medium, technology or genre is seen to be irredeemable or tameable also depends on the context; what is considered possible in a certain political climate. Over the last century, the context of media – and also media resistance – has changed drastically. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries protesters appealed to legislators for restrictions, censorship and even prohibition of some media and genres. Although political campaigning continues, in later decades, liberalization and convergence have made it more difficult to identify clear political goals. In the book,

I explore the transition from a political and legal orientation towards more personal media regulation, where self-help guides and websites inspire media detox and abstention.

Although this book draws on examples and cases from several countries, most notably the US, but also Britain and Scandinavia; the intention is not to do stringent comparative analysis. The purpose is instead to use examples and cases to show that media resistance is both situated and travels across borders. Books are translated, movements in one context align with movements in another, writers and campaigners are invited to speak at conferences and events; yet resistance also reflects historical and cultural specificities in different eras and contexts.