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TEMPORALITIES AND THEORY IN MEDIA HISTORY

Jukka Kortti

This essay discusses what the topical approaches to history—digital history and different concepts of historical temporality—have to offer for media history studies especially in terms of defining a common theory of media history. The outcome of the essay is that since often media historical approaches essentially take the plurality of media historical time and the layering of media forms for granted, these new trends do not provide a key for a 'grand theory' of media history. Whilst the new possibilities that digital history provides for media history are substantial, the advantages are first and foremost methodological. Since media history essentially consists of both breaks and outbreaks, different layers with a different logic and tempo in which the context of a given time and space is crucial, to find one's own body of theory for media history is not even necessary.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, we have faced the significant increase of media historical studies. Media history is widespread but still an emerging field of study although studies on the history of media have been done, particularly newspaper histories, since the early twentieth century. One manifestation of the popularity of media history is the increase of media history overviews published since the 1990s.[1]

The obvious reason for the contemporary popularity of media history is undoubtedly the need to understand our digital culture. Techno-cultural motives, however, are nothing new in the field of media history studies. Early on, the close linkages between theory and technology have been central in the theorising of media history. The rise of the media-deterministic Toronto School since the 1950s was a product of a new electronic age. Television was the Internet of the 60s: a 'revolutionary mass media' and a McLuhanian 'extension of man'.[2]

Besides changing techno-cultural context, also scholarly tendencies have an effect on how media history is studied. The focus of this essay is to look at what topical academic trends concerning digitalisation and temporality in history studies have to offer for media historical studies both in terms of theory and the ontology of the orientation.

Indeed, media history has been theorised and classified long before the digital age, since the (Anglo-American) origins of the orientation at the latest. The father of the

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Toronto school,—and, according to media philosopher John Durham Peters, the founder of media history as a field of research[3]—economic historian Harold A. Innis, looked at the entire history of civilisation from the viewpoint of the history of media. According to Innis, communication tends to change political, juridical, religious and economic structures. Especially empires—or the monopolies of power generally—are dependent on communication.[4]

Despite the wide popularity of MacLuhian one-liners, media history was not a very popular object of research especially among media and communication scholars from the 1960s until the 1990s. First the positivist sociological approaches of the post-war decades, then Marxist theories and the rise of the cultural studies from the 1960s to the 1980s in media studies were not very favourable for retrospective views, yet there were some remarkable exceptions.[5] The media history studies that historians conducted were for their part either studies that used media methodologically through the prism of source criticism or they wrote media institution histories.

Nevertheless, there was enough history research on media by the early 1990s that media scholars and historians started to formulate what media history is and should be. For instance, Norwegian historian Hans Fredrik Dahl asked for the essence and identity of media history in the media history issue of *Media, Culture & Society* (4/1994) and drew a distinction between historical work on particular media and a more synthetic notion of media history, whereas Paddy Scannel made a distinction between empirical and conceptual histories of media history in the editorial of the issue.[6]

During the 1990s, Paddy Scannel also introduced the idea of generations in media historical studies. Scannell called his and David Cardiff's social historical study on the British broadcasting[7] a 'second generation study', which largely used the 'first generation study', the in-depth institutional history of BBC by Asa Briggs. While on the other hand 'the third generation' studies utilise audience research for the study of media history to show how audiences have reacted to broadcasting, cinema, the press, etc., through time.[8] Another British media historian representing 'the Westminster school', James Curran, classified the ways of narrating liberal, feminist, populist, anthropological, libertarian and radical interpretations of (British) media history.[9]

It looked like the grounds for a common, if not a grand theory of media history had been created. Notwithstanding these Anglo-American examples, American media scholar John Nerone wrote about a decade ago: 'Media histories differ from other historical studies in that they tend not to have a body of theory that they call their own.' Media history often draws from disciplines of social sciences and humanities, modifying them for its own phrasing of a question. To be sure, this is the case with media theories as well—an ad hoc assemblage of theories drawn from other fields.[10]

The lack of a common theory in media history is obviously true, but is there a need for such a 'grand theory' in media history after all? And if there is a demand, do new (digital) methods and associated re-evaluations of historical temporality have something to offer for defining a 'media history theory'?

In this essay, I show that humanist, theory-driven approaches have questioned the linearity of media history since the 1990s. Secondly, I discuss possibilities (and problems) of digital history for media history studies and, thirdly, reflect it especially through the current ideas of historical temporality.

Historical Layers under 'the New Media'

Difficulties in establishing a grand theory for media history stem not only from the newness of the field as such, but also from the ambiguities about its object on the one hand and the omnipresence of media on the other: media have played a role in almost all areas of culture and society long before our digital age.

In addition, the definition of media has expanded. John Durham Peters,[11] for instance, talks about 'elemental media'; besides technological and cultural forms, media are vessels and environments, such as clouds. Insects,[12] minerals,[13] and cities[14] have also been considered as media among philosophy and history-oriented media scholars in recent years. Consequently, just as classifications of media as intermediate agencies, different media technologies and an advertising medium,[15] or as *presentational*, *representational* and *mechanical* media[16] do not resonate with the current digital media environment, they are also outdated for media historians as well.

Besides ambiguity, the ubiquitous and variable character of media, as well as the interdisciplinarity of media history studies makes the field challenging for a common theory. Those approaches that emphasise the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of past media also question the linear narratives of media development. The idea of alternate temporality has been at very heart of the one media historical approach for over three decades.

A notable (and mostly non-Anglo-American) research orientation—especially one interested in the cultural history of media—that arose from the media culture created by the new media of the 1990s was *media archaeology*. It means an alternative approach to the supremacy of media-historical narratives. It was influenced by the Foucauldian idea of the *archaeology of knowledge* and the concept of *dispositif*—how media machinery consists of the institutional, organisational and cognitive structures of a given time. Media archelogy is concerned with the formation of media culture: how media have become historically layered and how they functioned, and what the cultural role these old media forms have played.[17]

As much as being a method it was also, as German media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst defines the approach, 'an aesthetics of practicing media criticism, a kind of epistemological reverse engineering, and an awareness of moments when media themselves, not exclusively humans anymore, become active "archaeologists" of knowledge'. Ernst also emphasises that media archaeology is not just a way to collect 'dead media'[18] for a curiosity cabinet, but an analytical tool to approach the hidden corners of cultural history.[19]

Media archaeology highlights the alternate temporality of media. With its non-chrono-logical, antinarrative and antiteleological approaches, media archaeology showed the repeatability of media forms, even their cyclicity. 'There's nothing new under the sun' is commonly heard among media archaeologists. What characterises the media archaeological stance on time, as media theorist Vivian Sobchack puts it, is the 'desire for, and belief in, the possibility of historical presence'. This presence reveals not only the past but also the future.[20] One of the pioneers of the approach, Siegfried Zielinski wrote, before the digitalisation of media, that film and television are only short interludes (*enrt'acte*) in the broader history of audio-visual media.[21]

In addition, media archaeology is interested in a micro-temporal process according to the idea that machines have their own specific temporality, or *Eigenzeit*. According to Ernst, this approach differs from cultural studies—and also cultural history—which see media technologies as grand narratives of historical processes on the semantic level. Instead media archaeology 'operates on the assumption that technological media systems can be understood primarily and conclusively on the basis of their elementary, sub-semantic procedures. This type of analysis, which understands material, symbolic and signal-based operators as escalations of classical cultural techniques, requires a theory of genuine media-temporal processes.'[22]

Reading Historical Temporalities with Machines

Media archaeology is not, however, alone in rethinking insights into time in the field of recent 'new' ideas of history research. Besides historical space being compressed by new approaches to history, such as *transnational history* and *global history*, the perception of time has also changed or at least pluralised in recent discussions on historiography. The increased discussion about *alternative temporalities*, *the acceleration of time*, *multiple temporalities* and *the transtemporal* have challenged the common uses of linear narratives in history studies.[23] According to Norwegian history theoretician Helge Jordheim, due to globalisation with its complex and heterogeneous temporal relations and the 'deep times' of climate change, 'the myth of the uniform time of progress seems to be losing its grip'.[24]

The most obvious reason behind the new approaches is clearly the promise of the new digital tools for history research during the last two decade or so. It has meant a change, or 'turn'[25] if you like, in methodology. *Digital humanities* and *digital history* with 'big data', topic-modelling software and improving search possibilities have provided unparalleled possibilities for media historical research.[26]

Digital history concerns media history particularly since the newspaper and periodical collections have been the oldest and the most extensively digitised historical assemblages worldwide. The digitalising started in the last century, and since the beginning of the 2010s digital objects are considered their own 'turns' rather than imitating the non-digital world: from documents to data. The new past provided by the digitisation of newspapers and periodicals are no longer 'a foreign country' for media historians.

After the searchability of sources developed especially by OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technologies, it is possible to make cross-searches between massive numbers of publications revealing different kinds of connections by 'reading with machines'. The algorithms offer possibilities to find unexpected perspectives to an event, phenomenon, or themes. Digital history does not only make the research of a historian 'faster, easier, more convenient and more productive' as was manifested a decade earlier,[27] but, now in the 2020s, it also provides unparalleled possibilities for 'mapping and viewing history'—to make spatial historical interpretations, to increase the accessibility of audio-visual sources, and to employ computational methods in studying them. Moreover, just as media archaeology has been interested in 'dead media', the digital technologies have introduced new ways to study such ephemeral everyday media objects that were not intended to be preserved in the first place.[28] Obviously, digital history also provides

unprecedented opportunities for media archaeologists to find documents which have been utterly forgotten.[29]

One of the leading scholars within computational text analysis has been literary historian Franco Moretti, who introduced the idea of *distant reading* in studying the *longue durée* of literary history already at the turn of the millennium.[30] In the same way as media archaeologists, Moretti has been interested in the hidden, often unread texts of literary history.

Digital humanities have evoked criticism among academics.[31] Digital history is by no means unproblematic but requires *digital source* and *resource criticism*: It is easily exposed to biases, the technology (OCR) still has several problems, copyrights or paywalls restrict openness, and so on. Moreover, how search engines, algorithms, programmes and applications have been built requires critical discussion in terms of reflexivity.[32] In addition, difficulties do not just concern text but also affect the studying of digitalised audio-visual media via online television history collections, for instance. The lack of metadata and other decontextualisation of the material on account of discrepancies, inconsistencies and the limited usability of collections show that digitalised collections are not yet a game changer for television studies.[33]

However, despite the problems, 'digital history 2.0' has the potential for new standpoints in history research. One of the central perspectives provided by the new digital tools is that which concerns historical time. Digital history methods help to make wide-ranging historical timeline visualisations of how, for instance, certain words, news, concepts and phenomena have emerged in a chronology or a temporal axis through the gradual change of time. But in presenting past, digital history has also provided possibilities to study different points that are often overlapping rhythms in time.[34]

According to David Armitage and Jo Guldi, one of the outcomes of the digital turn is a shift back to longer-term narratives after the 'short-termism' that has prevailed for the last half century or so. As they write in their widely discussed yet controversial *History Manifesto*: 'In order to understand long-term change, whether of the climate or political regimes, scholars necessarily need to understand different time-scales, actors, periods, and events in their complex relationships with each other; that is one of history's primary capabilities as a field.'[35] Among media historians, this provocative book has been seen as 'the typical technological determinist combination of worrisome language about out-of-date analogue traditions,' which promotes a quantitative takeover by technology-oriented (culture) historians.[36]

Nevertheless, could these recent ideas on historical temporality and perception in historical time have something to offer for the theorising of media history?

Multiple and Alternate Temporalities and Media History

The concept of *transtemporal history*, based on the model of transnational history, was introduced by Armitage a couple of years earlier in his article on intellectual history. The aim of the concept was to link 'discrete contexts, moments and periods while maintaining the synchronic specificity of those contexts'. In other words, transtemporal history is time-bound, not timeless.[37] The idea of transtemporal history with its

emphases on contextualisation is obviously more evident in media history than in intellectual history (though they often combine).

For instance, despite the relative rapid development of the printing press in early modern Europe, in places like Orthodox Russia, however, printing spread very differently. This was partly due to the Cyrillic alphabet, but also due to the fact that, in Russia, literacy was the privilege of a very small elite. The Muslim world was also strongly opposed to printing throughout the early modern era, even considering it a sin. The first Turkish newspaper, for example, was not founded until 1840. These examples not only show that the spread of printing technology, like many later forms of media, requires favourable social and cultural conditions, but also that a transtemporal approach can provide an opportunity to non-simultaneously analyse possible universal social institutionaliing practices of a medium. The basic structural elements of culture all have 'their own rhythms of life and growth', as the giant of modern historiography Fernand Braudel stated already in the 1960s.[38]

Another theory of historical temporality that has evoked discussion in recent years has been German history theoretician Reinhart Koselleck's idea of *multiple temporalities*. In his essay, Helge Jordheim showed how Koselleck's theory on historical times is, contrary to many 'Anglophone' analyses, not a theory of (modernistic) periodisation, but aims 'to replace the idea of linear, homogeneous time with a more complex, heterogeneous, and multilayered notion of temporality'. Of the modes of temporal experience Koselleck introduced in 1973, 'the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous [*die Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*]' is closest to the idea that Armitage 'appropriates'. According to this idea, 'historical successions may have the same natural chronology but totally different temporal organisations'. Another mode of temporal experience, 'the repeatability of events', which investigates how constellations or typologies are repeated in history, is obviously at the heart of media archaeology.[39]

In his reading of Koselleck's idea of *multiple temporalities*, Jordheim emphasises how chronological and diachronic explanations of how concepts are preceded or succeeded by one other is not only a possibility in history, but 'historical meanings continue to exist alongside each other simultaneously and in a sense as alternatives for a certain amount of time'.[40] If we look at the development of media technologies when a new medium rarely substitutes the old one, the idea is very common in media history. There are plenty of examples of this phenomenon in media history: writing did not substitute speech, the printing press did not stop the writing of manuscripts, newspapers did not replace the book, the telegraph did not make newspapers redundant, the radio did not end the record industry, television did not replace the radio and cinema, the Internet will not wipe out the book, newspapers, radio, and television, and so on.[41]

In his article on transtemporal history, Armitage also states that 'the big is back' in historiography, meaning the return of the *longue durée*—the long duration of history— a concept famously introduced by Braudel and other members of the *Annales* school in the 1950s. Braudel's idea of the *longue durée* means the plurality of historical times, but also a stable duration and if it changes, the change is cyclical rather than linear.[42] Media history of full of these kinds of processes.

For instance, as is well known, everyday life, material civilisation with its routines and traditions, was an integral part of Braudel's concept of the *longue durée* as opposed to the

history of events that formed the other parts of the structures of history. Everyday life formed a basis that was separate from the place of the market economy operating between production and consumption.[43] In our current digitalised world this may look outdated when our social life is very much entangled with (media) consumption and markets. But if we look at how new media habits are transformed and adopted into national culture traditions, such as watching television according to daily routines or related to a national day of celebrations, new media applications can be seen as *transmodern*—they incorporate habits that are both new and old.[44] This phenomenon is easy to find in social media as well in the form of such phenomena as websites of clubs, hobbies, dilettantism, diaries/blogs, and birthday parties. This was most evident during the Corona pandemic in 2020–21 when most former social habits were forced to go online.

Braudel also noticed the temporal changes in the history of technology—as a sort of alternation between revolution and evolution.[45] Besides long-lasting elements, history also consists of ruptures and evolutive processes. In describing media history, roughly two pathways are often used: to present the development of media either as upheavals or as continua.

But could the new (digital history) possibilities for challenging the linear historiography with a more pluralised perception of time provide a solution for the need for a new 'grand theory' of media history?

It is evident that new digital methods with distant and close reading provide new ways to reveal similarities and differences in media history both diachronically and synchronically. However, as I have shown, ideas about temporality, cyclicity and the plurality of historical time were already known in media history studies even before the arrival of digital history. If anything, these questions are instead embedded in the ontology of the orientation. Media history consists of both breaks and outbreaks, different layers with a different logic and tempo in which the context of a given time and space is crucial.

Therefore, the new possibilities that digital history provides for media history are first and foremost methodological. Notwithstanding, we as media historians need to be aware of biases and other problems with digitised sources, as well as critical towards the methodologies used in general. Jo Guldi emphasises the importance of opening the processes of using digital history: '[A]s historians engage in moving from the small example to the big question, and from the big overview back to individual speech acts, the process of movement itself is open to methodological argument, questions of interpretation and over-interpretation.'[46] Indeed, the media historian needs to be in the vanguard of the paths directing digital history.

Conclusion: No Need for a Grand Theory

Media history-oriented media theoreticians have long tried to periodise the history of communications, to establish a teleological narrative based on sequenced eras of communication. This was most apparent in the first wave of Anglo-American media history research: the Toronto school with Innis's ideas of time-biased and space-biased media;[47] McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy,' and how we are outcomes of the effects of mass media;[48] or Walter J. Ong's evolutionist idea of how humankind has developed from orality to literacy.[49]

But as media historians Gabrielle Balbi and Juraj Kittler noticed when they tried to reconstruct the old idea of the dichotomy from *one-to-one* to *one-to-many forms* of media throughout the history of communication, such grand theories are artificial and difficult to apply to media history. Their outcome is that a grand narrative of media history is not a very fruitful way of understanding the history of communication. Media history needs more nuanced, comprehensive and entangled analyses over extended time spans that are not so historically tied to a moment of the theory.[50] Indeed, media history, more than many other branches of academic history, is highly dependent on a given historical period and its multiplicity, simultaneity and cyclicity.

One dimension that explains the exertion needed in creating a grand theory of media history is the modern–postmodern dichotomy of media. Although media are distinctly *modern*,[51] 'modern' media history is very much a product of late modern times. This means that the perception of time in media history studies is principally plural rather than linear. In other words, being axiomatically aware of the diversity and flexibility of 'little narratives' in history and 'the collapse of grand narratives',[52] the rethinking of historical time according to the latest trends in history research hardly offer anything groundbreaking for contemporary media history studies.

This does not mean, however, that media history would be distinctively a 'postmodern' subdivision of history studies, but that since questions concerning media history rise —perhaps more than usual in the fields of history studies—from our current (digitalised) media environment, the perception of the past is principally 'hypertextual' rather than linear.

Nor should we drop the periodisation in media history as an outdated, technological-determinist way to approach such a complicated, time-based and out of phase development as the history of communication. The periodisation of media history, like any modern phenomenon, helps us to see the central outlines in highly complicated historical processes.

Another characteristic of media history that makes it difficult to define a common theory is its way of combining different scholarly fields. According to Nerone, 'media history is an interdiscipline that brings historical research into dialogue with the unruly tribe of communication theories'.[53] Moreover, media historians, like historians in general, need to adapt themselves not only to interdisciplinary, but also to transdisciplinary research: to go 'beyond disciplinary borders and perspectives to create a large intellectual framework for research', as Finnish cultural historian Hannu Salmi states in his introduction to digital history.[54] In the field of digital history, this means incorporating data scientists in projects, for instance.

This was already understood in media archaeology a decade ago. According to Ernst, this 'turn from the epoch of electronics to that of information' requires competence in informatics and mathematics when media archaeological study turns to deal 'with techno-archaeological artifact' by means of measuring and calculating.[55] As such, media archaeology was born in close relationship with art studies. And as the basic idea of digital history, namely the concept of distant reading, shows, media history also cooperates with other disciplines in the humanities, such as literary studies.

As much as it would help media history studies to strengthen their position as a field in its own right, to find one's own body of theory is not only impossible, but also superfluous. One of the strengths of media history is its capacities to include and soak up

different methods, theories and approaches—old and new—into studies that increasingly help us to understand our complex world of communication in human history.

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Notes

1. The overviews often highlight the development of media as a series of 'revolutions. See e.g. Kovarik, *Revolutions in Communication*; Fang, *A History of Mass Communication*; Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, 15–73; Crowley and Heyer, *Communication in History*.
2. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.
3. Peters, 'History as a Communication Problem.'
4. Innis, *Empire and Communications*; Innis, *The Bias of Communications*.
5. Bailey, 'Editor's Introduction'; Mosco, 'The Two Marxes.'
6. Dahl, 'The Pursuit of Media History'; Scannel, 'Editorial.'
7. Scannel and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*.
8. Scannel, *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. See also, Kortti and Mähönen, 'Reminiscing Television.'
9. Curran, 'Media and the Making of British Society.' For an extended version of the formulation, see also Curran, 'Narratives of Media History Revisited,' 1–21.
10. Nerone, 'Mapping the Field of Media History,' 21.
11. Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds*.
12. Parikka, *Insect Media*.
13. Parikka, *Geology of Media*.
14. Mattern, *Code & Clay, Data and Dirt*.
15. Williams, *Keywords*, 203–4.
16. Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 18.
17. About media archaeology, see e.g. Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology*; Packer, 'The Conditions of Media's Possibility.' In general, enthusiasm about the new digital world also gave birth to techno-utopias among writers, artists and researchers in the early 1990s. Popular visions included cyber media and virtual reality—ideas of an artificial world created through computers.
18. In the mid-1990s, science-fiction author Bruce Sterling, known especially as a definer of the cyber-punk genre, organised 'the Dead Media project.' It was supposed to publish a handbook on dead media. The project did not eventually materialise as a book, but it did manage to gather information about dead media. See http://www.deadmedia.org/.
19. Ernst, 'Media Archaeography.'
20. Sobchack, 'Afterword,' 327.

21. Zielinski, *Audiovisions*. The German origin was published in 1989. For examples of the technical genealogy of film and television, see p. 36–43.
22. Ernst, 'From Media History to *Zeitkritik*.'
23. Tamm, 'Introduction,' 3–6.
24. Jordheim, 'Introduction,' 500.
25. Nicholson, 'The Digital Turn.'
26. Seefeldt and Thomas, 'What Is Digital History?'
27. Nicholson, 'The Digital Turn,' 61.
28. Salmi, *What Is Digital History?*; Mussell, 'Doing and Making;' Mussel, 'The Passing of Print.'
29. Huhtamo, 'Dismantling the Fairy Engine,' 40.
30. Moretti, 'Conjecture on World Literature.'
31. See e.g. Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital.'
32. Salmi, *What Is Digital History?*, 17–19; Fridlund, 'Digital History 1.5,' 81–82.
33. Jensen, 'Doing Media History in a Digital Age.'
34. Salmi, *What Is Digital History*?, 85–6.
35. Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 31.
36. Wijfjes, 'Digital Humanities and Media History,' 4. About the other critique on *History Manifesto*, see e.g. Cohen and Peter Mandler, 'The History Manifesto'; Simon, 'History Manifested.'
37. Armitage, 'What's the Big Idea?' (cite 498). By this term Armitage wanted to distinguish his approach from the history of ideas associated with Lovejoy. The concept of transtemporal history is history *in* ideas, instead of an atemporal and decontextualised history *of* ideas (ibid., 497).
38. Braudel, *On History*, 30.
39. Jordheim, 'Against Periodization,' (cites: abstract, p. 162).
40. Ibid., 169.
41. However, this does not mean that there would not be 'dead media,' quite the contrary. Electronic, especially digital media leave a trail of media technology applications at an accelerated speed so that they soon have no use.
42. Braudel, 'Histoire et Science sociales.'
43. Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*.
44. See Kortti, 'Media History and Mediatization of Everyday Life.' The idea transmodern media comes from John Hartley, who used it in the study of television audiences. Hartley, *Uses of Television*.
45. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 430.
46. Guldi, 'The Common Landscape of Digital History,' 341.
47. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*.
48. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.
49. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.
50. Balbi and Kittler, 'One-to-One and One-to-Many Dichotomy.'
51. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*, 23–47, 76–80.
52. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
53. Nerone, 'Mapping the Field of Media History,' 21.
54. Salmi, *What Is Digital History?*, 73.
55. Ernst, 'Media Archaeography,' 242.

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