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Brave new media

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«AUGMENTED REALITY TECHNOLOGY IS DESIGNED TO ENHANCE ONE'S PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD IN REAL TIME.»
ANNE BALSAMO

As technologies continue to evolve at bewildering speed, the varieties of content creation platforms under the umbrella term "new media" are ever changing. SUMMER CAO examines what the explosive pace of technological innovation in the media means for the creative community.

“New media” is a term that seems to escape definition, so rapidly does it evolve, with each week bringing what seem to be revolutions in both hard and soft ware.

The high-tech gadgets that have been recently launched range from mobile phones that mimic a limited range of human emotions, clothing that changes colour depending on a person's mood, smart mirrors that offer cosmetic advice, a vest that allows players to feel the soundtrack of a game and headsets that immerse the wearer in an artificially created world.

These eclectic innovations have taken the media to an elevated realm where new technologies are integrated into innovations from other disciplines, and are able to enhance human experience in a tailor-made fashion.

“There are two categories of emergent media technologies that will become increasingly important

to understand,” says Anne Balsamo, Dean of the School of Media Studies at The New School, “augmented reality and public interactives.”

Balsamo is a pioneer in media studies and a media-creator whose work links media with studies of culture and humanity. She is the author of *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*, a transmedia book that is accompanied with DVD and web linkages to interactive media projects.

Augmented reality (AR) technology is designed to enhance one's perception of the world in real time by augmented elements that are generated by a computer's sensory perception of the same physical world. It is a technology that can easily be found in computer games; other industries have also been trying to tap into it.

For example, carmaker Jaguar announced its Virtual Windscreen concept in July, which will provide drivers with a virtual display on the car's windshield, making the driving experience similar to playing a video game. Jaguar is not the first among carmakers to deploy AR. Toyota has been toying with the technology since 2011 in order to improve the view through its vehicle windows.

Balsamo predicts that AR technologies will become prevalent, reaching every level of human activity from advertising to enhanced medical imaging.

“AR commercials will be available to viewers as they walk through urban landscapes, accessed through smart devices such as phones, glasses and bracelets that are already ubiquitous,” says Balsamo. “AR will present visualisations of a person's biological status and medical condition so that they can monitor the functioning of their own bodies through the use of smart devices.”

The other significant category of media technologies identified by Balsamo is the one involved in making public interactives, which she describes on her blog as “...types of experiences ranging from large-scale projections in public spaces (urban screens) that visually address large groups of people to human-scale digital installations intended to be used by individuals in public spaces.”

“For example, Environmental Interactives describes one category of public interactive experience where people engage with computational media embedded in built structures. The form of these interactives might include wall embedded displays, spaces with dynamic lighting and sound features that respond to the presence of bodies, buildings used as screens, rooms populated with animated surfaces (tables, floors), and/or buildings inhabited by robotic avatars.”

Public interactive technologies have been used by museums to circulate a large amount of data to a broader audience. Notably, innovative public interactives such as immersive experiences, moving paintings and architectural projections were installed at various sites at the Shanghai World Expo held in 2010.

As a scholar who is in the vanguard of studying public interactives, Balsamo led a team that reviewed how public interactive technologies widely used during the Shanghai Expo could prepare visitors to adapt to a technological future and engage them in content that was conveyed through high-tech media.

Balsamo also created a public interactive in 2011

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that was a tangible interface for AIDS-related information. The interface consists of a tabletop through which users can explore information by twisting and tilting the surface. These data screens are like panels of a quilt that have been stitched together.

"Public interactives will become more prevalent as buildings become computationally enabled with sensor nets and large-surface display technologies," Balsamo says. "We will be able to access digital information networks everywhere, not simply on our smart devices, but as part of the environment. They are changing the nature of the pedestrian experience in urban landscapes, transforming the experience of city life into a

fully mediated adventure."

There is no doubt that the advancement of AR and public interactive technologies will have an impact on every aspect of daily life. "These changes have profound implications for notions of privacy," Balsamo believes, "of surveillance, of individuality, of play, of work, of leisure, of civic engagement, and of commerce."

Among the changed notions, there will be pitfalls. Among them is the misconception that the Internet is a perfect memory machine. Even if life-logging devices were to make perfect recording of everyday life possible, they would still be likely to create a sea of irrelevance.

"It is important to remember that with all



the hype about automated data collection," Balsamo emphasises, "that data does not equal information, which is not the same as knowledge, which does not equal wisdom or insight."

As demonstrated by the high-tech gadgets, utilities of media technologies don't simply add up, and a large part of them must be manifested via the expertise and creations of other disciplines.

To take the creation of new public interactives as an example, Balsamo points out that they require expertise not only in interaction and experience design, constructed environment design, interior and lighting design, but also in understanding the behaviour of people in public settings, the creation of cultural contexts for storytelling, as well as deep technological knowledge of hardware hacking and systems integration.

"The design process must engage a wider range of talented people on the design team," Balsamo says. "Good graphic and interactivity designers are important, but so

too are good storywriters, cultural analysts, and systems integrators."

In constructing a world of new media, the old tenet of being a world citizen and undergoing a whole person education will still hold sway, requiring practitioners to discover their calling and true vocation before putting that vocation to work in the world.

HKDI is now developing exchange opportunities at The New School for its undergraduate students, in the hope that they will not only gain technical knowledge from one of the most active centres of media innovation, but also set themselves on a fast track to becoming a global citizen.

The New School also holds high expectations for collaborating with HKDI. "We are interested in fostering inspiring cross-cultural conversations about the status of design across domains," says Balsamo. "The students and faculty in the School of Media Studies will be enthusiastic about learning more about the status of design in Hong Kong and throughout China." 