Lecture 21: new media and mass culture

VISIT TO HANDPRESS: Thurs April 27, 6:30-8pm (if a few people could stay later to help distribute the type, this would be much appreciated). Alternative time: any Tues 6-9pm at the weekly open house. The Press is in the basement of B-entry at Westmorely Court, one of the dorms at Adams House, a big Georgian brick building that's located at the corner of Bow and Arrow Streets (hence the name of the press—the Bow and Arrow Press) across the street from St. Paul's Church. There's a push button phone at the door (B-entry is the southern door). Please gather there at the appointed time. If no one is there to open the door, call 5-0440 and someone will come and let you in. In preparation for this visit John Pyper (who will be our teacher there) has asked to browse the information on handpresses at http://www.fiveroses.org/intro.htm

Sources:
Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, A social history of the media (2005)
David Alberts and Daniel Papp, The information age: an anthology… (1997)

I. General observations:
- Beware the trope of supercession, that each technology supercedes the previous (“this will kill that”)—many new media coexist rather than replacing old media. And the trope of transparency, that each new medium mediates less—media studies assume that there is no unmediated representation, that the medium plays a role in all cases (Gitelman and Pingree, eds., New media 1740-1915, 2003)
- Mutual interactions between technology and general social context. New media pass through a phase of identity formation before becoming established. Many new media do not last long (zograscope; physiognotrace; Vannevar Bush’s rapid selector—see Heritage and History of Science Information systems, 1999). Early uses of new media are often conservative

II. A rapid history of technology:
Today: 1850-1950: communication revolution (telegraph, telephone, radio)
On Monday: 1950-80s: television, early computer and satellites
- Telegraph 1845 (multiple simultaneous developments) is major breakthrough to electrical communication (Carolyn Marvin, When Old Technologies Were New)
- Telephone 1861/1876 (A.G. Bell): 1st electric medium to enter the home
- Electric lighting 1880s in public, later in homes
- Radio 1894 (Marconi). Entered the home in early 20th; ham radio clubs
- Cinema (1895 Louis Lumiere): mass audience very rapidly (1910s)
- Magnetic tape recording 1899
- TV 1930s; mass audience in 1950s
III. Correlated with a history of management methods
Interchangeable parts (1800); modern accounting techniques (1850s), professional managers (1860s), continuous process production (1880s), “scientific management” (Frederick Taylor, 1911); Henry Ford’s production line (1913); statistical quality control (1920s)
Standard grading of commodities (1850s), mail order (1870s), machine packaging (1890s), franchising (1911—for automobiles first), supermarket (1920s).

IV. Assessing cultural impacts
- Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) (Birmingham School). Mass culture involves de-personalization, fragmentation, “bittiness” = cultural debasement; also a focus on materialism without social responsibility
- Lawrence Levine: *Highbrow, Lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America* (1988): a once unified American culture increasingly split into high and low in late 19th, with importing of European cultural forms by wealthy Americans
- Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow culture* (1992): “middlebrow” a term in common use by 1950s. Fostered by new devts of 1920s: book of the month club; Great books series; history outlines (Will Durant); radio interviews; “higher journalism” (e.g. Atlantic Monthly)