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Bibliography. Book review

On the evolution of media: understanding media change

Carlos A. Scolari

Published by Routledge, Oxford/New York (2023), 302 pp.

To those familiar with his track record, a new book by Carlos A. Scolari is consistently a promise of a fruitful contribution that works as a gateway to media scholarship in the area he pursues, as he supplies the reader with the theoretical background and methodological tools needed to carry out academic work on the subject. *On the evolution of media: understanding media change* delivers on these expectations, just like his renowned works on hypermediations, trans-media narratives, media ecology in general or interfaces in particular, to name just a few. In this case, the book does not continue the path of formal innovation –in the design of the publication– opened by some of his preceding works, although it has everything that can be asked for in an essay of this kind, in terms of clarity and order in the presentation of ideas and arguments. Quotations from authors that established the

foundations on which Scolari builds his work are included generously and abundantly throughout the book.

The book comprises a foreword by Mark Deuze and it consists of three parts, after an introduction where the author poses the questions he intends to answer. Part one traces “the rise of an evolutionary approach to media change” (p. 7). It includes the first chapter, on the origin of theories, which reviews and summarizes the main theories and models in the field of communication and the maps that have synthesized them, and the second chapter, which presents the new theoretical framework brought about by Media Evolution. It is here where the author proposes a definition: “Media Evolution is a proto-discipline that studies media change from a long-term, holistic, intermedia, reticular, and complex point of view. The goal of this proto-discipline is not to predict the future of the media ecosystem but rather to understand its past and contemporary transformations” (p. 60). Then, he goes on to analyse each of these parts. The definition is revisited, with a couple of changes in words (“main objective” for “goal” and a final mention of “by extension, of society”), in the first page of the conclusions (p. 231).

Part two, with the overarching title of “A brief dictionary of Media Evolution,” devotes seven chapters, taking up half of the book, to eight different “fundamental concepts and analytical categories for developing this new scientific conversation” (p. 69), starting with “media life cycle,” with the case study of the fax machine, and following on with “emergence,” taking the World Wide Web as an example; “dominance,” with the rise of papyrus as the first platform war; “adaptation,” with two case studies intertwined with other concepts, “the emergence adaptation of the printed book” (p. 118) and “the survival adaptation of television” (p. 122); “survival” and “extinction,” both embodied in “the rebirth of vinyl discs” (p. 136); “niches,” related to consumption; “intermediality,” explained through “the liaisons between literature, painting, photography, and cinema” (p. 170); and “coevolution,” as that of cinema and comics. The author situates each concept’s origin in bio-evolutionary sciences, and he explains its adoption in social sciences and humanities. Scolari claims that “only the continuous confrontation of the theoretical categories with real processes of media transformation will make it possible to consolidate an evolutionary theory of media change”

(p. 70). Shortly before this one, Scolari devoted a short essay in Spanish to platform wars (*La guerra de las plataformas*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2022), starting with papyrus versus parchments.

Part three is “a methodological kit for Media Evolution,” focusing on “data-gathering and data-analysis techniques” (p. 193), with chapter 11 elaborating on quantitative methods and 12 for qualitative methods, focusing on “the most recent approaches” (p. 194). Thus, the first chapter in this part summarizes contributions from distant reading, cultural analytics (introduced by Lev Manovich in an homonymous 2020 book), and the study of hardware/software evolution, mentioning evolutionary economics and social network analysis. The second chapter discusses Media History; Media Archaeology; Semiotics; Science and Technology Studies (STS), encompassing ethnographic and documentary techniques of data gathering and the relational approach to data analysis, and finally, this chapter on qualitative methods pays attention to techno-evolutionary approaches. Both chapters in this methodological part end with “a critical glance” to the methods.

In the conclusions, Carlos A. Scolari calls for us to reflect on the metaphors we use in scientific discourses, and deconstruct them; the author also reminds readers that Media Evolution is still a discipline “under construction” (p. 231), and he proposes conceiving evolutionary change as a network.

This book fulfills its ambitious purpose and it is a good landing on the field for novel scholars, although it also helps more experienced ones situate themselves in a fastly evolving environment, to better understand and study it. As an example of this educational nature and of its usefulness for the reader, it presents a synthesis of the ten key points at the end of each chapter. Scolari’s latest publication will help readers stop and think about the theories, models, metaphors and methods that may configure academic work on Media Evolution.