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Author(s): Vicki Mayer

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Through the darkness: Musings on new media

Vicki Mayer
Tulane University

I spent five days without electricity this fall. It wasn't totally unexpected either. Hurricane Isaac was lumbering into the Gulf at the pace of a drunken tourist. I dutifully prepared as I always do when it looks like we're in for a tropical visitor. I bought the batteries and candles, canned goods, water and ice. I filled the tub with water too. I had a flashlight in every room, a shortwave radio in the den, and then I charged two smart phones, leaving one off as the back up. When Isaac showed up at 5 a.m., the lights went off. At the time, I could still cheerily joke about *The Love Boat's* insistent but innocuous bartender, now personified as a category one, coming to announce last call.

By day four, I was incredibly anxious. It was really hot in the house. During those first days, we opened all the windows to try to create a cross-breeze and sat in the shade in an attempt to save our energies. That didn't work very well. My two-year-old kept pointing up at the television set, asking for *Oswald* and *Maisy* to no avail. The Wi-Fi wasn't working either so she couldn't search for YouTube solace. Reduced to waves of tearful tantrums, my boyfriend played a DVD for her in half hour segments over the course of the day, trying to ration the battery and preserve our sanity. Nights we drove around the worst flooded areas of the state to get to a friend's house who had power and thus air conditioning. But during the days, we kept moving around in the city, looking to eat a hot meal, to buy more ice, and to recharge the Androids that never matched the capacities of our old Nokias. We still couldn't call anyone as the lines were jammed or down. I responded to text messages and posted a couple of Facebook updates just to say, "We're ok." When the power came back on, I went to my office and started the process of recovery in the form of dozens of emails to tell people what had happened and when I might get back on track.

To understand the irony of this experience, let me position myself. I am editor of a journal in which half our title refers to "new media." So every day I traffic in the digital transfer of manuscripts touting the enabling capacities of the internet, mobile phones, tablets, and supposedly smart technologies. It's not like I can't understand the feelings of freedom these objects inspire. I facilitate the transfer, involving both transport and communication, through a range of objects: the desktop, laptop, my phone, and my shiny, new iPad. I recognize that the process of being a journal editor, at least in terms of distribution and circulation, has become easier because of these devices. But I also understand how these devices can blind us to the state of the environments we live in. Here I present three lessons living in New Orleans and Hurricane Isaac taught me about new media and technology. I offer them to my fellow writers and researchers, if for no other reason than to temper some of the claims in the manuscripts that come across my desktop.

1. Pay attention to the political economy of communications infrastructures that enable new media and technologies.

I walk around campus watching people literally trip over the crumbling curbs and sidewalk tiles pushed up and around by the grand oak tree roots in my southern city. They are too busy texting or reading email on their devices to pay attention to their ramshackle surroundings. In a similar way, so many academic discourses about the uses and abuses of new media simply overlook questions of infrastructure, the material landscape that encompasses these uses. New Orleans has not had any major upgrade in electrical service or its maintenance since the mid-1970s. Unless you live in one of those incredibly privileged spaces where Parisian intellectuals and Microsoft researchers roam, chances are your local infrastructures for communications and transportation are falling apart too. Who cares about HD and 4G, much less net-locality, when you don't have power to begin with? In short, we cannot overlook the impacts of neoliberal governance, specifically the disinvestment in public goods and the privatization of basic utilities, on a supposedly techno-centric society.

2. New media technologies can extend beyond electronic infrastructures, and resist them.

The other blind spot in new media research also relates to the metaphor of students gazing raptly into their electronic screens. After this hurricane and other human-inflected disasters, New Orleanians have had to get creative if they simply want to communicate with the outside world. Even today, street signs not replaced by some official entity post- Katrina have colorful placards announcing names and directing our attentions. When the power went out after Isaac, some good Samaritan-cum-artist sent out a decorative reminder to neighbors and the electric company alike to advise them where the power lines were down. If I followed the signs around town, I could find services, avoid hazards, and connect with a community so often and otherwise segmented by social class. The signs mediated both public messages with the private flair of the artists who made them. In sum, if you're looking only at electronic screens as new media, you'll miss these beautiful new media and the creative people making them. In the eye of a communications disaster, these are the primary – indeed, sometimes the only – communication technologies left to survivors. Given the likelihood of future failures and ongoing crises, it would make sense for researchers to pay more attention to the ways low-tech, no-tech solutions enable a “networked society.”

3. New media and technologies are not essential to young people's identities.

Finally, after three days of hearing my daughter wail, her face red from crying in the stifling heat, we two adults in the house decided on the only solution. While she napped, we unplugged the set and put it in the closet. She woke up, pointed at the empty mantel place and announced, “TV broke.” Then she went off and played with her toys as if nothing had happened. This act of heresy for the television and new media scholar was actually pretty instructive for me. As I weigh the seeming importance media scholars continue to place on the new technological object with the other things that surround us, it feels like there's always a lack of insight into the real lived experiences we have with media. The theoretical calls to decenter the object in media studies have still largely gone unheeded in the procession of studies of consumption, uses, and ecologies. So much has been made of young people's dependencies on their mobile phones that we seem to forget that needs for connection, attention, and passing time existed long before telecommunications companies targeted the teen market. New media researchers do not have to be luddites or embrace the pseudo-

medicalized discourses around media addiction, but they also don't need to echo the marketing messages that kids are smarter, happier, or better off with a gadget. For every cell phone as manna study, just imagine another technology taking the phone's place, such as a diary, a camera, or maybe even a book. In the wake of the storm, my daughter found a paper dollhouse a ready substitute.

It may seem strange to inaugurate a journal devoted to feminism and new media with a discussion of new media breakdowns, candles, signs, and paper dollhouses; but, for me, the feminist message in this is that we need to envision all people as new media users, even when the technology has been around for centuries. And feminist scholars of new media must look up from their own screens and deal with larger questions of access, context, and political economy if we are to ever deal with real questions of access and relevance beyond a privileged few. Because if it's only the gals in the networked cities, the babes with the hot new gadgets, and the desirable demographics in the digital enclosures that we are talking about and to in new media studies, then I'd rather stay in the dark.



Respectin' old technologies. Credit: Photo by Vicki Mayer



New media post Hurricane Isaac. Credit: Photo by Vicki Mayer