FROM OLD TO NEW MEDIA
The issue of interaction between media and society raised in the Introduction to Part III also arises when considering the consequences of the latest forms of communication technology, based on computers, satellites and telecommunications. There are two main reasons why this topic should be dealt with in a reader on mass communication theory, given that new media are usually distinguished by their ‘non-mass’ character. One is the need to face up to the growing potential obsolescence of a body of media theory based on the fundamental assumption of a ‘mass character’, as outlined in Part I.

Secondly, there is an increasing acceptance of the view that we are gradually moving into a form of society that can be described as an ‘information society’, in which activities and relationships are increasingly mediated through communication networks, and power is based on control of these networks and the information and cultural products that flow through them. New thinking edges somewhat more in the direction of giving some primacy of social effect to communication technology, but the basic premise of an interaction between communication technology and social forms and trends remains unaffected. New conditions, however, call for a joint analysis of ‘new media’ at the level of structure (systems and ownership) and individual use.

At the time of writing (and it will remain the case for some time to come), it is still unclear how much and what kind of change will be brought about by the take-up of new media potential. The staying power of existing media institutions is already being demonstrated by the growing success of media industries in absorbing the new media and incorporating them into multi-media strategies with global extension. Mass communication still seems to flourish (see the excerpt from Neuman, Chapter 34 in Part IX), and many of the innovative uses of new technology for multiple and unbounded intercommunication and opportunities to ‘publish’ appear, as time goes on, to be frequently marginalized or simply marginal.

The items chosen for this section mainly focus on conceptual issues and on early (thus contemporary) formulations of the significance of new media for individuals and society. The earliest piece, by Bordewijk and van Kaam (Chapter 9) offers a conceptual analysis of basic communication patterns, with telecommunications supporting a decisive shift from older ‘centre-peripheral’ flows (the essence of mass communication) to interactive and consultative patterns in which control shifts from centre to periphery (individual users). Morris and Ogan (Chapter 11) explore what this might mean for the experience of the Internet user conceived as an ‘audience member’. The extent to which and the manner in which ‘new media’ are new, as so widely assumed, are explored by Rice (Chapter 10), and Slevin (Chapter 12) considers the implication for society of interactive communication in the light of Thompson’s (1995) and Giddens’s sociological theories of media and society.

This section has been compiled in the belief that there are important changes underway in society in which communications are deeply implicated, and that there is something intrinsically new about technologies that undermine monopolies of property and skills in publication and extend opportunities for communicative contact and experience. It also recognizes that innovative potential is often suppressed or controlled (Winston, 1986). It would also be unwise to forget the apparent lesson of communication history that new technologies rarely, if ever, replace existing forms or destroy
institutions, but instead bring about adaptation of systems and behaviour with outcomes of increasing complexity for the blueprint of social communication, in line with ideas of an ‘information’ or ‘network’ society.

REFERENCES