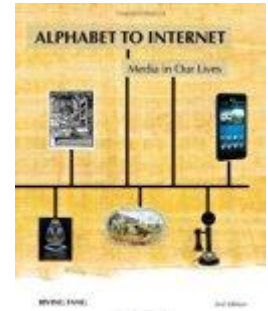


Irving Fang. *Alphabet to Internet: Media in Our Lives*. Second Edition. St. Paul: Rada Press, 2012. 318 pp. \$48.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-933011-01-1.



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Alphabet to Internet: Media in Our Lives

In a recent television spot teasing Amazon's new Kindle Fire tablet, young families and savvy e-readers are seen enjoying the breezy convenience of the company's wireless products and services—all apparently at ease navigating the whirl of media and commerce at their fingertips. As upbeat music fills the background, a kindly voiced narrator reflects on Amazon's seamless network, the fruit of its commitment to digital innovation and convergence. “We dream of making things that change your life, then disappear into your everyday, of making the revolutionary routine.” In this case progress, in the form of Amazon's forthcoming products, can be expected, and technology impels changes that we comfortably adopt into our lives. “Look around,” the narrator suggests, “what once seemed wildly impractical is now completely normal.”

Irving Fang's *Alphabet to Internet* is concerned with the historical developments of such cycles of change to and adaptation of communica-

tion technologies. Designed as an introductory textbook for students of media history, Fang surveys some twelve thousand years of human communication, spanning early cave paintings, the Gutenberg press, satellite television, and Web 2.0, and identifying common themes and effects these media technologies had on their respective societies. While he wants to shy away from deterministic formulations, Fang's thesis, like Amazon's claim, is that widespread adoption and adaptation of new media technologies has generally resulted in social changes “distinct to that medium”—reorientations of communicative practices and habits which become “routine and habitual, baked into our lives” (p. 4). Along the way, Fang often returns to a fundamental contradiction that he takes to be implicit in new media forms—the unintended consequences by which the global reach and instantaneity of our communication tools creates distance between the isolated users of personal devices.

As an introductory text, Fang presents this vast history in a concise and accessible manner, often complementing his examination of distant, perhaps abstract historical media with modern comparisons—a feature that might be useful for stimulating in-class discussions. Any historical survey must discriminate, however. That *Alphabet to Internet* takes as its subject the entire historical scope of human communication, all condensed into 318 pages, means that some things are necessarily left out of the discussion. Based on their individual interests, some readers will inevitably find glaring omissions in Fang’s sweeping historical treatment (no mention of the WELL in the context of social media? Only passing reference to John Peter Zenger, to WikiLeaks?); and for an introductory text, the book at times tends to presume too much knowledge on behalf of the reader. This is not to nitpick, but rather to note that instructors using the text would do well to equip themselves with supplemental readings—some of which are helpfully suggested in the book’s appendices.

Those familiar with the first edition of *Alphabet to Internet* (2008) will find a few new features and revisions to the original text. Naturally, a few of these updates draw recent events and new media forms into the larger historical narrative. To begin, Fang’s introduction calls on the memory of the Arab Spring and the global “social media revolutions” of 2011 to illustrate his premise that “communication media have been a factor in the course of history” (p. 2). Likewise Twitter, which merited a cameo as a trendy kind of instant messaging service in the 2008 edition, proves more ubiquitous in the second edition, appearing in the contexts of both personal communication and political activism. Other revisions in the second edition have less to do with contemporizing, but are worth mentioning. Notably absent is the original chapter on reading and literacy, which contained an extended discussion of newspapers and journalism that is now redistributed over several chapters. A more unfortunate loss is the scant at-

tention devoted to standards of American journalism history, like the penny press and William Randolph Hearst, and the development of objectivity—a crucial topic that makes its most conspicuous appearances in a passage about the telegraph, and much later in a closing section on rhetoric. In another move, discussion of computers and the Internet are now spaced over two chapters rather than one, but are not accorded much more length. Likewise, the chapter on video games—an emergent topic in media studies—has been reduced by a third. Like other chapters, however, these discussions have been supplemented with photographs, images, and text boxes sorely lacking in the original edition.

While *Alphabet to Internet* provides a quick and accessible reference to media history studded with modern comparisons, its overriding concern with the social and political effects of media technologies tends toward the deterministic stance that Fang—at least in his introduction—aims to avoid. Throughout the book, for instance, certain verb choices (technologies often “arrive” or “catalyze”; the Gutenberg press is a “bomb thrown into the medieval world” [p. 45]) seem to foreclose potentially fruitful conversations about the social construction of technology and institutional power. This perspective marks a preoccupation with long-term trends and change in which old technologies are replaced with newer, better media, all leading toward a McLuhanesque global village. Indeed, that the Telecommunications Act of 1996—which allowed for a corporate consolidation of media ownership—is mentioned only in terms of its introduction of the V-chip rating system, shifts attention away from important questions about the role of large institutions in the development, distribution, and regulation of media systems. As with the advertisement for the Kindle Fire, an inexorable progression of innovation appears as the order of history. This is not to say that these technologies are unproblematic to Fang. Indeed, his discussions of the exclusion of women and girls from premodern (and non-Western) me-

dia access, objectification in various media content, and emergence as a key demographic for video games demonstrate how media systems are inscribed with social and gender relationships.

Encompassing a vast amount of terrain and synthesizing a range of scholarly and popular sources, Fang's *Alphabet to Internet* will provide readers and instructors with a ready source of in-

formation on the historical development of media technologies. Though at times brief and teleological, Fang's overarching concern with media use and with historical comparison is sure to engender provocative classroom discussions and an informed appreciation of historical media development.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

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