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## UNIT 12 THEORIES OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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### 12.0 INTRODUCTION

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The digital revolution has transformed the ways in which we communicate, socialise and live our experiences on an everyday basis. Along with our individual lives, the domains of media and the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres have changed considerably. The playfield of media forms, content, and infrastructure has also shifted from analogous to digital, along with media production, information dissemination, market regulation, and media ownership patterns. The concepts of time and space have also collapsed along with the traditions of media forms.

Therefore, overall, our lived realities have encapsulated and aligned with a digital presence at the individual, micro, and macro levels. This has also influenced the academic realm and theoretical frameworks to look at media.

Traditional media theories have converged into the online space, introducing new concepts, constructs, and theories related to the digital sphere. The digitality, interactivity, hyperreality, dispersal, and virtuality of online media have also been reflected in the academic narratives of media's relationship with us in the socio-cultural aspects of life. In this unit, we will bring to light

the theories of communication in the digital sphere from the vantage point of an individual, society, and technology at large.

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## 12.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After working through this unit, you will be able to:

- demonstrate the shift in the theoretical framework of media;
- illustrate the concepts and theories of digital communication;
- elaborate on the sociological theories of digital media; and
- underscore the technological intervention in the theoretical framework of media.

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## 12.2 INTERSECTION OF THE DIGITAL WITH SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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The intervention of digital media in our society and culture has had profound transformations in our everyday life, whether it is a sense of self, identity curation, politics of age and gender in families and the society at large, consumption patterns, or the connections between the global and local.

The networks with spaces and relationships of the home have been redefined. Our everyday popular culture and experiences have transiently shifted to gaming and mobile phones. Our every day relationships and environments also shape the nature and adoption of new media technologies and vice versa. The developing fields of technologically mediated communication and production that have shaped the nature of our everyday relationships and environments would include:

- **Computer-mediated communications:** email, chat rooms, avatar-based communication forums, voice image transmissions, the World Wide Web, blogs, etc., social networking sites, and mobile telephony.
- **New ways of distributing and consuming** media texts are characterised by interactivity and hypertextual formats- the World Wide Web, CD, DVD, Podcasts, and the various platforms for computer games.
- **Virtual 'realities':** simulated environments and immersive representational spaces
- **A whole range of transformations and dislocations of established media** (in, for example, photography, animation, television, journalism, film, and cinema).

The digital has also revolutionised how we experience culture with digital artefacts, virtual museums, digital video and music libraries, digital religious practices, etc.

The advent of the internet was coincidental with the notions of postmodernity, globalisation, the information age, and decentralised power structures, which ultimately led to the emergence of a 'new era'. The emergence of new media is, thus, an epoch-making phenomenon within the realm of a much larger landscape of social, technological, and cultural change, often seen as part of a new technoculture.

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## 12.3 SHIFT IN THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION: FROM OFFLINE TO ONLINE

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The advent of the internet has had a significant impact on media theories. Here are some ways in which media theories have changed with the rise of the internet:

- ***The democratisation of media:*** The internet has enabled anyone to create and share content, leading to a more democratised media landscape. This has challenged traditional media models, which were based on a few large media corporations controlling the distribution of information.
- ***The rise of participatory culture:*** The internet has facilitated the rise of participatory culture, where consumers are no longer passive recipients of media messages but active participants in creating and sharing content. This has led to the development of new theories, such as Henry Jenkins' Theory of Participatory Culture.
- ***The fragmentation of media audiences:*** The internet has made it easier for people to access a wide range of media content, leading to the fragmentation of media audiences. This has challenged traditional media models based on the assumption that a mass audience for a particular media product exists.
- ***The importance of networked communication:*** The internet has facilitated networked communication, where people are connected to each other through digital networks. This has led to the development of new theories, such as Manuel Castells' Theory of Networked Society.
- ***The impact of digital technologies:*** The internet has facilitated the development of new digital technologies, such as social media and mobile devices, which have profoundly impacted media consumption patterns. This has led to the development of new theories, such as Nicholas Carr's Theory of the Shallows, which argues that the internet is rewiring our brains and making it harder for us to concentrate for extended periods.

Therefore, the emergence of the internet has challenged traditional media models and has led to the development of new theories that better reflect the current media landscape. While the advent of the internet has led to the development of new media theories, some traditional media theories have also transitioned and adapted to the digital age.

In the context of the *Agenda Setting Theory*, it originally proposes that media has the power to shape the public's perception of what is important by highlighting certain issues over others. The introduction of the internet has led to a proliferation of news sources, and traditional news outlets are no longer the sole gatekeepers of information. However, research has shown that social media platforms such as Twitter can still influence the public agenda by amplifying certain issues and creating a sense of urgency around them.

Similarly, the *Uses and Gratifications Theory* suggests that people consume media to fulfil specific needs, such as entertainment, information, or social interaction. The internet has led to an explosion of media options, allowing people to find content that caters to their needs and preferences more easily.

Likewise, the *Cultivation Theory* highlights exposure to media over time can shape a person's perception of reality. While traditional media, such as television, was the primary focus of this theory, the internet has become a major source of news and information for many people, leading to questions about how exposure to digital media might shape our understanding of the world.

Lastly, the *Social Learning Theory* posits that people learn new behaviours and attitudes by observing and imitating the behaviours of others. With the rise of social media, people are more connected than ever before, and social learning can occur online through exposure to the opinions and behaviours of others on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Therefore, on the one hand, the digital revolution has led to the development of new media theories. On the other hand, some traditional theories have adapted and evolved to reflect the changing media landscape.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. How has technology transformed our everyday lives and environment?

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2. Discuss the transition of traditional media theories due to the advent of the internet.

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## 12.4 THEORIES I: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The digital revolution has significantly impacted media sociological theories, fundamentally changing how people interact with media and each other. New media technologies have enabled people to create, share, and consume media content on a personal level rather than just consuming media from a few sources. This has led to the development of new theories of communication that focus on individual and social interaction rather than mass communication. Similarly, the internet has also impacted social structures, such as how people form communities and interact with each other. This has

led to the development of new theories of social media and online communities, such as network theory and the theory of online identity.

We will discuss some significant theories on digital media in the next section.

### **12.4.1 Media Convergence**

Media Convergence refers to merging previously distinct media technologies, platforms, and content into a single, integrated system. In other words, media convergence is the process by which various forms of media, such as television, radio, newspapers, books, music, and video games, are brought together into a single digital platform.

Media convergence is made possible by digital technologies, which allow for integrating different types of media content onto a single device or platform, such as a smartphone, tablet, or computer. For example, a single device can now be used to watch television shows, stream music, read news articles, and play video games on the same screen.

Media convergence has significant implications for media companies, consumers, and society as a whole. For media companies, convergence means adapting to new technologies and finding new ways to monetise their content. Convergence means increased convenience and access to a wider variety of consumer media content. According to Jenkins (2006), convergence represents a cultural shift in which consumers actively produce content, seek new information, and make connections between disparate media content. They do so by using varied media platforms. In these terms, the active production and consumption of media content creatively alters the logic by which media audiences operate, thus changing how media industries operate.

However, it also raises questions about privacy, intellectual property, and the quality and reliability of the information.

Media convergence has transformed how we consume, create, and engage with media content, and it will likely continue to shape our lives in significant ways.

### **12.4.2 The Internet and the Public Sphere**

The concept of the public sphere, which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas first introduced in the 1960s, refers to the space where citizens can come together to engage in rational and informed debate about issues of public concern. This space is characterised by openness, inclusivity, and democratic deliberation and is essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy.

The internet has profoundly impacted the concept of the public sphere. On the one hand, the internet has expanded the potential reach and inclusivity of the public sphere. With the rise of social media platforms and online forums, people worldwide can now come together to share information, debate issues, and engage in political discourse.

However, the internet has also raised concerns about the fragmentation and

polarisation of the public sphere. With the proliferation of online echo chambers and filter bubbles, people are increasingly consuming information and engaging in discourse with like-minded individuals rather than engaging with diverse perspectives and engaging in democratic deliberation.

Furthermore, the internet has also raised questions about the quality and reliability of the information in the public sphere. With the rise of fake news and disinformation campaigns, it is increasingly difficult for citizens to engage in informed and rational debate about issues of public concern.

Therefore, the relationship between the Internet and the concept of the public sphere is complex and multifaceted. While the Internet can potentially expand the reach and inclusivity of the public sphere, it also poses significant challenges to its openness, inclusivity, and democratic deliberation.

### **12.4.3 Remediation**

Remediation theory was introduced by media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book "Remediation: Understanding New Media" in 1999. The theory suggests that media technologies are constantly remediating or borrowing from one another as new forms of media are created and adapted to meet changing cultural and social needs.

According to the Remediation theory, all media are influenced by earlier forms of media, and new media are often created by combining or remediating earlier forms of media. For example, television news borrows from print journalism, while online news borrows from both print and television journalism.

The theory also suggests that new media technologies are often created in response to perceived shortcomings in existing media. As a result, new media often remediate earlier forms of media by incorporating or improving upon their features. For example, digital photography remediates traditional photography by allowing for instant image capture, editing, and sharing.

Remediation theory has significant implications for media production and consumption. It suggests that media technologies are constantly evolving and changing and that producers and consumers must constantly adapt to these changes to remain relevant. It also suggests that media audiences are active participants in the process of media production, as they influence the development and evolution of new media technologies through their consumption and feedback.

### **12.4.4 Information Society**

The concept of an information society refers to a society where information and knowledge play a central role in the economy, social structure, and cultural life. Information and knowledge are considered valuable commodities and key drivers of economic growth and innovation in an information society.

The term "information society" was first coined in the 1960s and 1970s by sociologists and economists interested in how technological advancements in

computing and communications transformed society. With the rise of digital technologies and the internet, the idea of an information society has become increasingly relevant and has been the subject of much research and debate.

Individuals and organisations increasingly depend on access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) to perform their daily activities in an information society. This includes activities such as work, education, socialising, and entertainment. As a result, the availability and quality of ICT infrastructure, such as broadband internet access, are important factors in determining a community or country's social and economic well-being.

Critics of the concept of an information society argue that it tends to over-emphasise the role of technology and downplay the importance of social, political, and economic factors in shaping society. Additionally, there are concerns that the widespread use of ICTs may lead to increased social isolation, privacy violations, and other negative societal effects.

### 12.4.5 Networked Publics

The concept of "networked publics" was introduced by Danah Boyd, a scholar and researcher in the field of digital media and technology. In her book "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens" and various academic papers, Boyd explores how digital networks and social media have transformed the nature of public and social interaction, particularly among young people. She argues that networked publics have both positive and negative effects on social life and that understanding these effects is crucial for addressing contemporary social and political issues.

The concept of "networked publics" refers to the online communities and social spaces that have emerged through the use of digital networks and social media platforms. These networked publics are characterised by their ability to connect people across geographic and cultural boundaries, enabling new forms of communication, collaboration, and collective action.

Networked publics are different from traditional publics in several ways. First, they are often more diverse and inclusive, as people from different backgrounds and cultures can come together in these spaces. Second, they are often more participatory and interactive, as users can actively engage with one another through various online tools and platforms. Third, they are often more decentralised and fluid, as users can form and dissolve communities quickly and easily.

One of the key features of networked publics is their ability to enable new forms of collective action and political engagement. For example, social media platforms have been used to organise protests, rallies, and other forms of political activism. They have also been used to raise awareness about social and political issues and to mobilise support for social and political causes.

However, networked publics are not without their challenges and drawbacks. They can also be used to spread misinformation, harass and bully others, and reinforce existing social and political divisions. As a result, there is an ongoing debate about the role of the networked public in shaping public

discourse and promoting democratic values.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What is media convergence?

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2. What do you understand by the Remediation theory?

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3. Discuss the concept of networked publics.

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**12.5 THEORIES II: TECHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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The rise of digital media and the internet has led to significant transformations in media theories as scholars seek to understand how technology shapes media production, consumption, and distribution. These theories include the network society theory, which emphasises the importance of digital networks in shaping contemporary society, and the platform theory, which focuses on the role of platforms like social media and search engines in shaping media content and audiences.

Furthermore, technology has also impacted existing media theories by providing new insights and perspectives. For example, technological advancements have allowed researchers to conduct more extensive and accurate audience research, better understanding how audiences consume and interact with media content.

We will discuss some of such theories in the next section.

**12.5.1 Network Society**

The concept of a "network society" refers to a social and economic structure that is characterised by the widespread use of digital networks and communication technologies.



Manuel Castells first introduced the concept of network society in his book "The Rise of the Network Society", published in 1996. Castells is a prominent sociologist who has written extensively about the impact of digital networks and communication technologies on social and economic structures. In "The Rise of the Network Society," Castells argues that the widespread use of digital networks is transforming social and economic structures in powerful ways, creating new opportunities and challenges for individuals, organisations, and societies as a whole. The book is widely regarded as a seminal work in the field of media and communication studies and has had a significant impact on our understanding of the digital age.

According to Manuel Castells, a sociologist who has written extensively about the network society, this new form of social organisation is defined by several key features:

1. ***The centrality of information and communication technologies:*** In the network society, digital networks and communication technologies are central to social and economic life, shaping how people interact, work, and consume.
2. ***The rise of global networks:*** The network society is characterised by the emergence of global networks that connect people and organisations across geographic and cultural boundaries.
3. ***The decentralisation of power:*** In the network society, power is more decentralised than in traditional hierarchical structures. This is because digital networks enable people to communicate and collaborate without the need for centralised control.
4. ***The emergence of new forms of social organisation:*** The network society has enabled the emergence of new forms of social organisation, such as online communities, social networks, and virtual organisations.

Thus, the concept of the network society suggests that digital networks and communication technologies are fundamentally transforming social and economic structures, creating new opportunities and challenges for individuals, organisations, and societies as a whole.

### 12.5.2 Actor-Network Theory

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was developed by French sociologists Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were part of a broader sociology, science, and technology studies movement. They sought to challenge traditional notions of agency and social structure and rethink how we understand the relationships between humans, technologies, and other social actors. The theory posits that the relationships between actors (both human and non-human) and their networked interactions shape social behaviour and ultimately create social reality.

Since its introduction, the theory has been widely influential in various fields, including sociology, anthropology, and science and technology studies. It has provided a framework for understanding the complex relationships between actors and their networks in various social and technological contexts.

According to ANT, actors are not simply individuals but rather any entity or thing that is capable of acting, including technologies, institutions, and even ideas. These actors are seen as part of a larger network, and their actions and interactions shape the structure and dynamics of the network.

The ANT theory emphasises the importance of examining the relationships between actors and how they influence each other in complex ways. It argues that understanding social phenomena requires looking beyond individual actions and behaviours to examine the larger network of actors that shape and are shaped by social reality.

### **12.5.3 Technological Determinism**

The concept of technological determinism has been discussed and debated by scholars across a range of fields, including sociology, philosophy, and media studies. However, the term "technological determinism" was first coined by the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his 1921 book "The Engineers and the Price System". Veblen argued that the development of technology and the scientific method would inevitably lead to a "machine age" in which social and economic life would be dominated by technology and its influence. Since then, the concept has been developed and refined by numerous scholars, including Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, and Neil Postman.

Marshall McLuhan's Technological Determinism theory suggests technology is the primary driver of social and cultural change. According to McLuhan, the medium itself, rather than the content transmitted through it, profoundly impacts society and culture. McLuhan argued that each new medium, whether the printing press, the telegraph, or television, has distinct characteristics that shape how people perceive and interact with the world. For example, the printing press enabled the widespread dissemination of knowledge and the development of mass literacy. At the same time, television facilitated the development of a global village and a more visual and sensory form of communication.

McLuhan's theory of technological determinism also suggests that technology has the power to reshape society in ways that are not always predictable or controllable. He argued that people often adopt new technologies without fully understanding their implications and that these technologies can have unintended consequences.

While McLuhan's theory of technological determinism has been criticised for its deterministic view of technology and its impact on society, it remains an influential perspective on the relationship between technology and culture. Many scholars continue to explore how technology shapes society and the impact that emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things (IoT), will have on our lives in the future.

### **12.5.4 The Technological Shaping of Everyday Life**

Langdon Winner is often credited with introducing the concept of technological shaping of everyday life. In his influential book, "The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology,"

published in 1986, Winner argues that technology is not a neutral tool or instrument but rather shapes and influences our lives. Winner coined the term "technological somnambulism" to describe how we often unquestioningly accept new technologies without questioning their impact on society and the environment. Winner's work has been influential in the field of science and technology studies and has influenced the development of critical approaches to technology and society.

In line with the "social shaping of technology" school of thought, Raymond Williams stresses that the knowledge and acquired skills necessary to use a tool or machine are integral to any full concept of technology.

Williams differentiates between:

- Technical inventions and techniques upon which technology depends, the alphabet, appropriate tools or machines for making marks, and suitable surfaces for accurately retaining marks;
- The substantive technology, in terms of writing, is a distribution technology (it distributes language), and this requires a means or form—scrolls of papyrus, portable manuscripts, mass-produced printed books, letters, or emails, and other kinds of electronic text;
- The technology in social use. This includes (a) the specialised practice of writing, which was initially restricted to minorities and then opened up, through education, to larger sections of society, and (b) the social part of the distribution of the technologically reproduced language, which again was only extended in response to perceived social needs.

The concept of technological shaping of everyday life suggests that technology plays a significant role in our daily lives. From the moment we wake up until we go to bed at night, we are surrounded by technology and constantly interacting with it.

### **12.5.5 Cyborg Manifesto and Critical Posthumanism**

The Cyborg Manifesto is a feminist essay written by Donna Haraway in 1984. The essay explores the cyborg concept as a metaphor for challenging and rethinking traditional ideas of identity, gender, and power in a world increasingly shaped by technology and science.

In the essay, Haraway argues that the traditional categories of "nature" and "culture" are no longer useful for understanding the complex relationships between humans and technology and that the cyborg can be seen as a hybrid entity that blurs the boundaries between humans and machine, biology and technology, and physical and virtual reality. According to Haraway, the cyborg can be seen as a figure that challenges and subverts traditional categories of identity and power and offers new possibilities for imagining and enacting resistance and social change. In this sense, the cyborg represents a kind of "political myth" that can inspire new ways of thinking and acting in the world.

The Cyborg Manifesto and the concept of critical posthumanism are closely related, as they both seek to challenge traditional ideas of human identity and

subjectivity and explore the complex relationships between humans and technology. On the one hand, critical posthumanism is a theoretical approach that emphasises the need to rethink traditional concepts of the human and the non-human and recognise how technology and other non-human entities shape our identities and social relationships. The approach draws on various fields, including philosophy, cultural studies, and science and technology studies, to explore the implications of these changes for ethics, politics, and social justice. On the other hand, the Cyborg Manifesto is often seen as a key text in the development of critical posthumanism, as it offers a provocative and innovative approach to thinking about the relationship between humans and technology. The essay challenges traditional ideas of identity, gender, and power and suggests that the cyborg can be seen as a figure that embodies the potential for resistance and transformation.

Both the Cyborg Manifesto and critical posthumanism emphasise the need to recognise and engage with how technology and other non-human entities shape our lives and to develop new ways of thinking and acting that are responsive to these changes. In this sense, they offer a critique of traditional humanism and a call to rethink our assumptions about what it means to be human in a world increasingly shaped by technology.

### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What are the key features of network society?

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2. What do you understand by technological determinism?

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3. How are the cyborg manifesto and critical posthumanism related?

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## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

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This unit has reflected upon various frameworks and theories in the context of digital media that seek to explain how digital technologies and media are

changing how we communicate, think, and interact with each other and the world around us. These theories draw on various disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy.

These theories have sought to explore questions such as how digital media technologies are changing our social, cultural, and economic practices, how they are transforming the way we communicate, how they are shaping our identities and communities, and the role of technology amidst this transformation. The sociological and technological perspective demonstrated key themes of convergence, networked communication, the socio-cultural implications of technology, and vice versa. Some notable digital media theorists include Henry Jenkins, Manuel Castells, Donna Haraway, Lev Manovich, and Sherry Turkle.

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## 12.7 KEYWORDS

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**Media Convergence:** The merging of previously separate forms of media, such as television, radio, print, and the internet, into a single, integrated medium.

**Remediation Theory:** The idea that all media are constantly reworking and repurposing elements of previous media, creating a constant cycle of borrowing and adaptation.

**Networked Publics:** A term coined by Danah Boyd to describe online communities and social networks and how they are shaped by technology, culture and social norms.

**Network Society:** A term coined by Manuel Castells to describe a society in which communication networks and digital technologies are central to social and economic life.

**Technological Determinism:** The idea that technology is the driving force behind social and cultural change and that it has the power to shape and transform society.

**Actor-Network Theory:** A theoretical framework that views social and technological entities as interconnected and emphasises the role of both humans and non-humans in shaping social and cultural systems.

**Cyborg Manifesto:** A feminist essay by Donna Haraway that uses the cyborg figure as a metaphor for challenging traditional ideas of identity, gender, and power.

**Critical Posthumanism:** A theoretical approach that challenges traditional ideas of human identity and subjectivity and recognises how technology and other non-human entities shape our lives.

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## 12.8 FURTHER READINGS

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Lister, M., Dovey, J., Giddings, S., Grant, I., & Kelly, K. (2009). *New media: A critical introduction*. Routledge.

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## 12.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. Technology has transformed our everyday lives in the following ways:
  - Computer-mediated communications: email, chat rooms, avatar-based communication forums, voice image transmissions, the World Wide Web, blogs, etc., social networking sites, and mobile telephony.
  - New ways of distributing and consuming media texts are characterised by interactivity and hypertextual formats- the World Wide Web, CD, DVD, Podcasts, and the various platforms for computer games.
  - Virtual ‘realities’: simulated environments and immersive representational spaces
  - A whole range of transformations and dislocations of established media (in, for example, photography, animation, television, journalism, film, and cinema).
2. The transition of traditional media theories due to the advent of the internet:
  - **Agenda Setting Theory:** Research has shown that social media platforms such as Twitter can still influence the public agenda by amplifying certain issues and creating a sense of urgency around them.
  - **Uses and Gratification Theory:** The internet has led to an explosion of media options, allowing people to more easily find content that caters to their individual needs and preferences.
  - **Cultivation Theory:** While traditional media such as television was the primary focus of this theory, the internet has become a major source of news and information for many people, leading to questions about how exposure to digital media might shape our understanding of the world.
  - **Social Learning Theory:** With the rise of social media, people are more connected than ever before, and social learning can occur online through exposure to the opinions and behaviours of others on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

### Check Your Progress 2

1. **Media Convergence:** The merging of previously separate forms of media, such as television, radio, print, and the internet, into a single, integrated medium.
2. **Remediation Theory:** The idea that all media are constantly reworking and repurposing elements of previous media, creating a constant cycle of borrowing and adaptation.
3. **Networked Publics:** A term coined by Danah Boyd to describe online communities and social networks and how they are shaped by technology, culture, and social norms.

### Check Your Progress 3

1. Key features of the network society:
  - The centrality of information and communication technologies
  - The rise of global networks
  - The decentralisation of power
  - The emergence of new forms of social organisation
2. Marshall McLuhan's Technological Determinism theory suggests technology is the primary driver of social and cultural change. According to McLuhan, the medium itself, rather than the content transmitted through it, profoundly impacts society and culture.
3. Both the Cyborg Manifesto and critical posthumanism emphasise the need to recognise and engage with how technology and other non-human entities shape our lives and to develop new ways of thinking and acting that are responsive to these changes.