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Book Review: Alphabet to Internet: Media in Our Lives

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Book Review

***Alphabet to Internet: Media in Our Lives, 2nd ed.* Irving Fang.**

St. Paul, MN: Rada Press, 2012. 312 pp. \$48.00 pbk.

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Keeping track of rapid changes in communication, and their impact on our lives, can get complicated.

Technology has changed virtually every aspect of communication. As more of us adapt to news and information delivered almost instantly on devices that handily fit into a pocket, we've become accustomed to new tools and quick changes.

Irving Fang's second edition of *Alphabet to Internet* puts it all in perspective, starting with the dawn of writing and including today's 140-character Tweet. In a word, the impact is mind-boggling.

Fang, a longtime University of Minnesota professor, helps readers through the maze and writes in a simple, easy-to-understand manner. In this second edition, Fang reorganizes his successful 2008 edition to make it more student-friendly, and catches up with the many new media developments of what might seem a short four years, but is a millennium in modern media technologies and user habits. The result is a fascinating walk through history connecting, well, the first alphabets and writing to the Internet. This book doesn't plod along. Instead, like a good mystery novel, it hooks readers. Each chapter makes readers eager for the next as Fang brings history to life.

He starts with the impact of writing. "Writing enabled the tellers of tales to separate themselves from their memories," he says. "It allowed them to leave those memories and come back to them, for it allowed them to forget."

From writing, he takes us to the development of printing, which "changed it all," he says. In one short chapter, Fang takes us from Gutenberg and the development of mass communication (thanks to efficient printing systems) to a digital world where a printing press is no longer required to publish. He questions not the loss of "ink-on-paper," but the impact of a news delivery structure that doesn't require professionalism on the part of the messenger.

Subsequent chapters examine the impact of mail, telegraph, telephone, recording, photography, movies, radio, television, computers, the Internet, and video games. Each chapter includes a handy timeline that makes it easy to clock the pace of transformation. In the recording chapter, for instance, the timeline starts with Charles Wheatstone sound experiments in 1821 and ends with Facebook and

Spotify making downloading music a social networking tool in 2011. The timeline in the Internet chapter reminds us of how quickly things have changed. Google News, used by millions every day, was launched in 2002. Today's college students don't remember and find it hard to fathom the days before Google aggregated news and information.

A chapter on persuasion is broad, covering advertising, public relations, political persuasion, editorial cartoons, and cultural differences. Fang starts with the advent of advertising on a board in ancient Greece announcing a gladiator contest and ends with the impact of satellite dishes on youth in Saudi Arabia. They now see a view of the world that their government-controlled media sources do not allow.

Fang's final chapter details the real impact of media on our lives: "Of all the rewards the media has brought us since the invention of writing," he says, "the most valuable is the expansion of knowledge." Interestingly, Fang is concerned that the increase in media choices may not mean a better society. "The more choices we have, the less we have in common with one another and the more we become communities of strangers," he writes.

Media can connect us—as any grandmother using Skype to see her faraway grandson can attest. But media can also separate us, as anyone watching a couple checking their cell phones over dinner at a restaurant knows. Either way, what's clear from reading Fang's book is that our dependence on media is not going away.