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The Cybernetic Apparatus: Media, Liberalism, and the Reform of the Human Sciences examines efforts to reform the human sciences through new forms of technical media. It demonstrates how nineteenth-century political ideals shaped mid-twentieth-century programs for cybernetic research and global science sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. Through archival research and textual analysis, it reconstructs how and why new media, especially digital technologies, were understood as part of a neutral and impartial apparatus for transcending disciplinary, ethnic, regional, and economic differences. The result is a new account of the role of new media technologies in facilitating international and interdisciplinary collaboration (and critique) in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Chapter one examines how political conceptions of communications and technology in the United States in the nineteenth century conditioned the understanding and deployment of media in the twentieth century, arguing that American liberals conceived of technical media as part of a neutral apparatus for overcoming ethnic, geographic, and economic difference in the rapidly expanding nation. Chapter two examines the development of new media instruments as technologies for reforming the natural and human sciences from the 1910s through the 1940s, with particular attention to programs administered by the Rockefeller Foundation. Chapters three and four examine the rise, in the 1940s and 1950s, of cybernetics and information theory as an ideal of scientific neutrality and political orderliness. These chapters demonstrate how programs sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, MIT, and other institutions shaped linguist Roman Jakobson's and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's efforts to redefine their fields as communication sciences. Chapter five considers how critics of cybernetics, including Noam Chomsky, Claude Shannon, and Roland Barthes, critically re-evaluated the claims of cybernetics to redefine the relations between technical research and the human sciences.

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