

NEW MEDIA OLD THEORIES

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commentary

NEW MEDIA, WHICH IS THE NAME THAT REFERS NOT ONLY TO THE INTERNET, GENERATE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS RELATED TO STUDYING THEM. FOR ALMOST 100 YEARS OF RESEARCH, STARTING WITH PRINTED NEWSPAPER, THEN CINEMA, RADIO AND ESPECIALLY TELEVISION, A NUMBER OF THEORIES HAVE BEEN ELABORATED IN THE FIELD OF MEDIA AND MASS COMMUNICATION STUDIES, ONLY A FEW OF WHICH HAVE A UNIVERSAL DIMENSION, THAT IS, THEY ARE NOT RELATED TO A SPECIFIC STAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION. THEORIES OF MEDIA OMNIPOTENCE, POPULAR IN THE 1930'S, DID NOT PASS THE TEST OF TIME MAINLY DUE TO COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES' DEVELOPMENT. THIS HAS LED TO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BROADCASTERS AND AUDIENCE.

These changes are well illustrated by a comparison of Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. As well as traditional media, Web 1.0 allows for static viewing of the content offered by the media. The content consisted mostly of irregularly updated information, which resembled a booklet. A typical page contained text, images, icons for navigation, menu. Texts created by professionals were written in impersonal, professional, descriptive language. The parties were not related to each other, communication between the entities took place via e-mail.

Defining Web 2.0, Tim O'Reilly wrote: "Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web2.0 application are those that make the most intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it; consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others; creating Network effects through an "architecture of participation" and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences."¹ According to the above we can name the most distinguishing features of Web 2.0 that are also applicable to some extent to other new media: folksonomy and ludic character of usage, user as a contributor, dispersion, multiplicity of media, mass participation, interactivity, autonomy, feeling of social presence and personal contact with others, content personalization and privatization. What is an advantage of the new media in human communication process can be at the same time disadvantage from research perspective. Two questions shall be asked: what to examine and how to do it.

WHAT TO EXAMINE?

Each survey starts with the definition of the object of research. In mass communication, according to the model of Harald Lasswell, usually these are the sender - the institution of the media, the recipient - a mass audience or its part, the content of messages generated by the media, and the reaction to customers, channel of communication and variously defined effects of the process. Difficulties generated by the new media appear already at this stage. In the case of traditional media, the media institutions have been broadcasters in mass communication. In new media there are three types of them: institutional (similar to the traditional model), social - the different social actors that through access to new media have become independent

¹ O'Reilly 2005.

from institutional media agency, and individuals - each user of new media, who has the need to actively co-create them.

The old mass media audience has been replaced by the fragmented groups, individually and in convenient time involved in the process of communication, very fluid and unstable. Its members interact without the participation of institutional sender. Due to the richness of the content it is difficult to make and justify the choice of investigating content. New media, especially the Internet, can be defined as a channel of communication in terms of technology or as a platform of resources, co-created by all users. The question therefore arises – what is the object of research: the communication channel as a technology and its properties or the social constructs created by these new technologies?

It is also necessary to define precisely the effects of the operation of the new media, as the same effect is a broad concept and needs to be clarified. Similarly, as in the case of other media, these effects may be in apparent contradiction. For example, exploring new media in the context of social change can be achieved and prove that media may contribute to fragmentation and individualization of society. Equally it can be proved that the new media promote a new kind of integration which can be portrayed, as D. McQuail argued, in a more positive light as interdependency, or more negatively as a mass society.² Therefore, even if the theory of mass society, linked to the belief in the omnipotence of the media, does not seem to be useful, the concept of social mass itself is still interesting. Thanks to the Internet, immediate „communities” are created, that may have a significant impact on the various sectors of society. However, they consist of more or less anonymous participants pursuing their goals, thus constituting groups, but their durability, interactions and relationships are limited. Such groups have a lot of features that resemble a crowd (if you apply the criteria proposed by Herbert Blumer) or at least they are characterized by „collective behavior.” It means, that individuals work together in a certain way and their action is based on a common understanding of the situation (common expectations) or on the tradition dealing with how to behave properly in given circumstances. Interactions on the Internet, which can be accessed through various channels, can be well described by a special form of interaction – concept of circular reaction. One can define it as a type of cross-stimulation, in which the response of one individual reproduces the stimulation that comes from another individual and referring back to this individual enhanced stimulation.³ Starting from the spontaneous behavior of individuals it stimulates and strengthens them,

2 McQuail 2010.

3 Park, Burgess 1970.

and may ultimately take the institutional form. The institutionalization of spontaneously forming standards may consequently lead to a new social order. This is the basis of the power of the internet – an ability to cause such institutionalization. But the question arise, how it will continue real world.

HOW TO EXAMINE?

In researching new media, all methods and techniques developed for examining old media, are useful, especially the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. New media, due to its technical characteristics make it easy to organize experiments and anthropological surveys.

OLD THEORIES

As already mentioned, significant number of theories developed, so far, by studies of the media has a historical importance, as the social and technological changes have led to the transformation of the media environment and their relationship with other elements of the social system. If we assume that in the process of elaborating social science theories on the effects of media on various social actors three stages can be distinguish – the theories of the first two: the omnipotence of the media (with the exception of the concept of mass) and the limited impact of the media have no application ability. Theories formulated since the 1970's, which can be described collectively as the theories of indirect and moderate impact of the media, seem to be more promising. Among them it is worth to point concepts talking about the cognitive effects (framing, priming, agenda setting/agenda building), defining the social reality (the spiral of silence hypothesis, cultivation theory), or models of behavioral effects. Their underlying assumptions still retain the qualities of actuality, though, obviously, must be reformulated in such a way as to take into account the social and technological changes, the effect of which is the emergence of new media.

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