

INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODS IN MEDIA HISTORY RESEARCH

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Abstract: The development of electronic media in the 20th century has fundamentally changed the traditional chronological descriptive methods of press history research. The printed press has become part of a wider system, with elements that are interconnected and interacting with each other. It is therefore necessary to apply a historical perspective on media history, reassessing the function of each element and the role of multiple interactions between the elements of the system. The interdisciplinary studies are sources for several research narratives, which are approaching media history using different scientific fields, for example social science, social economy or technology. The study is presenting these narratives, shaping their connections and applicability.

Keywords: media history, printed press, electronic media, research methods, historical perspective.

The traditional descriptive method of press history uses a chronological report of the beginnings and ends of various newspapers and journals, with an additional description of the content. However, with the advent of electronic media – radio, television, and the internet – the written press has become a particular field of a much wider communication system. This approach denies the concept that the history of mass-media begins with the appearance of electronic media, and attempts to establish the inner logic of the evolution of mass communication channels. Accordingly, the range of research had suffered significant changes before the end of the 20th century, and the new direction focuses on a diachronic approach to the transformation of media instruments.

The first researcher to draw attention on the organic connection between the nature of the transmitted information and the communication medium was Marshall McLuhan. His theory gave birth to a new paradigm in mass-media research, focusing on the interdependence of the media of communication and the laws that govern their transformation and evolution, taking into account that old media do not disappear but are integrated into a system.

Consequently, one of the main problems of the research was the analysis of how new instruments have transformed the role of old communication media. This calls for a retrospective reassessment of the history of the written press – as a historical perspective of an evolutionary process which has led in time to the appearance of electronic media, and has resettled, by its interactions, the place of the written press within the system.

Another thinker to yield a new interpretation to researches in the field was Günther Habermas, who mainly analyzed the connections of mass-media history and the evolution of the public space, as well as its crystallization and structural changes. This way society and mass-media became inter-dependent elements of research, an approach prevalent in some of the works published after 1990.

Considering its evolutionary character, the history of the press can be discussed as a functional model taking into account the branches of the system leading to its different constitutive elements. This framework allows for studying the various types of press: the

separation of reviews from newspapers, the appearance of encyclopedic reviews, then specialized journals. The divide between “opinion press” and “information press” led to the formation of the party press, which played an important part in mid-19th century European political changes. Economic progress brought about the advent of profit-oriented journalism, a branch of which became the “scandal press”, originating from yellow journalism emerging in the United States at the turn of the century. New genres of the press, like the editorial, the reportage and the interview, appeared as well.

The development of electronic means can be studied within the same functional framework. First of all, the emergence of these transformed the traditional role of the written press, which had lost its previous monopoly on information. Radio and television increasingly gained ground by their simultaneous broadcast of the events. At the same time, the appearance of the internet in the last decade of the 20th century brought on the phenomenon of multimedia convergence, causing different audio and video contents to be received by one single instrument, the computer.

In what follows, I shall present some narratives along which the diachronic evolution of mass media can be observed. The separation and delimitation of the narratives is however not always very clear, since certain developments can be the results of simultaneous factors. With the help of these narratives, different discourses of mass media can be conceived as additional sides of a process leading up to the current state.

The history of mass media as a history of mentalities and the freedom of expression

The history of journalism is organically connected to great historical events as well as philosophical, cultural and religious trends of the history of mankind. By changing the attitude towards reading and spreading texts in vernacular languages, Luther’s Reformation brought significant changes to people’s relation to literacy during the 16th century, facilitating the dissemination of publications predating the press. Two centuries later, the Enlightenment opened people’s minds to the global problems of mankind and the need for information, leading to the formation of the press as we know it today.

Practices of censorship and other issues related to the freedom of the press appeared in parallel with this process; at the beginning, these were regulated by church authorities, then progressed within the general framework of the philosophy of human rights. The requirement of the freedom of the press was first formulated in Europe during the English civil wars in 1694, the French revolution in 1789, and the European revolutions of 1848.

The idea of the free press in early 19th-century Europe was far from being practically applied in its contemporary meaning. Still, despite limitations, and as a result of civil revolutions of previous centuries, the press had by then exceeded its merely informative role, becoming a weapon in the hands of emerging bourgeoisie, and a means of public expression of opinions. In individual European countries the freedom of the press worked in various ways depending on the political system of these countries. The fight for free press became one of the principal demands of 19th-century political movements, and the 1870s and 1880s saw in most European countries the formation of the patterns which were to determine the operation of the press in the century to come. The concept of the free press crystallized in the time of

19th century bourgeois liberalism, and became one of the key concepts of 20th century democracies.

The freedom of the press is also connected to the legal framework in which the press functions, and which needed to be adapted at all times to the conditions set by the appearance and expansion of new means of communication. The legal condition of online journalism is for instance a timely issue even at this time. This is a good context to analyze all regulations connected to the practice of journalism, the first laws of the press and the practices to limit the freedom of expression (the rules for founding newspapers, granting privileges, interdiction of publications, trials of journalists in the course of history, etc.)

Furthermore, in the 20th century the press was used as a means of propaganda for fascist and communist totalitarian regimes, subordinated in many European countries to political ideologies. Harold Lasswell was the first to analyze, by his researches regarding the history of propaganda during WWI, the global press campaign considered to be the starting point of modern propaganda. Also, this phenomenon has also triggered the researches on the effects of mass media and the way it influences the audience as a manipulative factor.

The history of mass media as the history of technology

Another essential approach to the history of mass media is to consider it a direct result of technological development. This perspective analyzes all technology and inventions that have changed the conditions for editing and marketing newspapers. With the modernization of printing technology, the layout of the press also changed: arrangement in several columns, titles with larger character size, and use of different typeface. In the first stage illustrations also appeared, obtained by printing drawings or paintings on paper through engravings. From the second half of the 19th century, the invention of photography offered new possibilities for the press: the publications were illustrated with engravings after photographs, and then later printed photographic clichés. The development of press photography can thus be traced all the way up to the current application of digital technology.

As for the inventions that had a major impact on the press, it is considered in the bibliography that the electric telegraph (1837) was a milestone in its development by the way it changed the system of information communication, making possible the instant transmission of news. The telegraph is part of the system of inventions which, together with the new means of transportation (railway, steam ships, etc.) and the new technologies of typography (rotary press, offset printing, etc.), turned the press into a mass phenomenon. This process can be regarded as the professionalization of means used by journalists.

The telephone used for sound transmission (1876) and the phonograph for sound recording (1877) were precursors of the new medium – the radio – which became a means of mass communication after WWI. The television appeared as a result of the improvement and simultaneous use of existing means – the radio and the cinema – and, beginning with the 1960s, became the primary medium of communication. The digital medium of the internet is the invention of the end of the 20th century, an integration of existing technologies, leading to the phenomenon of global communication.

In parallel with technological processes, the 1960s and 1970s also witnessed the beginning theoretical debates on the concepts of information economy and information

society, shaped thanks to mass media and the spreading of computers. Information society was formed as a result of the transformations that changed the functioning of societies and the roles of technology, information and communication within these. Compared to previous transformations, the truly radical turn occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when the technological development of social and individual communication brought about changes that resulted in a new order of communication, giving birth to the global network of “information super-highways”.

The history of mass media as economic history

The history of the press can also be analyzed as an element of economic life, in a narrative framework focusing on creating powerful economic societies behind media institutions. As the press turned into a mass phenomenon, press empires came into being, and became in time important economic actors (let us only mention Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s newspapers in the US in the late 19th century).

One can thus follow up the evolution of certain factors which turned the press into an economically profitable business. These factors are the increase of circulation numbers and the large-scale distribution of advertising. The increasing number of copies published is due partly to technological development (the rotary press appearing in the second half of the 19th century allowed for hundreds of thousands of copies to be published), and partly to the demographic boom and mass literacy. At the same time, increasing circulation numbers also resulted in lower prices, which again led to increased demand.

As consumption was on the rise, advertising became an important factor of trade, and consequently a major source of income for newspapers. In the course of the 19th century, major newspapers already hired publicity agents who kept contact with companies which posted the advertisements. With the economic globalization of the 20th century, advertising through television and the internet became a highly important factor of economic life.

Another problem of the economic history narrative is that of diffusion, closely connected to increased circulation numbers, since the profit-oriented press could not have appeared without efficient distribution networks. In the first centuries of the press, distribution was a secondary issue since the tens or hundreds of copies only reached the subscribers. Before the first railways built in the mid-19th century, newspapers were distributed by stage coaches, which covered distances of a couple of hundred kilometers in several days. The development of means of transportation led to a faster distribution of newspapers and consequently published much timelier news.

Another important aspect of the business-based mass press of the end of the 19th century was the concentration of publishers and the formation of well-capitalized press empires. The concentration continued in the period when the radio and especially news broadcasts on radio became a serious competition of printed press in the inter-war period. The 20th-century concentration of media power has gained increased attention. Not only have the borders between information and entertainment been blurred, but the divide between the political left and right have also become contingent, as well as the differences between the various branches of media.

Media concentration may result in various formations. Horizontal concentration refers to the cumulation of property rights within one particular medium (e.g. written press, radio, television) – for instance, when a publisher buys a rival publisher. In addition, there are so-called multimedia-type concentrations. A diagonal concentration happens when a media enterprise extends its power to various other media. Vertical concentration refers to the ownership of various phases of media production (e.g. production and distribution), for example, when a publisher buys a distribution network or a paper factory.

In the 1980s the extensive use of satellite broadcasting and cable-based signal transmission in addition to the deregulation of media markets hastened media concentration and globalization. As a result of this development, the 1990s already witnessed the birth of media conglomerates which controlled not only a whole series of media, but entire production chains as well, from film industry to media.

The history of mass media as social history

This approach covers, on the one hand, the research of the formation and evolution of journalism as a profession. The first newspapers published in Eastern Europe in the late 18th–early 19th century had yet no professional editors. The materials were published by amateur correspondents or writers who, in addition to their literary texts, also wrote journalism for an extra income. In time, there has been a differentiation between the jobs of an editor, a publisher and a journalist. This process was of course also influenced by a series of other economic and social factors. For instance, the profession of the reporter, which appeared in the second half of the 19th century, was influenced by the progress and improvement of information transmission systems and the first press agencies in Europe (1835 – the AFP agency of Charles Havas in France; 1851 – Reuters in Great Britain). The profession of photo-journalist appeared with the development of photographic and typographic technology.

On the other hand, this is also the framework to analyze how a group of readers has come to constitute an audience, which can be seen as a complex social process integrating the transformation of the culture of reading and the considerable increase of the amount of books published after the end of the 18th century. This has led to extensive reading, meaning the reading of several types of books, and later also newspapers and journals instead of rereading a limited number of books, usually religious. Surely this process could not have taken place without the spreading of literacy and the raising number of readers, for instance with the inclusion of female readership. At the end of the 19th century, with the formation of the mass press, the fight for readers also started: the target was to win an ever larger number of subscribers, for which purpose the newspapers applied various strategies from different kinds of manifestations (beauty contests, concert, etc.) to organizing raffles or other contests with different kinds of awards.

As the profit oriented press consolidated at the turn of the 19th-20th century, the attacks against press organs and journalists became more frequent, leading to a need to establish organizations to defend their interests. Due to abuses and excesses of the press, these organizations also had the task to regulate the practices of journalism. The notion of ethic of journalism appeared in the United States in 1889, and the doctrine of objectivity included into the ethical codes was first formulated in Anglo-Saxon journalism. At the same time, the social

engagement of the journalist has influenced the work methods in the publishing offices: investigation journalism undertook the task of protecting the interests of the society against the power.

The attempts to hold back the spreading of yellow journalism and the need to create quality journalism led to the organization of university-level journalism education. The first institution of this kind was founded at the University of Columbia in the United States in 1912, on the initiative and with the financial help of Joseph Pulitzer.

The increasing readership caused the segmentation of the audience and the delimitation of readers according to various types of press. The changes in media consumption habits led to changes in social life in that they affected human relationships and social communication by their institutionalization. At the same time, society became a consumer of information, for which reason micro-communities tend to become more uniform under the slogan of globalization, a process also hastened by the appearance of electronic media, especially the internet. A new kind of public sphere is thus created, whose evolution can also be followed in a historical perspective, from cafés where people changed their opinion regarding current events to the forums enmeshing the internet today.

On account of those said above, the question can be asked how and to what extent the new media technologies and online communication alter public and social relations. This new form of communication transcends country borders and questions all traditional knowledge on information. The comprehensive information network of the internet can be accessed simultaneously on the whole planet, therefore we are able to contact an extremely large number of people in a very short time and communicate information to them. Therefore, in the course of just a few hours or days, one can mobilize the users of the network not only in order to acquire information, but also for real life social action as well. Several new political movements have made use of these possibilities. Civil journalism has played a great role for instance in the Arab countries in the organization of the protests against the power in 2010-2011, known as the Arab spring, and in raising awareness of the unlawful measures of the power.

One of the main sources of tension in the digital, networking and interactive society is the difference between the accessibility of communication infrastructure and digital information, and the amount of knowledge necessary for it, for instance between the richer and poorer strata or between the old and the young. In the society of the future there is an ever deepening break between those who can afford and are able to use the possibilities offered by the new technology, and those who are incapable of this interaction. It can be misleading to profess the global information revolution if we think that in many third world countries there is no electricity and telephone network, not to mention satellite television or computers connected to the World Wide Web.

Generational differences are perceivable especially by the fact that members of the young generation who have grown, or are growing up in information society, are instinctively good in handling info-communicational technology and are very fast in processing new information. In contrast, digital illiterates have no possibility or ability to use the new means of info-communication. This divides the information society even further, possibly leading to an even deeper break in the future: a distinction will be made between those who have access

to information and are able to adequately use it, and those who are incapable of doing it. The lack of digital literacy will create the same kind of rupture within society that classical literacy created before the 19th century.

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