

## CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: BUILDING A NEW PARADIGM

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*Abstract: The generalization of interpersonal, but also of media communication, and the emergence of multiple possibilities of assertion in the public sphere, in the context of a pronounced demassification of the public, imposes rethinking the approach strategies employed in an analysis. Surpassing the postmodern stage also requires reestablishing, if not a paradigm, then at least an interrogation framework. Developing a philosophy of digital communication becomes imperative, out of the need to rebuild and adapt the tools of investigation. From my point of view, we can identify at least three fields of research. The first one targets the way information is gathered and edited. The second one refers to the new features of the message in the global communication society. The third field imposes a strong reflection on new media ethics. In what follows we will outline a few directions of analysis, starting, however, from elements of traditional communication. The numerous approaches of present-day cybermedia and cyberspace are oriented towards (1) Defining, mapping and investigating the field in its general characteristics; (2) Establishing the specificity of each field. Media communication is a manifestation framework of this type, bringing numerous challenges. In the analysis of changes that have occurred in the field of media communication, on a traditional level, we notice the prevalence of studies regarding the distribution of journalism products, i.e. public relations. In our study, we mainly approach the more difficult and more specialized stage of information gathering. In this activity as well, the technological offensive is powerful, though less obvious.*

*Keywords: digital media, information gathering, media platforms, cyberspace, media sphere, new communication.*

### **Over-mediatisation and lack of ostentation**

For almost two centuries, ever since the classics in this field began studying the sociology of public opinion, the interaction between (mass) media and its public has been investigated in its most diverse forms, with enormous benefits. However, little-researched epistemological, sociological, and pragmatic matters are dealt with in this segment of investigation into the path of information from source to communicator (journalist and editor). The fact that research regarding this path of old and new media communication is rather irregular and sporadic has a baffling effect. At least as compared to studies dedicated to the other communication sector, stretching from the press institution to the recipients of media products.

There is a conviction that digital media, in its current form, favors and imposes a focus on the relationship between media institutions and the public. Koljonen, Raittila and Väliverronen (2011) find that: „The burning question for all editorial offices is: how to maximize one’s target audience on all publishing platforms without compromising any individual platform’s performance?” Also, the economic crisis has brought heightened competition among media institutions, putting additional pressure on journalists. Nevertheless, the authors then focus on sources and the relationship between these and journalists, thus contradicting, to a certain extent, the claim that exclusive attention is given to mediation, to transmission of journalistic products to the public. With regard to information gathering, Koljonen, Raittila and Väliverronen (2011) would show how some inconsistencies have created negative reactions. They refer to an armed attack which took place in a school. Authorities released precise data only hours later, a time interval during which, under the

pressure of informing in the field of digital media, journalists called on different sources, including minor students. The victims' relatives and surrounding residents also criticized authorities, for not allowing them to carry out the mortuary rituals and pray in peace.

The journalist's good degree of information, as well as that of the public he/she serves, is founded on a fair and efficient process of information gathering. The expansion of digital media and a high degree of technological and media convergence stimulates researchers to focus on this segment too, found at the beginning of the communication (information) process. The effects (and shortcomings) noticed upon reception, when the journalistic products reach the public, have direct causes in the unseen, i.e. in the process of finding, acquiring and editing data. In order to revitalize the circuit of professional communication, certain academic programs have emerged, capable of exploiting the particular field of journalistic mediatization in the context of digital explosion (Diakopoulos 2010 and 2011). As Pavlik explains (2013), we are standing in front of computational journalism or CAR (Computer-Assisted Reporting), as technology is present along the entire path of communication: information gathering, organization and sensemaking, communication and presentation, and dissemination and public response to news information.

### **Involvement and needs in media space**

The behavior of digital or cybermedia users, as we wish to name this complex field of new communication in postmedia or in intermedia, is also very important. One can notice two already underlined features: 1) the public, in a general sense, no longer exists; one speaks of publics, some of which are often interested in highly specialized fields; 2) the studies are mostly focused on the interrelationship between the media institution and the public, and less on that between sources and journalists. However, an approach from a meta-communication perspective, given by intermedia, allows new observations on user behavior. Each of us enters the digital communication sphere with certain needs and specific purposes. Thus, we are part of one or several large categories of users, whether we are placing contents or just accessing already existing ones. I have already mentioned that my intention isn't to focus my research on the impact of data on the public and on its behavior; however, a few points of reference on this information and entertainment section are important in order to understand the topic.

Placing various media products on websites and altering existing ones can be carried out by anyone, amateur or professional. Non-professionals' access on many platforms is limited to certain sections (comments, for instance) and provided under safety conditions. Professionals can only access websites they work for or with which they have a collaboration agreement. Under these circumstances, one can see that it is not that easy to post in the online space information or products of higher complexity. There are sites that can host anything, but trust in these is low. In serious organizations, any content from users is assessed and verified before it can be mediatized. Numerous digital publications have sections where one can post contents directly, with minimum filtering. Here we refer to comment sections, forums or what is known as the Reader's Corner. Here, interventions are made after data is introduced, eliminating improper formulations.

The degree of user involvement is manifested between two extremes, which need highlighting: 1) a remarkable degree of involvement, implying very active individuals. They post often, join debates, provide information, make comments and offer suggestions; 2)

individuals with minimum activity resumed mostly to observing. They introduce contents quite rarely. Between these limits there are very many users with different degrees of involvement. The users who lurk make up an interesting category. Schneider, von Krogh and Jäger (2013) conducted a consistent study on what they named „lurking behavior”, the behavior of those lurking in online communities. This is a less studied field, regarding people with extremely varied interests. The authors seem to understand this behavior more as observing and minimum socializing, and not necessarily in the sense of a hunter studying his/her prey, of a predator.

### **Points of reference and meanings in postmedia**

The term postmedia needs to be understood, in accordance with the evolution of terms such as postmodernism, post-history or post-industrial, but not as a new stage following media, but as part of a process of the transformation of media. It also signifies a stage of reflection on what was before and present-day manner of configuration. The term metamedia could also be useful, possessing the advantage that it suggests, by referring to metaphysics, the establishment of a field of investigation capable of analyzing the evolution, the content and the issues of mass communication. It also stands close to metalinguistics, a term which Roman Jakobson uses to individualize one of the functions of language. The term metamedia can be employed as an instrument of work in the context of the bulkiness and uncertainty of postmodernism, which postmedia explicitly refers to. Ramsey E. Ramsey (2006: 685), noticing this confusion generated by the semantics of postmodernism, would suggest the concept of post-metaphysics, though this is not necessarily clearer... Jensen (2011) sets the term metamedia apart for the technological part of communication, outlining the tools that make it possible, such as the computer and the cellular phone. This terminological diversity is a challenge for communication, as it threatens to restrict it and render it unclear through the multitude of often contradicting terms.

Nevertheless, we stay with the concept of postmedia, precisely in order to avoid increasing terminological and methodological confusions. Relating to it can be antithetical, in the sense that one can relate to mass communication in a critical manner, in the way it was discovered and harnessed in modern society. In this case, the critical analysis is fixated on the evolution of mass media, investigating the field according to its components, to its inner functioning (the type of organization developed), as well as its external efficiency, i.e. the evolution in the social system served. There is also a type of relating to this in the direction of actual media - postmedia continuity. Everything builds a history, in which the constituent parts are integrated, nevertheless maintaining individual features. Thus, the paradoxical situation is revealed, in which the emergence of radio, and, to some extent, of television, would not undermine the activity of the printed press. The latter would have peak moments (reflected in an increased circulation) during the inter-war period, as well as in the years following World War II. The three media directions would have separate histories, but would interfere with each other due to common procedures. Information seeking, editing from a neutral point of view, as well as presenting quality entertainment would remain a priority. The audiovisual, during its first decades of activity, would provide a dimension adequate to the culturing function of the press, a function subsequently maintained, though less obvious today, as it is outrun by the exacerbation of entertainment.

New media is a term with a rather long history behind it. It would be used in order to understand two relatively distinctive media contexts.

In a first sense, new media refers to those changes of paradigm through which researchers in the field have made distinctions in the stages of press evolution. The criteria were chosen according to evolutions in technology, science and society. One can identify old and new media according to the role played by certain events that have brought about radical changes. Thus, the status of the press would differ before and after the French Revolution (1789-1791). The role of the telegraph in transmitting information (the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) would impose another periodization. People also spoke of new media after the introduction of the rotary press and of the linotype machine with molten lead (second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), as well as after the arrival of radio and television systems. After World War II, they would even speak of *new journalism*, seen as a change in editing journalistic materials, with a higher degree of subjective involvement on the authors' part.

Currently, the term new media maintains its historically preserved meaning of detachment from the old press, but also gains new features. Nonetheless, the main meaning attributed today to new media is that of cyberspace communication, in the electronic environment. Other terms suggested, less known and less used, but which are able to better reflect the field of contemporary press, are online media, digital media or electronic media. In a first sense, one can agree that among the three terms there is a very high degree of overlapping, as they define the same domain. There are, however, significant differences. Two gradations are necessary here. Thus, digital or electronic media covers more than online media, due to its storage capacity on mobile support devices and due to offline work options. At the same time, online media bears connections to social media, which only partly behaves as professional press in the classical sense. Electronic media also includes computer memory, offering the possibility to work offline. The main feature of online media is its capacity to instantaneously transmit in continuous connections, in permanent flows of data and information. Therefore, online media can be seen as an important constituent part of electronic media (Szabo 2013).

### **Editing and reception strategies**

Based on a few criteria we can establish a few fields of defining and understanding new and older media. Here, the adjective “new” is fundamental, because, depending on the meaning given to novelty, one can establish a first criterion, i.e. the historical criterion.

From a historical point of view, any old media was at some point new. Diachronically, we define a few areas of inclusion: 1) general relating to technique and technology. The press, the telegraph, the photocopying instruments, the telephone, the possibility for long-distance data transmission, all represent innovations of general social character, but with specificity in mass-media; 2) the specific mass-media technical evolution. This is related to point 1), however, certain elements can be identified regarding the revolution of the movable letterpress, of the mechanical press, underlining the role played by the linotype machine with molten lead or the rotary press. The emergence of radio and television constitutes another feature of new media in relation to the classical media of the time; 3) the evolution of journalistic genres and of the types of publications. Diversification was gradual, by separating the informative elements from those pertaining to education, literature or entertainment.

Specialization and diversification can be noticed in the occurrence of waves in the cheap press, often associated with flows of tabloidization. The invasion of the specialized press makes up a separate chapter; several magazine eras can be identified; 4) evolution in concept and design. This translates into an enlargement of publication formats and an increase in the number of pages, into the use of new paging techniques, into a change in the attitude towards titling (titles would become larger). This would be followed by reducing article dimensions and enlarging the font, in parallel with a much greater attention given to image. With radio and TV, techniques of enhancing the dynamism in news broadcasts would be employed, and with the increase of broadcasting time, a revolution in entertainment would be achieved.

Synchronically, from a present perspective, new media can be seen as separate from the historical evolution described above. Communication in cyberspace is the mechanism that defines new media in this sense, and the elements of conjunction are named internet (with important components such as www or the e-mail) or digital media. One can quickly notice that, although a synchronic approach, media communication in cyberspace already has a history. The starting point can be traced back to 1989-1990, to the activation of the first network links (www), but also back to the year 1994, of internet expansion, following the creation of the Mosaic search engine. Naturally, there are voices claiming, based on certain arguments, the existence of a new electronic media in 1969, beginning with the ARPANET project. This calls for a discussion on what one understands by digital media, a collocation identifying the synchronic new media. Our field of analysis is based on two meanings: 1) digital media as a new model for press, as a specific domain along with the printed press, radio and television. It does, however, use elements from the classical environments and develops them in the electronic environment; 2) digital media as toolkit for classical media, in which case it takes part in fulfilling the purposes of these organizations (newspapers, magazines, radios and TV), outlining their specificity, without being separately outlined. There is also a difference between new media seen as electronic media and online media. It is obvious that electronic media has a much ampler history, beginning with the first magnetic recordings. These were carried out more than a century ago, beginning with gramophone records, and continuing with magnetic tapes for cassette players and magnetophones after World War II. These were later followed by data storage devices for computers, from various types of flexible disks, to the optical disk, and all the way to the increasingly sophisticated memory sticks and hard disks that currently allow the storage of large amounts of data, in parallel with an ample card industry.

### **Actors in the media sphere**

New media also calls for a discussion from the perspective of the professional criterion, i.e. who carries out a press activity and how, who communicates in media, and how. Again, there are two possible approaches.

Who are the people who make journalism in the new media system? Apart from media professionals, the field of mass communication is populated with people who manifest themselves from a media point of view, sometimes quite powerfully (Szabo 2013). We identify the large category of outsiders, individuals who have rather influential sites or blogs. For few of these do the rules of journalism represent a priority in the activity carried out. There is also a specialized category, represented by the diverse range of citizen journalism.

These are people who militate for an idea or a cause, many of them coming to know the techniques of the genre quite well. They are not journalists in the classical sense, where, probably, few would cope, but they possess all the necessary skills to carry out their work in their field. Naturally, they differ from the mainstream journalists, who act on the basis of balance and impartiality (at least theoretically!), whereas, citizen journalists do not set out to hide their militancy, the fact that they fight for a well-defined purpose, considered to be of public interest. Citizen journalists can be professionals who have joined the fight with an aim, using all the means available, even those rejected by journalists. The category of outsiders, of non-professionals (Lasorsa 2012) is much wider and includes all those who are involved in the media process, particularly in digital media, however, without possessing the skills of a journalist, nor the necessary ethical points of reference.

What are the changes that have occurred in the way journalism is made from the perspective of this profession's standards? Here we refer to people qualified as journalists, in the sense that they have an attribute or several attributes that define the profession: they have specialized training, a certain professional experience, they work in an editorial office or have a collaboration agreement for a longer period of time, or they possess a work badge issued by a professional organization or by a media institution. An opinion which seems to gain popularity among the public, as well as among specialists (media analysts) refers to lowering standards. The reasons are several: 1) the poor training of the employees of media institutions; 2) fewer employees, meaning that those who remain have to cope with multiple tasks; 3) errors occurring as a result of working under pressure, under conditions of fierce competition; 4) the large volume of data, which can no longer be efficiently managed; 5) the incapacity to verify all available sources, particularly electronic ones; 6) the pressure put on by non-professional competition (social media), that imposes rather raw, emotional subjects and approaches; 7) the need to maintain and win over the public's interest, by offering information, and particularly entertainment, of a poorer quality.

### **The role of technology in new communication**

Another dimension is represented by new media (often also digital media) as seen in its relationship to and in its overlapping with multimedia. This latter term is characterized here as a field of communication equipment, ranging from the mobile phone to the tablet, and from the computer to the satellite. Here we also identify two categories, depending on the location of the media institution. Transmitting messages by phone has undergone a continuous process of perfecting ever since its invention, just as technical innovations have enabled a better transmission of radio and TV signals. Then we stepped into the digital era and witnessed the unprecedented development of internet communication. A closer look reveals a different degree of visibility on the two parts of the path of information from the source to the public.

Publishing, i.e. the activity describing selling the printed materials or broadcasting journalistic products (radio or television), has always had a greater visibility in the public sphere. The press has often been judged based on the way disseminated products (pertaining to information, education or entertainment) are received, their quality often bearing different meanings in the eyes of the public, of researchers and journalists. During the past decades, new media, seen as technology, has offered the possibility to transmit journalistic products of

higher technical quality. The signal is disseminated faster and without numerous and ample distortions, therefore making it better. Media organizations have made outstanding efforts in order to have access to such technologies. Beginning with the classical TV or computer screen, today these are not only integrated, but also assimilated to other devices (already mentioned: mobile phone, tablet). Yet, all of these are not specific to mass communication alone, understood in the professional sense, but to other related human activities, such as social media. The diversity of context was accurately captured by researchers in this field: “Citizens of this information age are provided with a plethora of opportunities not only for accessing information such as news, but also for producing and sharing such information themselves” (Westlund 2013).

However, important changes have also occurred on the path of information from the sources to the journalist and from the journalist to the editorial office. Another ingredient is represented by technical innovations emerging in media organizations, in the process of information editing and preparing final products for publishing. During the 1877-1878 war, Romanian journalists copied the news written by hand and posted on the door of the Ministry of War. Others they received by telegraph, but the stations were located quite far from the battlefield. Things have evolved over time, but the paper and pencil have remained the journalist’s basic tools. However, new (digital) media has also changed the manner of work regarding information gathering and processing. Mobile phones, and later laptops, meant the first stage in what Westlund (2013) coined mobile media. Internet access later followed, allowing the diversification of the manner of work. Thus, journalists could transmit increasingly elaborate journalistic products, i.e. text, sound and image. The images are photo images, as well as video images, which are extremely dynamic, requiring an adequate technology. Also, media communicators were exempted from certain trips, being able to access sites belonging to various institutions from the editorial office or from the comfort of other locations. In 2010, Groening described the way in which the mobile phone was evolving toward the media platform status, becoming an efficient instrument for receiving TV broadcast signals. Thus, an important mutation was occurring, as the TV was “taken out” of the private space of home. This transfer into the public space was also noticed by the author in the history of the cellular phone per se, initially used exclusively for private talks. Subsequently, it reached the impressive development we see today. In this context: „The adoption of cellular phones as television platforms presages a changing role for television in the public/private divide” (Groening 2010). After only two years, the digital media explosion would be extraordinary, and the cellular phone would become one of the instruments for promotion, along with the others previously mentioned. Not only the role of television would change, but the transfer of elements belonging to the private space into the public space would also continue, with or without the assent of those involved.

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