

THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA ON SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT: With the aim of better understanding the mechanisms behind social movements, we intend to examine the distinction between mass-media and new media, discussing both the downfall of the traditional mass-media model and how new media have evolved. A special attention will be given to exploring the role of social networks in activism and to mobile youth culture. Globally, the younger generations are the driving force behind online social movements as they easily embrace each new technological breakthrough. Therefore, they can radically influence social change.

Key words: new media, mass media, mobile youth culture, social networks, activism

Introduction

On our way to work, in offices, on the screen of a mobile desktop - these are just a few of the "locations" where one can access the Internet, the most valuable tool of current mass media. The distinction between traditional media and new media becomes thinner and thinner every day. We are part of a generation of change, adaptation, reinvention and reorganization of the fundamental values on which the society is built.

The explosion of new technologies creates new tools and new opportunities for the reinvention of old structures supporting civil society, activism, fight for or against beliefs, ideals, or even fundamentalisms. We have always been part of a network transmitting information by word of mouth, little by little. Incidentally, this is one of the basic principles of activism: to disseminate information in order to reach a larger and more varied target audience.

The same principles are the basis of this new digital network that Joyce (2010: 2) describes as 'an interconnected group of devices that use digital code to transmit information.

The beauty of networks is that connectivity is distributed. Networks do not connect us only to the center, they link us to each other as well. And, when large numbers of citizens are able to more easily connect to one another, to send and receive original content, and to coordinate action, they are able to create effective political movements'. Certainly, this definition does not apply only to political movements, but also to any social movement, be it with political implications or not.

With the strengthening of this reinvented network, traditional media, but also the tools through which they are conveyed, must reinvent themselves, because we are witnessing a time when those who cannot adapt to new generation requirements lose the promoting battle of mass media. The younger generations do not wait, but they quickly embrace each and every new technology. Thus, a new culture is being created among young people – Mobile Youth Culture - in which participatory democracy has won.

With the help of adolescents and young adults these technologies are incorporated in the daily routine and fulfill the purpose for which they were created: to form a compact network of individuals who share the same ideas, objectives and moral values, people always ready to protest for things they are entitled to and actively participate in changing the society.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that these social movements both on-line and off-line have their limits and their negative aspects and that media tools are not only used for disseminating verified information and substantiated opinions but also for subjective information. Online activists who hide behind these tools thinking that they can keep their anonymity are not as safe as they expect to be.

1. Differences between mass media and new media

With the development of new technologies in various fields, there was a shift of information from the mass media, which slowly erode, to the new, mostly digital, media (see L. Nădrag, 2011: 90-109). These new means of transmitting information to a large extent influence our perception about daily events, at national or international scale. A decade ago, those who mostly decided what was to be broadcast through mass media were those who had, in one way or another, the power: political groups, TV producers or media moguls. The current alternative - the new media - show that anyone can express their discontent, dissent or support for a particular cause. Anyone can lead a movement in the digital world using new technologies. Some of the most popular new media are blogs and social networking sites, where anyone can create their own platform to express their views.

Thus, we are witnessing technological and socio-cultural changes. From the challenge of keeping the traditional means of information, to the new lifestyles of users of new media technologies (e.g. reading an article about the conflicts in Egypt, in the subway, on our way to work), it is impossible to deny the impact on a cultural level. So, we should not deny the role of bloggers in shaping the new context of information. Currently, traditional media have lost the monopoly, although this is an industry that relies on huge financial capital, on the structure of multinational trusts and huge audiences. In this respect, it takes a contrastive approach of mass media and new media in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of reducing the audience, the disappearance of certain newspapers that were not able to cope with the avalanche of information provided through the most powerful new media tool - the Internet -, and how much influence bloggers and the social media of the virtual world can have on real-time decisions of the decision-making bodies in the real world.

1.1. The evolution of new media

Better understanding the difference between mass media and new media requires a concrete definition of the two terms in their current meaning. The new media are a combination resulting from the growing need for information and free expression of opinions, be they political, social or cultural, and technological developments. Mass-media can be defined as "ways of communication that involve transmitting information in a certain way, or some form to a large number of people" (Chris Livesely, *Central Sociology*, 2011 www.sociology.org.uk) or as defined in the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language*, but also in other dictionaries and encyclopedias: totality of technological means of mass communication of information (television, press, radio, Internet, cinema, etc.) (DEX – Romanian Academy edition).

According to these definitions, new media are, indeed, part of mass media. It could be classified as a branch of this area, but as will be shown, new media are different from traditional media, primarily by being a combination of the two dominant communication media until a decade ago: interpersonal medium (one-to-one) and mass communication (one-to-many) (Crosbie, 2002). A conclusive example of this is e-mail, which can transmit personal information from individual to individual, or send the same message of global concern to hundreds, thousands or millions of people (e.g. the famous "spam" type of e-mail from various chain stores which invite you to access their bids).

Vin Crosbie, in his paper "What is New Media?" provides a clarification in this regard. He makes a comparison between the three types of transport (land, sea and air) and the three media of communication: interpersonal, mass and new media. Crosbie (2002) notes that: "Because the New Medium simultaneously encompasses both the characteristics and the reach of the two previous communication media and therefore can easily perform each of those media's individual tasks, many people mistake the New Medium as merely an electronic extension of the Interpersonal or Mass media".

It should however be noted that new media are not just about developing new technology and versatility of this medium of communication. What is really important is the relationship of all users of new media technologies that facilitates the existence of new media.

Terry Flew (2000) states that we should not ask what are the technologies that facilitate new media, but rather what innovations it brings to society (10). It is very important what we do with this new medium of communication and how it influences us in turn. Currently we can relate, represent and bring a contribution to changing the world in ways that seemed impossible 100 years ago, which means that our lives and culture have been changed in the process. This global cultural transformation has an effect on the development of the world as large as Morse code or the light bulb invention.

The postmodern theorist Keith Bassett argues that: "the rapid development of the New Media and computer technologies [...] have the potential to transform the very nature of the public sphere and open up new channels of communication to a proliferation of new voices. The public intellectual of today must now be much more alive to the possibilities for participating in what could become a new 'cyberspace democracy' – an expanded public sphere which is less academic and less elitist, and demands the use of more accessible forms of language and discourse than those which intellectuals have become used to" (Bassett 1996: 519).

Based on Bassett's statement, one can theorize that new media opened the way to a medium of communication for all of us. There is an attempt to erase the line between specialized press and media aimed at ordinary individuals so that, due to the diversity of items offered, the Internet is currently the most powerful new media tool of information for all those who can access it; it is how ordinary people, through images, records, audio testimonials, blogs are explained concepts such as democracy, cloning, environmental pollution or the presence of various dangerous additives in food.

We are witnessing an attempt to equalize the cultural level. While this is viewed positively in some circles, there are plenty of critics who say that this new media communication environment creates inequalities by the fact that it is not widely accessible socially and geographically, that it provides access to information categorized as hazardous, such as pornography, religious/political fanaticism, viruses and hackers that undermine the integrity of civil society. Some countries (China, Iran) have gone up so much that they have limited access to certain sites, spying on Internet users and persecuting the bloggers of the opposition's movements. (Moyo, 2009).

Having positive and negative aspects, pros and cons, the fact is that new media allow the user to choose the information that s/he wishes to receive daily. S/he selects it from a variety of sources, and checks its usefulness. The information is available any time with just a touch of a button. The traditional mass-media, such as cable television, apparently offer a multitude of choices in terms of television broadcast, but each TV channel has certain rules in selecting the information.

1.2. The downfall of the traditional model of mass-media

What we call today traditional means of information, such as radio, television and print media were themselves a kind of "new media" in the past decades. This distinction between traditional and new means of information is temporary. As technology advances we are already talking about the concept of postmedia, about blurring even further the boundaries of the three aforementioned means of communication (interpersonal, mass media and new media), and a softening of the functions performed by the tools that provide such information.

Mass-media roles as known worldwide, i.e. to inform, to monitor, to serve political and economic systems, to provide entertainment, to function as a community forum and create a sense of solidarity, are constantly changing and redefining.

Since the 90s, Felix Guattari had a vision of the changes imposed by this new era of information, namely that the digitations of the television will reach the point where the TV screen is at the same time the computer display and telematic receiver¹. Practices that today are performed by multiple devices will be united under the same denominator. Cabling and satellite televisions will give us access to over 50 channels and telematics will offer us multiple databases with images and cognitive information. This hypnosis related to watching TV programs will vanish. From that moment on, we expect a transformation of mass-media

¹ Telematics is the technique of long-distance transmission and enhancement of information, combining computer (large computers and gigantic "banks" of data) with satellites and other modern methods of communication (telephone, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, etc.). <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/telematica>.

power going beyond contemporary subjectivity and opening the door to an era of re-inventing the community-individual rapport and interactive use of communication, information and culture tools. (Guattari, 1996)

Guaratti's assumptions are correct. Today we are witnessing, indeed, a reinvention of mass-media tools' utility. But we must not forget that the TV or the screen of a smartphone are merely information receivers that we choose to make our own. The persuasion power of these tools lies in the transmitted messages. Neil Postman's remark completes this idea and states that: "Our televisions help us communicate with the world, but they do so with a placid, unchanged smile. The problem is not that television presents entertainment topics, but that all topics are presented as entertainment [...]" (Postman 1985: 89).

Perception plays a very important role in the formation of an objective opinion on a certain situation. If a mass medium, be it print, television or radio, is governed by certain political principles or economic power that prevents it from presenting the matter in a different light, there is a so-called optimism related to the value of these digital networks that Joyce (2010: 12) describes:

"the networked nature of the digital world allows for people to communicate and take action outside of—and sometimes in opposition to—traditional hierarchical power structures. In a hierarchy, those at the top have power over those at the bottom; networks have a much flatter power distribution, with authority defined by peer-to-peer relationships. The hope is that the nature of power in the digital network will change the nature of power in the real world as digital networks become ever more integrated into our lives" (Joyce, 12).

Therefore, networks are gaining more power in society because there is a very low probability of these being influenced by external sources. Traditional mass-media do not provide this certainty. We can say that the technology is "socially constructed" (Bijker et al. 1987), which means that users are those who add value and meaning to technology by the way they use it, for example, the option to choose Facebook as a means of informing a group of political activism.

Jenkins (2006) creates an analogy between the contemporary changes in the aesthetics of mass-media, communication infrastructure, and balance of cultural influence. He does not speak about a downfall of the media, but rather a "convergence" (Jenkins, 2006) between old and new, by incorporating the old tools into the new ones.

"Convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communication systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content and toward ever more complex relations between top-down media and bottom-up participatory culture". (Jenkins 2006: 243).

Ashley Highfield, director of BBC New Media & Technology explained in a speech in October 2003 that digital technologies will have a major impact on the organization of television and that television will be unrecognizable in the future, being defined not only by linear TV channels, packaged and programmed by producers. Instead, they will be like a kaleidoscope, thousands of broadcast content, some of which cannot be classified as true channels. These transmissions will combine content and emitter's programs with our contribution as spectators. Even at the most basic level - the public will want to organize and recognize the content the way they want. They will add comments to our programs, will vote for or against them, in general will do whatever they want. At another level, the public/audience will want to create these video streams themselves, from scratch, with or without our help. At this level, the current relationship between the "traditional news announcer" and "satisfied spectator" will disintegrate (Highfield, 2003).

2. Manifestations of New Media

From the rapid, simultaneous and interconnected development of transmission systems, from the quality, quantity and structure of the content and user interfaces, it is easy to underestimate the collective impact of these changes on how society, namely the younger generation, communicates and absorbs information. Finally, it will be important to understand how these technologies facilitate, amplify or modify cognitive processes and/or the social behavior of the generation that is defined by using the Internet.

First, it should be understood that every means of information dissemination in turn passed through these stages of innovation, acceptance and naturalization in society, then their place on the pedestal was occupied by a new medium. In this sense, we can talk about the "diffusion of innovation" (Beal and Bohlen, 1955), "the process by which an innovation [new ideas, opinions or products] is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1983: 5).

In this sense, Rogers (1983) identifies five categories of persons who adopt these new technologies during their development stages. The first two types are: innovators (approx. 2.5%) and the first followers (13.5%), members of the early majority (34%), a majority of the late members (34%) and conservatives (16%). Among the innovators and early followers most of the people are young. They are among the first to come into contact with new technologies due to their education in an era of informatics and digital literacy.

The activism of the youth should not be underestimated. Currently, they are the most open to new technologies, the most curious regarding their use and they use social media the most effectively. A study carried out in the United States in 2010 shows that 72% of young adults between 18-29 years old use social networks, significantly higher than the 39% of over 30 years old users (Lenhart et al., 2010).

A study conducted by CURS in Romania, for the foundation Friedrich-Albert, mentions, among others, that: "Young people in our study inform about political life in the country primarily through the Internet, which shows both a very good opening towards new media communication and a relative rejection of classical, traditional media, such as television and the (now defunct) print "(Sandu et. al. 2014). The same study shows that 93% of young respondents between 15-24 years have Internet access, and as for the 25-29 age group, the percentage is somewhat lower, 84%.

In Bulgaria, for example, Eurostat statistics show that the proportion of young people who use the Internet is close to 90% for 2014, and that daily home users' share is 46% of all respondents, regardless of age (Statista.com, 2014).

Conclusion

Therefore, it is very clear that those who influence the development of new technologies, the ideological development of mass-media and their reorientation are young adults who view society in a certain way, who are always in motion and who, in this time race, want to keep track of what is happening around them.

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