

Digital Footprints in Mass Communication: Networking the Concepts

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Abstract

This paper is an overview on the theory development in media studies and mass communication in the digital media ecosystem. It analyses the progress of theory building in mass communication with special focus on how media negotiates everyday life in a digital environment in order to make meanings. The supremacy of technology in media discourses as illustrated in the works of Toronto School of thought is the basis for this discussion. The paper tries to capture the nuances of 'self' in mass communication through the scholarship under new media theory and approaches the media life perspective as a new window to look at the swift changes in the digital media arena.

The paper further argues that 'Social Media Curation and Reproduction' in place of conventional SMCR model must be problematized in the backdrop of demassification as put forth by Toffler. It put forth an idea that through media life, people experience a 'remassification', i.e., active audience act upon digital technology with or without agency and freedom.

Keywords

Network Communication Model, Digital Media, New Media Theory, Demassification

Introduction

Theory development in mass communication has always been complex and cumbersome because of the social, technological, cultural, politico-economical and spatial implications of the processes involved. Conventional modes of understanding of communication theory needs more nuanced outlook in the age of interconnected networks and digital/data diffusion. Mass Communication theory has undergone paradigmatic shifts and turns based on critical, functional and technological aspects. Theories of effects and uses of media have often been critiqued as prescriptive formats bereft of contexts and cultural locations of individuals or societies it dealt with. Obsession with technological advancements and haste in being judgmental about the transformational capacities of media often clouded the agency and freedom of human beings who interacted with it. The fundamental premises of mass communication process such as the presence of structured and regulated

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mechanism of information gathering, processing and distribution, capital-intensive technological solutions to create and operate media, passive, amorphous and ignorant collection of faceless individuals and dependence on the wisdom of a few in discerning information of value are being interrogated. Digital connections and networks have paved the way for ubiquitous media interactions in everyday life. The process of circulation and reception of messages became more interactive, modifiable and convergent. At the same time it lead to the formation of echo chambers, filter bubbles and panopticons. It often invented new textual and visual forms to build narratives instead of presenting facts. Now, new media logic is emerging with the help of machine intelligence. All these sum up to the fact that earlier conceptualisation of mass communication needs a thorough re-reading and evaluation.

In order to reimagine the processes and outcome of mass communication it's important to make use of earlier research, concepts and theories. In other words, instead of adjoining many theories and concepts and emerging trends in conventional terms, building of 'networks' of theories is more tenable. Networks are less hierarchical, more conversational and interactive. Networking of theories allows conversations in place of blind rejections or acceptances. It would also give a platform to seek evidences for theory development in the 'new' media arena. Historicity of 'old' media, mediation and construction of reality through negotiation, recognising the differences in information ecosystem in the old and new media structures are some aspects of theory development by networking concepts in digital media-sphere. It should capture the ontology of the digital and address the epistemological concerns in the production and transfer of knowledge in the networked world. The process is expected to be flexible and often informal so as to engage with the tremendous pace of changes in the digital domains and platforms.

From Medium Theory to New Media Theory

Medium theory by Toronto School scholars, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, laid out an all-pervasive, deterministic paradigm of 'media' and suggested its organisation as a structure which augments the sensory experiences and its relationship with the outside world through mediated and mediatised experiences (McQuail, 2010). The 'content' or the architect of content has liminal role in helping someone to make sense of the world than the form in which it has been delivered and reacted upon. Innis historicised the evolution of communication technology and found connections and profound influences of it in the making of our culture and social construction. McLuhan's extensions of Innis' works were primarily based on the standpoint that the notion of knowledge is not an innate construct of human beings but as

something based on sensory information and its frequency of stimulation (Ellis, 2012). Medium theory has addressed several themes such as individuation and fragmentation of masses, commodification of information, shifts of sensory experiences such as orality, textuality and visuality through various media forms. It has also addressed the epistemological question of knowledge development through the electronic or digital processes of collecting, sorting and storing information. Medium theory also pointed not only at the possibilities of accessing 'distant presence' but also the consequences of immediate future.

New Media theorists such as Mark Poster and Sherry Turkle announced the demise of monolithic messages and passive publics with the advent of internet and allied technologies. Interactivity and multiplicity were celebrated as the defining characteristic of new media age (Holmes, 2012). This paradigm has drawn its history from the conventional forms and its ability to cultivate new cultural norms. It envisaged colonisation of certain parts of new media societies, internet ghettoization, virtual public spheres and imagination of 'new' communities and nation states. It went on to suggest that,

“...in future all media will be connected on a digital basis, completely erasing the very notion of medium itself.” - Friedrich A. Kittler (1987)

(as quoted in *New Media Theory* by David Holmes)

Digital ontology encapsulates not only the technological convergence of media forms, new forms of languages and symbols, choices for interaction and conversation, easy access to the production tools of content but also the infinite possibilities of construction of meanings, social, communities and identities. In fact, the abundance is the core of critiques on digital ontology. While new media theory celebrates the choices, it lures the biases as well; not always in a negative connotation. While it accelerates the consumption habits, it nurtures tech-capitalism and its profit mongering tendencies. While it promotes interactions and dialogues; it creates echo chambers and filter bubbles wherein forceful intellectual isolation and denial of plurality is normalised. However, digital networks and its ontology in our everyday life is a reality and we should be capable enough to look at ourselves to understand the transformations occurred to us and reconcile with the present. Mediapolis (Silverstone, 2007) and convergence (Jenkins, 2006) are two terms that tried to capture the nuances of new media (internet enabled digital media after web 2.0). Both these concepts put forth the emergence of spaces for connections not necessarily in physical forms. However, it seems such spaces are not claimed by everyone or allocated for all in the digital world.

Lev Manovich (2009) explained the changes since web 2.0 as the replacement of mass consumption of commercial culture in 20th century by mass production of cultural objects by users in the templates set by professionals and platforms. In an article on 'Information- rich world', Simon (1971) articulates that:

'...wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it'- Herbert Simon (as quoted by Rudi Laermans in *The Attention Regime: On Mass Media and the Information Society*).

Although this conceptualisation has drawn its evidence from ubiquitous mass media content- especially with the popularity of television- it is sound enough to explain the information overload in the digital media world. Innumerable uploads in platforms which are considered as information is not getting traction among users because it has no inherent value of attention*. The organic nature of information is getting fulfilled when it is used or accessed and consequently, data assume the status of information only when it has been accessed and synthesised. Thus, attention becomes an inherent attribute of information in digital media sphere. If there is a conscious effort to cloth elements to the data that grab attention of a user, then it gets repurposed and its intention may change accordingly. Thus convergent media in digital spheres not only condition the thinking of producer of messages through avenues and templates of message production (such as reels, emojis, GIFs, predictive text etc.) but also construct an environment for message formulation (such as shares, likes, reviews etc.) with attention seeking as its prime motive. This has been true to the traditional mass media forms as well and can be observable in rating wars, circulation fights and listenership competitions. However, the marked difference in the new media arena is increased collectivisation of attention as it has the multiplier effect. Compounding to this aspect, in new media, there are deliberate attempts to have affective engagement with the user through emotionally charged content. Emotions play a crucial role in the style in which messages are formed in digital platforms. Just as any app is subjected to frequent updates, new media theory has to scale up its inquiries in multitude of directions.

Reorienting Mass Communication in the Network Age

Based on the above discussion we can rethink the idea of mass communication under the following sub-themes

* This author is sceptical about the interchangeable usage of 'information' in place of 'data'. The issue has been problematized in a research paper presented at the IAMCR conference, Nairobi- 2021(online).

a) Appearance, disappearance and reappearance of Sources

Traditional mass media, merely by acknowledging the sources, have enjoyed the privileges of authenticity, credibility and accuracy. This process counteracted upon sources with a bargain for truth and fairness. Even when sources sounded rhetorical, they had to be formal, civil and ethical. However, in networked media, sources are difficult to trace and locate. Although some appears to be sources, they may not always be within the frameworks of institutional or individual responsibilities. Sometimes there are no sources at all, but the spiralling content may be snow-balling through the networks. Sources reappear through meta-data analysis, but the intent might have been lost forever. They might lose the control over their content as well. If we borrow the elements that contribute to the encoding process by sources from David Berlo's linear SMCR model, we can rethink of it as follows. Informal and emotional expressions constitute the 'new' communication skills and attitudes. Acquisition of knowledge has been replaced by selection, sorting and distribution of data which appears to be knowledge. Social and cultural systems have been redefined in terms of new norms which nurture individualism instead of collectivism.

b) From message to content

Messages have been shaped not only by the sources but the platforms as well in the networked media. Platforms can even tempt someone to make messages unintentionally. Since the digital media thrive on un-ending interactions and engagements they create an evolving mechanism to increase its reach and access. Scope for selling thoughts and performances of everyday life ensures accelerated content making in the networks. Such abundance often disregards value –driven message formulations. The treatment of new media messages result from the co-creation by sources and networks.

c) Consumption and its consequences

Network appropriated messages have more emotional appeal rather than rational approach. The combination of texts with symbols which represent emotions, thoughts and responses diverge the attention of its users. It may evoke instantaneous feedback and lead to unintended trajectories of conversation as conceived by the producer. Such outbursts and digressions diffuse the intensity of messages and diminish it to the status of an attention-seeking utterance.

Mass Communication- A new ontological turn?

Many of the older theories of mass communication have envisaged media as a distinct structure and independent element that participates in the process of communication. Earlier mass society perspective read it as a disruptive force of elite culture which ushered 'bad tastes' and political unrest. Media was seen as an external agency which can cause desired consequences and habits. It was operational with the power of language which not only includes textual forms but also the aural and visual forms as well. This mass society perspective has been revisited in limited and moderate effects paradigms. Theoreticians such as Joseph Klapper, Paul Lazarsfeld and Walter Lippman attributed varying degrees of media effects based on contexts and locations. Media as interlocutors of elite groups and cultures have been challenged and new understandings of mass culture, popular culture and culture industry have been realised. As explained earlier, the media technology assumed centre stage in the prophetic writings of Toronto School scholars. The role of media in society has been theorised in terms of uses and gratifications.

Shifts from media or source centric views to active audience could be considered as a bridge to the 'digital' era. The simplistic SMCR (Source-Message-Channel-receiver) can now be rephrased as '*Social*' *Media Curation and Reproduction*. The source in the digital mediasphere embedded and immersed in the sea of virtual-social cannot always be seen or experienced in isolation. Medium appropriates the message and it becomes the message quite often. There is no specific channel, but a confluence of channels, which augments circulation and more specifically curation of the 'digital- social' and always tries to multiply by itself through interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality. Media convergence in the digital is no longer the combined action of different media forms but the partnering of content as well. The idea of 'demassification' by Alvin Toffler in the networked world has to be reimagined in terms of '*remassification*'; this time not by amorphous, ignorant and passive groups of people but by those 'active' audience who act upon the digital technology with or without agency and freedom. They form networks for various sorts of actions including simple acts of making everyday life even simpler to complex efforts of building resistances. Social media algorithms determine the appearance and reach of a particular content and it prompts the co-creation of content by manipulating the language of the author. If Artificial Intelligence is going to be deployed in various walks of life in near future, the disruption in mass communication process would be enormous. With the capacity to process texts and refine it further by sourcing data from users, it will create its own media logic which is going to alter the fundamental notion of mediation and conversation itself. In the future social media, when you are participating in a conversation you may not be sure whether you are talking to a human or an AI chat bot. It has the computing power to make users shift their

political allegiance and even to make them pull the trigger. AI has already been hacking the human communication and democracy says Yual Noah Harari (Harari, 2023). He was affirmative in adding that unhindered use of AI will mark the end of human history and called for immediate regulations which should start with the compulsory disclosure statement that if an AI tool is used, it should be revealed first. If the present digital ontology is meeting with the unnatural intelligence of machines individuals may start understanding media, not as a proposal of 'being' but as a prognosis of 'becoming'.

With the emergence of computer-mediated networks, mass communication has fused the interpersonal modes and Castells (2000) defined it as self-mass communication. While the social organisation of media plays a key role in the interactions, individual assimilations of the content also gained significant space in the exchanges. Cardoso (2011) has developed this theme by addressing the power of integrated media systems and the processes of communication globalisation, networked mediation and varying levels of interactivity available to users. He called it a 'networked communication model'. Cardoso argues that an 'informed citizen' in the network age is not the person who accessed the information and knowledge, but someone who made use of it to develop new information and knowledge. In networks, media is not the message, it precedes the message says Eco (2001). The media tools compel us to express ourselves and generate content unintentionally.

Archives of memories and knowledge in digital media sphere is getting recycled and repurposed. The process of archiving has no protection of gatekeeping and almost all that has been passing through networks are archived without validation. The retrieval of archived materials is optimised with machine intelligence and we experience an augmented reality in place of objective reality. The precedence of media before messages leaves the prosumer with little chances to negotiate meanings and navigate the information entropy.

Mark Deuze (2012) has put forth the media life perspective in which he argues that we are not living *with* media, but *in* media. Deuze says this can be considered as a new ontological turn in mass communication theory. People live in their own information spaces with the presence of increased mediation and individuation through media in all realms of life. Identities have been co-created in the media lives.

Conclusion

The very notion of media as something external to human beings or media merging itself to the messages have been challenged in the digitally networked

mediasphere. Media has become more 'organic' by accumulating and appropriating knowledge and human emotions with computing abilities and it is slowly, but surely, capturing a self-evolving mechanism with the advent of AI. It can potentially alter or reshape the lived experiences of human beings and may usher unintended consequences. Earlier conceptualisation of media as a facilitator of rational public spheres has also incorporated the possible transformations such as audience fragmentation and cocooning.

From the launch pad of technology driven media paradigms, media studies and mass communication research need to search for new theories in the light of digital ontology. Web 2.0 has unleashed novel ideas such as the amalgamation self and mass communication, networked interactions and digital communities and underscored the significance of media performativity in everyday life. The 'Social Media Curation and Reproduction' calls for remassification; a process in which active' audience act upon the digital technology with or without agency and freedom. As Mark Deuze puts it, seeing life as something lived in media would be the ontological point of departure for new theories in mass communication which explains the digital and its consequences.

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