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Sociology of the Internet

The System of Public Media in Transition

Some "Megatrends" and their Implications for Social Theory and Research

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Abstract

Digitalization and computer networking give rise to a more complex media system in which conventional mass media and new computer media will specialize on complementary functions. In addition, they will enter into new relationships of symbiosis and mutual support. Mass media will articulate the integrative aspects of society: providing widespread common experiences, homogenizing opinions, offering intellectual leadership, transmitting information generated at top levels of societal institutions. They try to focus public discussions on single salient topics and create a strong "public opinion" able to influence societal developments and political decision making. Contrarily, computer media will express aspects of cultural heterogeneity and social complexity: constituting an ever growing "variety pool" of information and views hitherto not available within the public sphere. They give rise to a multitude of volatile "weak publics" (Nancy Fraser) deliberating on a broad spectrum of (also quite "unpopular") issues at the same time.

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1. Two countervailing developmental trends

Evidently, the contemporary media system is undergoing rapid and fundamental change caused by two very different (even contradictory) developments. On the one hand, the long-term trend toward economic concentration and monopolization continues: resulting in a loss of many smaller scale (local) media (e.g. newspapers) as well as in a shift toward supranational TV-stations. This implies that

- 1) the number of independent actors in the media system is shrinking;
- 2) the average size of each player is increased;
- 3) media tend toward heterogeneity and moderation (and toward independence from specific parties or other groupings) in order to appeal to a very wide audience;
- 4) access to public expression becomes more unequal and more highly controlled: so that most individuals, groups and smaller-scale political actors (like communities) lose any chance to articulate autonomously their views;
- 5) integrative media functions become more pronounced: manifested in the global spread of identical news or series as well as in live events watched by hundreds of million people worldwide.

On the other hand, we see the emergence of new media based on networked personal computers: giving rise to the global public net of networks known as the "internet", but also to a rapidly growing diversity of semi-public networks on the meso-level of organizations and groups (intranets) as well as to completely private networks (based on mailing lists or email addresses). The most general function of these new technologies is to provide low-threshold access to worldwide information, communication and publication for any user irrespective of time, space and social affiliation. Ideally, "low threshold" means particularly that fixed costs (in terms of money or the acquisition of prior qualification) are very low and that the need for intermediary agencies vanishes because authors are able to act themselves as editors or publishers without making use of organizational and/or professional support. In addition, the rapid worldwide spread of computer networks (even in underdeveloped countries) is facilitated by their rather low infrastructural and organizational requirements (compared with traditional "snail mail" and conventional telecommunications). As a consequence, the public sphere is drastically enlarged by layers of peripheral information and communication: stemming from a multitude of (mostly unprofessional, often even unidentifiable) sources. Even extremely small and poor collectivities (like tiny communities, extremist groupings or intraparty fractions) are able to present themselves independently in public, and long forgotten informal folk traditions and local identities may re-emerge in unexpected forms and constellations. This implies that the factual heterogeneity of cultures and views existing on grassroots levels is more likely to become manifest, and that any kind of consensus-building becomes more cumbersome because a larger variety of positions have to be combined.

Given the aforementioned exodus of conventional media from lower levels of society, the internet is likely to fill this ever growing vacuum, and by giving a voice particularly to more educated population segments skilled and motivated to make their views heard in a competent way.

Looking at the present online-scenery in Switzerland, we already see that the internet may revive the "opinion press" wiped out in the last decades (e.g. "Biwidus"¹ or "CH libre"²) or

¹ <http://www.biwidus.ch/>

² <http://www.stacher.ch/chlibre/chlibre.htm>

that it may give rise to a rich flora of small-scale media on the communal or neighbourhood level (e.g. "mattezytig"³ or "der Oberhasler"⁴). While the conventional media have high potential capacities to influence public opinion and political processes, their societal impact is curbed by the fact that their mere size forces them to abstain from high-profile opinions and ideologies and to adapt opportunistically to a variety of preferences and pressures. On the Internet, we find the contrary constellation of actors very weak in terms of money, organization and public visibility, but rather strong in terms of goal specificity and internal homogeneity. Nevertheless, online groupings typically remain "weak publics" insofar as they contribute to a fragmentation of public attention to a multitude of issues at the same time: so that no focused public discussion on single salient issues can be enacted, and no unified "public opinion" (as a supreme source of political legitimacy and guidance) may emerge.

In sociological terms, internet surfing can be conceptualized as the sequential enactment of *very peripheral (fully reversible) roles* (VPR) and the short-term actualization of *very weak social ties* (VWT). The major function of these is to provide individuals with a broader range of information and behavioral options without sacrificing autonomy and without being drawn into more enduring and demanding types of social relations. In the realm of politics for example, we may see the spread of a very noncommittal type of "mouse-click-activism": by signing petitions or (p)referenda by email or by initiating one's own very little campaign (without the need for helping hands or formal organization).

Certainly, the Net does not create equal publication chances for everybody, but the *nature* of these inequalities is severely transformed. Up to the present, inequalities were based on different opportunities for accessing channels of publication (= a correlate of money and social controls); in the future, inequalities will result from different skills in attracting public attention (= more a matter of reputation, the possession of relevant information or mere communicative skills). Basically, the common good for which all media are competing is "individual attention": a scarce resource not expandable much on the level of each human being because of all other role-requirements of modern life.

The capacity of the Internet to absorb attention is considerable because wherever surfing occurs, it is a dominant activity beside which almost no secondary activity can be exerted at the same time. Absorption is particularly high to the degree that interactive potentials are exploited: (e.g. by writing newsgroup messages or participating in online games.). These interactive features are also making the internet a serious competitor for face-to-face interactions to a degree never attained by books, radio or TV.

2. Functional complementarity as a basis for inter-media specialization

Given the pronounced functional complementarity between conventional mass media and new computer media, we may expect that both will specialize more and more on those tasks where they are particularly strong:

1) Mass media will concentrate on real "broadcasting": aiming at extensive mainstream audiences with highly "popular" content and disregarding smaller-scale social systems (as well as lower levels of societal institutions and meso-social organizations.). Computer media will specialize on "narrowcasting" to a multitude of tiny minorities with highly divergent (also

³ <http://www.niconsult.ch/Mattezytig.htm>

⁴ <http://www.oberhasler.ch/>

quite exotic and extremist) preferences and views. Consequently, the (global) public sphere will become more comprehensive by encompassing a wider spectrum of social collectivities and by reaching further down to very low levels of society (e.g. the level of tiny communities and insignificant voluntary associations). On the professional level, we may well see the emergence of a new type of narrow-casting journalism: small teams of free lancers selling their specialized or "customized" news (e.g. covering a local area) online to paying subscribers with whom they will cultivate interactive relations. As they don't need any organizational infrastructure, they will remain independent from capitalist elites and large-scale bureaucratic institutions; on the other hand, their dependence on recipients will be notoriously high.

2) Mass media will emphasize sender-dominated "push-information" (like announcements of new products or political propaganda) aiming to provide basic new information or changing attitudes; computer media will specialize in "pull-functions": providing data-bases (e.g. advertisements about job openings or vacant apartments) for client-oriented use. Consequently, all mass media heavily relying on pull information (e.g. daily newspapers) will tend to lose income, while push media like Television will be less affected.

Generally, net publication reinforces the dissociation between encoding and decoding behavior, because users enjoy all the freedom to navigate in any preferred direction. *Hypertextuality* in particular makes it less probable that messages are decoded in the same sequences as they were encoded: thus lowering the sender's chances of controlling the process of communication. Consequently, senders are in a position of helplessness and uncertainty. In particular, they lose control over the sequential orders of verbal transmissions: making it impossible to transmit very complex chains of logical reasoning or complicated literary plots which require that a strict sequence in decoding is maintained. While it becomes very easy to be sender, it may well become less motivating to send anything, because no control over reception processes can be gained.

3) Mass media will articulate the *integrative* aspects of society: providing widespread common experiences, homogenizing opinions, offering intellectual leadership, transmitting information generated at top levels of societal institutions. They try to focus public discussions on single salient topics and create a strong "public opinion" able to influence societal developments and political decision making. Contrarily, computer media will express aspects of cultural heterogeneity and social complexity: constituting an ever growing "variety pool" of information and views hitherto not available within the public sphere. They give rise to a multitude of volatile "weak publics" (Nancy Fraser) deliberating on a broad spectrum of (also quite "unpopular") issues at the same time.

Methodologically speaking, the net is a rich source of basic sociological data because it mirrors rather truly the (changing) conditions in various settings of society. In particular, many new phenomena (e.g. embryonic social movements) may be seen first on the internet before becoming visible in the mass media sphere. While mass media increase widespread homogeneity by providing identical information and experiences to very large populations, computer nets catalyze inter-individual heterogeneity and social atomization because every net-surfer follows his own idiosyncratic paths acquires a particularistic mosaic of information.

Consequently, wide-spread use of computer-nets will undermine face-to-face interaction by reducing the likelihood that any congregating individuals will share common backgrounds of information and meaning and that they will easily find common topics of discussion.⁵

4) Given the costs and limits of transportation or terrestrial propagation, most conventional mass media or will remain confined to territories, while computer nets specialize on trans-territorial communication (e.g. catalyzing solidarity among geographically dispersed ethnic or religious groups). In the political realm, the net may facilitate the emergence of nonterritorial actors (e.g. worldwide ethnic movements) as well as the formation of "heteromorphic" actors (combining territorial states with emigrant populations). Culturally heterogeneous countries (like Switzerland) will experience additional centrifugal forces, because the diverging transnational solidarities of different population segments may become reinforced).

5) Mass media will specialize on the one-directional diffusion of information without feedback provisions; computer nets will be used for bi-directional (and multilateral) communication. Together, they create the chances that a more equilibrated relationship between

- Top-down information
- Bottom- communication
- Horizontal multilateral communication

is maintained within political systems, parties or other organized social units.

Paradoxically, mass media will be more able to maintain their highly centralized regime: because the Net functions as a "safety valve" by providing free publication opportunities to all those who have no access to the conventional channels.

One of the fascinating challenges of computer nets results from their capacity to support multilateral communication without some of the known handicaps of face-to-face interaction: scarcity of time, unequal opportunities for talking and "irrational" nonverbal cues. In fact, higher degrees of "communicative rationality" may be realized insofar as complex statements can be fed into discussions, replications can be related to any preceding message and thoroughly thought over before sending, discussion results can be synthesized, stored and transmitted (e.g. to newcomers); attention will focus on message content (instead on personal attributes of their originators etc etc. Taken in a value-free literate sense, the USE-NET may be seen as the first historical realization of "communicative public space" ("kommunikative Oeffentlichkeit" in Habermas' terms), because it supports multilateral discussions open to anybody's observation and active participation.

On the other hand, computer-mediated discussions are known to encourage emotional flaming and to contribute more to pooling information and enriching the range of alternatives than to consensus-building and decision-making.⁶

From a methodological point of view, the study of online communication can contribute much to a better understanding of the potentialities and shortcoming of face-to-face - interactions on the one hand and of unrestricted public communication on the other. In a practical perspective, systematic research will be needed to assess the functional capacities of different online arrangements; for example: what difference does it make whether discussions are moderated or non-moderated, or whether access to discussions is open to everybody or selectively restrained?

⁵ See for instance: Josef Wehner: *Interaktive Medien - Ende der Massenkommunikation?* (in: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 26, 1997: 96-114).

⁶ See Geser Hans *Auf dem Weg zur Cyberdemocracy?*" *Auswirkungen der Computernetze auf die politische Kommunikation*. http://www.geser.net/intcom/t_hgeser00.pdf

6) Mass media will increasingly emphasize their capacities related to journalistic professionalism, expensive technology and complex organization (e.g. collecting and analyzing complex data or displaying sophisticated presentations) Computer nets will be crowded with semi- or nonprofessional publishers and communicators which exploit their their capacity for "authentic" and "empathic" responses or their access to highly informal information.

The internet may strengthen the level of primary grass-root - information sent out by victims of wars and riots, by insiders of marginalized minorities or by inmates of closed institutions which hitherto had no voice in the public sphere. In the realm of social movements and political campaigning, the mass media may still be used for "top-down mobilization" (initiated by charismatic leaders and "social entrepreneurs"), while the Internet may facilitate "bottom-up" mobilization processes based on self-selective recruitment and horizontal communication. On the other hand, the proliferation of different voices can be self-defeating for democracy because processes of consensus-building and decision making are more cumbersome (and only effective when they are highly segregated from the public sphere.)

7) Mass media will represent more than ever the more volatile component of the public sphere: concentrating on outstanding present events and short-term developments which are quickly outdated and deactualized when news programs have ended or when tomorrow's daily newspaper appears. Computer nets will provide the "memory" of the public sphere by keeping all past information available in easily retrievable form. As a consequence, we see the emergence of a public sphere which has the capacity to learn and to evolve, because new information does not wipe out the old. Politicians as well as political groupings will experience higher pressure to show consistency in thoughts and action over time, and there may be a "neotraditionalist" trend of relating identities to past actions or events.⁷

8) Mass media will continue to be (or become) fully commercialized media because their fix costs (as well as variable cost) are very high. While Computer nets (particularly the WWW-section of the Internet) will also certainly be colonized by commercial media firms, there will always be a large "amateur section" reigned by noneconomic values.

In theoretical terms we may expect that in a fully wired society, there will be a more pronounced segregation between the economy and other institutional orders: because whoever wants to spread information without commercial motives (e.g. for political, scientific or religious reasons) can do so without making use of commercial publishers. Given the ease of entry and leaving, we may see a proliferation of "amateur journalists" : e. g. retired elderly citizens contributing to local news coverage or students reporting about highly specialized cultural developments and events. The Internet may also become a natural breeding ground for young journalists undertaking their first career steps and experiencing their first phases of professional socialization.

9) Mass media (particularly Television and the Tabloid Press) will even reinforce their contemporary trend toward "personalization": focusing more on human individuals (with all their idiosyncrasies) than on collectivities or more objective aspects of culture, collectivities or social institutions. Instead, communication on the internet will concentrate far more on

⁷ vgl. z.B. Hans Geser: Wiederbelebung vergessener Traditionen oder Aufbruch ins Dritte Jahrtausend?
http://socio.ch/intcom/t_hgeser04.htm

depersonalized topics (e.g. ideology or artistic artifacts) because - given the incapacity to transport nonverbal cues - communicated messages are likely to become highly dissociated from their senders. Thus, mass media may remain important in the realm of *political leadership and political elections*, while *issue-related discussions* may become more highly developed in online settings than (for instance) in TV-talk shows or volatile newspaper reports.

3. Emerging trends of inter-media-cooperation

"Digitalization" is the Megatrend producing a growing convergence of almost all technical media on the most basic technical level.

All digitalized data belong to a single, coherent universe insofar as they can easily be transmitted and transformed from one mode (or sector) to another. Within seconds, entries of most private diaries or minutes of secret executive sessions can be made available worldwide in the Internet, while public documents may be integrated into personal archives or forwarded a email messages; oral speech may be transformed in written text (or vice versa) and hitherto isolated groups or organizations may coalesce by sharing their data bases etc. While the generation of communicative boundaries is still essential for the the differentiation of social systems, such boundaries are basically permeable and have to be maintained by artificial efforts of self discipline and social controls or by special technical provisions (like firewalls and encryption). "Permeability" also means that internet users adopt an undifferentiated "polyvalent" role by changing quickly between phases of passive reception and active communication; and that firms and institutions dedicated to specific media (printing, TV, radio, film, software etc.) may give way to multimedia enterprises exploiting all modes of digitalization. Finally, it explains the explosive speed with which the WWW is filled up with contents from the grass roots level (e.g. family snapshots) on the one hand and from the sphere of mass media and formal institutions (e.g. electronic journals) on the other.

While the Internet may be potentially able to absorb all other media (e.g. telephone or Television), we may still envisage a future where all conventional media may persist: but only when they accept their more restricted, specialized domains and when they enter into symbiotic relationships to each other.

Two major strands of symbiosis are easy to identify presently:

- 1) By making use of their "push-capacities", conventional mass media provide the basic information needed to search for something specific on the net. For example, they report about crucial events which then give rise to extensive net discussions (e.g. Princess Diana's death); or they endow individuals and institutions with high public visibility and reputation: so that their websites are likely to find widespread resonance. Belonging to the secondary media", the Internet flourishes most in social settings where mass media have already produced rather converging views and interpretations.⁸
- 2) By constituting a rich "variety pool" of all sorts of information and cultural productions, the Internet is a major resource for any journalists seeking to acquire detailed knowledge of some sort or keeping up with current events and developments in any social setting (particularly in more marginal spheres uncovered by major news agencies).

Future newspapers and TV-programs will evoke interest insofar as they make use of these basic materials for enriching their own news coverage, and when they provide competent guidance to internet resources (e.g. by reporting about informative websites or fruitful newsgroup discussions). Adopting a new professional role model, many jour-

⁸Josef Wehner, op. cit.

nalists may see themselves as "information brokers": mediating between the intransparent jungle of online information and the very limited receptive capacities of typical media consumers.⁹

Considering the least controversial hypothesis, we may safely predict that the media system evolves toward higher complexity levels because new media are emerging while all conventional media are - in maybe diminished extensions - basically maintained. As a consequence, senders and receivers will have higher degrees of freedom in choosing media channels according to type of messages as well as according to their preferences, habits and goals. Focussing on those increasing populations who have access to all media channels, we may state that their actual use (or non-use) of different media is increasingly indicative of the user's personal (or collective) preferences. Like a prisma, the media system will tend to amplify basic divergences between different individuals, groups, countries or regions by providing them with a broader range of selection. Particularly, the use of computer networks may correlate strongly with preferences for individual freedom and political decentralization: thus sharpening the confrontation between liberal and authoritarian ideologies (or even intensifying Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations").

4. Studying the new media

It would be extremely misleading to see the "new media" as mere supplementary components of a given media system: making it more complex by providing some additional functions. Instead, *Digitalization* as well as *Computer-Networking* are more basic innovations pervading all technical media and generating a new platform for social and cultural evolution. Thus, future media sciences will have to adapt to the following categorical challenges:

1) Acceleration of change

Developments in the contemporary media world are progressing with such speed that they can no longer be grasped with traditional habits of scientific research and scientific publication. For instance, studies on the internet are only useful when they can be finished and made publicly available within 12 to 15 month. Consequently, typical research becomes small-scale and results have to be spread by means of online publications.

2) Potentialities and Options

As a second categorical change affecting research methodology, it has to be acknowledged that there is a rapidly widening gap between

- the factual uses of the given technologies to be observed presently (or in the recent past)
- the future potential uses of the given technologies (to be projected by taking ongoing learning and diffusion processes into account).

Methodologically, this means that empirical research has to be supplemented

- 1) by more prognostic endeavours: trying to preview how different social or cultural settings will probably make use of the new media in the future;

⁹ For an elaboration of this new role of the "referendarist" see Bullinga Marcel: Decision-maker/Teledemocracy: Dutch model for teledemocracy via Internet (<http://www.xs4all.nl/~roesderz/english/teledemo/index.html>)

- 2) "constructivist" endeavours: sketching various scenarios based on alternative premises about values and goals to be implemented or socio-cultural traditions to be conserved.

3) *Autonomy and Unpredictability*

The new media reduce the degree to which various kinds of individual or collective activities (as well as their causal impacts) can be predicted, because they provide each social actors with a wider range of alternatives concerning the types, modalities, contents and targets of communication. For instance, very many tiny groupings are able to start a "cybercampaign" at any chosen moment, and every individual user can relate himself to anyone of 18 000 discussion groups at any hour of the day. The "low-threshold" character of the new media implies that very negligible subjective motivations can decide whether one or another given online behaviour (or none at all) will actually occur.

In a methodological perspective, it may safely be concluded that the new media make it more necessary to conceive of human individuals (and even collectivities) as "stochastic" actors whose basic micro-actions are characterized by erratic fluctuations (while their overall behaviour may well show higher regularities over time).

4) *Polymorphic Interactions*

The new public sphere is a broad arena where very different social actors meet on the same plane of interaction: individuals, groups, collectivities, organizations, institutions, public authorities and political regimes. In addition, digitalization of data encourages the blurring of authorship (e.g. by supporting cooperative text-production or by facilitating plagiarism (via "copy and paste")). Finally, we may see the emergence of "semi-virtual groupings" (combining face-to-face partners with online members) as well as "cyborg systems" which include artificial actors like software agents, chatterbots and the like.

For sociology, this implies that many theoretical concepts and propositions have to be redefined in a more abstract, generalized way in order to encompass all these different relationships (e.g. "diagonal" interactions between individual and collective actors or between human beings and artificial agents). Evidently, current frameworks based on "intersubjectivity" will not suffice because collective and artificial agents have no psychological existence.

Methodologically, there will be more problems of defining the units of analysis and of attributing public messages to specific authoring actors,

Thus, far-reaching innovations on the theoretical as well as on the methodological level seem necessary before the newly emerging media system can become the object of adequate scientific studies. On the other hand, studying the new media may be very functional to identify the fundamental new problems in the first place and to set these developments into motion.