

Tele-graphy in the post-broadcasting era

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At one time, the electromagnetic telegraph was the sole technology that could transmit, record/store, and retrieve words in a steadily expanding *polis*. Today, the telegraph is a dying medium, but it is dying in a world of tele-graphics. Today's equivalent of the Morse code, the first global alphabet, is no longer limited to words. As it turns out, the telegraph was only the first hint of what Lyotard has termed a telegraphable culture, a culture which has once and for all transcended the bounds of time and place.

The principal successor to the telegraph was the telephone, which over the years has taken its place in virtually every home and an increasing number of briefcases and pockets. Culture, however, was mediated by other means: the press, film and broadcast media. Their tremendous growth took place within the premise of one-way communication and resulted in a new sector, viz., the cultural industries. These media have dominated Western culture throughout the twentieth century, and they have also drawn the greatest attention among researchers in the humanities and the social sciences.

But, as we all know, the telephone has new, younger siblings, media which afford two-way communication and, for the first time, the right of reply. Digital tele-graphics holds the promise of interactive communication with moving pictures, sound and

text – virtually independent of time and place. The networks of the new technology challenge both the established structure of telecommunications and the one-way model of mass communications. They erase the frontier between central senders and an abstract, anonymous and passive audience. They are not mass media, they do not 'mass communicate', yet they are definitely media!

We see the dawning of a post-broadcasting era, an era in which mass media will represent but one of many kinds of media. My use of the prefix "post" does not mean that broadcasting has died, or is even moribund. It simply indicates that mass communication now takes its place in a broader, more pluralistic tele-graphic culture. The new media locate mass communication in its historical context and demonstrate other means of communicating over distances.

This development also poses challenges to the research community. Let me present a few general hypotheses and questions concerning the implications and roles these new media will have in our societies. They form, if you will, a provisional agenda for media research in years to come.

Social interaction and morality

The first point concerns the audience. The new tele-graphic media render the concept

of "the audience" obsolete. The mass audience disintegrates into groups and individuals who are at once senders and receivers. The distinction between sender and receiver loses its relevance. The vast "audience" is broken up into communication processes initiated by individual, contextually motivated acts. The media are on their way to becoming everyday tools of social intercourse, individual and collective. They are media we not only pay attention to, but express ourselves through in our interaction with others. When we use our telefax, telephone, mobile telephone and E-mail, we are all senders – whether strong or weak.

Such uses of the media, such communicative acts are social acts, if we apply Max Weber's definition. Tele-graphic media may be used to influence others, to intrude into their lives, impact on their behaviour and attitudes. Sociological theories of social behaviour regain their prominence, but now in relation to the physically distant, mediated social behaviour in an expanded temporal and spatial arena.

Over the years, media research has studied effects, uses and gratifications, patterns of use and receptio. As the new communications technologies have made their way into households, it is time we expanded the traditional focus of theories of social behaviour to gain an understanding of the media user as a social actor, as one who acts socially via extended senses, viz., the new media.

One consequence of this development is that the new media give media use a *moral* dimension. Public discussion of the morals of the media – or the lack thereof (moral panics) – now becomes a general issue, not necessarily primarily directed to the media institutions, but to the users of media, as well: Do YOU behave morally? Do YOU take moral responsibility for your mediated acts? And for the media researcher the

question arises: Do the new media encourage us to walk the straight and narrow, or do they tempt us onto the broad way to destruction?

And: Posit for a moment that Emmanuel Levinas and Zygmunt Bauman are right in their proposition that morality arises in the meeting with the other, in the immediate social encounter, in touching and meeting one another's gaze. If this is so, can the electronic media, which re-establish contact, perhaps also reinstate the sense of moral responsibility? If it is not writing and the printing press per se which have caused the moral implosion in contemporary Europe, as Bauman, McLuhan and many others have claimed, but the rupture in the link between sender and receiver which written communication implies, can the new dialogic media re-establish the moral balance? Can the new media once again represent the other, body and soul, as our fellow man, as a person we have responsibility to and for?

Thus my proposal is that we extend the question of the accountability to include the media's inherent ability to re-create social encounters.

Reflexivity

Now, let us consider the role of images in the new situation. As many before me have pointed out, we human beings nowadays risk drowning in a sea of audiovisual impressions. The impressions that reach us are more and more removed from the lines of black on white, the abstractions of the written word. 'Texts' nowadays tend to consist of music, speech, images and photographic pictures in kaleidoscopic sequence.

The global circulation of information, as Scott Lash and others have pointed out, is not conceptual, but mimetic. Meaning is increasingly communicated in symbols, pic-

tures and narratives. This turns the reflexivity of the lifeworld toward aesthetics. Cultural industries deal in symbols; they appeal to ethics only via the aesthetic. We exist between art and artifice, between the horrible and the sublime. Our sensibilities are more attuned to tangibles and forms than toward rational argumentation. Thus, our moral values find themselves on shaky ground. The familiar postmodern lament.

Another process, however, militates in the opposite direction: The function of images changes in that they represent an individual's responsibility for his/her actions. The image, too, becomes part of the individual's mediated behaviour. Pictures cannot be understood solely in the light of their overall credibility – they must also be perceived as a bouquet of flowers or a revolver. I venture the thesis that as acts of communication have become aestheticized, the picture has acquired a moral dimension. In the video-phone, video-conferencing and home pages on WWW we find morally intentioned communicative processes.

The public sphere

What about the role of new media in the public sphere? The public forum which the media represent provides a flow of communications which generates consensus in greater or lesser measure on issues of common interest. The media should see that the communication process does not stagnate or degenerate into sectarianism in various subcultures or circles. In this way the media contribute to the vitality of our society. They maintain the democratic civic dialogue as a procedure and process, even though they do not permit the act of communication.

The media perform this function on a day-to-day basis by selecting the themes for communication. They set the agenda in

a varied and attractive manner by presenting 'eternal' themes as though they were new. Déjà-vu phenomena like corruption, abuse of power, parliamentary crises, summit meetings, earthquakes, turns of the business cycle, sports events, celebrities' weddings and bloody murder are all presented, time and again, but each time as though it were the first. Varying treatment of seemingly 'unique' events bolsters both the stability of our society and its ability to adapt. The media pigeon-hole events into different genres and social themes. At the same time, the themes are renewed, 'freshened up', and updated in the various 'items'. Thus, our society is kept receptive to change, while the essential continuity remains unbroken. Change and stability go hand in hand.

The media are meant to perform this role, to keep the public sphere vital, but they are less and less able to fulfil the task. *Increasing heterogeneity, complexity and speed of information in contemporary society calls for more differentiated, more rapid and more flexible media.* The new media reach out into the nooks and crannies of various subcultures, where mass media seldom reach. With the new media, society has got more legs to stand on, and it is likely more robust as a result.

Neither do mass media open channels of direct communication between individual citizens. The network media, with their alternative structure of communication, complement both the mass media and communication face-to-face. The differences between mass and network media mean that they can complement one another in the public sphere. Thus, the new media expand the public sphere, while contributing new forms.

In this way the new communications technologies contribute to the public sphere, to our society's self-awareness.

Meanwhile, they make such an awareness more necessary since they also give rise to complexity. For those of us who are interested in the dynamics of the public sphere, it should be an important task to specify the relationships between the old and new media, between mass media and network media.

Expert systems and electronic fields

The new media have significance far beyond the public sphere, as well. Our daily lives are more and more influenced by expert systems, whether effectuated by technology or human beings. Expertise integrates individuals' daily lives into the systems, fits the personal into the standardized world. Impersonal, professional expertise exists for all aspects of our lives. Access to expert systems means freedom from the drudgery of daily life, but it also implies greater dependence on technological systems. The independence of individuals today extends no further than what today's technology permits. Personal choice is more and more a question of selecting from the menu expert systems offer us.

Information technology will increasingly serve as *conduits of information, communication and services between individuals and expert systems*. Because information technology is quick, instrumental, flexible and cheap, it will be used to distribute information and services from systems to individuals. Our increasingly *mobile lifestyle* makes such electronic lifelines ever more important.

Expert systems are indispensable. They offer standardized and, to an increasing extent, mediated services which we cannot live without. The 'price' of our liberation from traditional norms and authorities is being tied to administrative and commer-

cial systems which have various aspects of our private lives as their 'business concept'. Life's necessities – food, clothing, money, sex, recreation, reflection, security, a sense of belonging and meaning - form the milieu in which our 'personal project' takes place. The challenge to us as individuals consists more than ever of weighing the options at hand in relation to our personal wants and desires, and then ordering external services and resources. The purpose of the project, of life, as Georg Simmel points out, is to convert the resources the objective culture makes available to serve one's personal needs.

In short, because digital technology is efficient and flexible it will be used in an ever wider variety of contexts. The development of increasingly sophisticated technologies, in combination with the systems of service and expertise which surround us, open up what we might call *electronic fields of interaction*, whether the interaction takes place via ATM machines, the travel bureau's terminals, or via tele-supported distance education. These electronic fields, on which people and social systems meet, need to be examined more closely.

Conclusion: The Medium is still the Message

I have talked about the importance of the new media in relation to social interaction, to morals, and in the contexts of the public sphere and expert systems. By way of conclusion, I would like to point out how the new media of Today remind us of an old methodological and theoretical truth. They demonstrate that a good part of the social and cultural importance of mediated information and communication lies in the media. Media formats generate numerous inadvertent side-effects. In time they reproduce cultures. We may, like McLuhan, turn Aristotle

upside down: Form is the soul of all things. If our culture has a message or a soul, it lies in the packaging, in appearances, the surface, the tangible. Technologies choose their users, select and form their content; they offer their services to actors and institutions, (some, but not others).

This fact has to some extent remained implicit, hidden. The power of the media is masked as technology constructs reality in a stream of deliberate acts, events, episodes, fictions and histories. Technology recedes into the shadows, as Heidegger puts it. The function of television programmes is to divert their viewers, to tranquilize the senses while the medium

performs its message. The medium is the message!

This aspect of the power of the media is revealed by the new media, with their variety, the voids in their content, the currents of communication they carry.

It should be our task to chase the media out of the shadows. Whether the media technologically mediate social action, play roles on the fringes of the public sphere, or serve as bridges between expert systems and individuals, no matter what the role they fill in the process of social integration, McLuhan's dictum, "the medium is the message", has more relevance today than ever before!