New Media as "Cultural Techniques" and as Forums for Communicative Action Empirical Research and Constituents of a Theory

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This project, financed by the Norwegian Research Council (2003-2007), is fundamentally about the potentials of (new) media for democratic communication. It operates with the concept of media as historically specific techniques of production and reception (with implications for culture and society), with theoretical reflections on democratic mediated communication, and with an approach of 'cultural engineering', experimenting with new technological interfaces.

New media are by no means more democratic per se, not even when they are interactive, in technological terms: Democratic culture is not built in to digital systems. On the other hand, certain technological interfaces provide better possibilities for democratic communication than others.

The project is a collaboration between staff members from the department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, and from the Faculty of Media and Journalism, Volda University College. All participants are devoted to communication values which can contribute to enhance the quality of public discourse and to develop media interfaces, accessible for many users and open to many voices.

The component projects are: (1) Changing television, changing audiencehood. Analogue and digital television as different cultural techniques? (Barbara Gentikow, UiB), (2) Techniques for better broadcasting (Lars Nyre, UiB), (3) Digital journalism (Øystein L. Pedersen, Volda), (4) Mobile communication (Erling Sivertsen, Volda), (5) Experiments with digital radio, television and online-newspaper (Sverre Liestøl, Lars Nyre).

Main Theoretical Background and Methodological Approaches

The media in their function as information and communication technology have always been essential for cultural and social development. They are both constituted by this development and instrumental in constituting it. Drawing on a concept from a contemporary German research tradition (Kittler et al.) we consider this operation as *culture techniques.* These are techniques in terms of practical-aesthetic competences involved in both production and use of media. As we know, the printed text and reading competence as 'old' culture techniques have been of great significance in cultural and social development. Similarly, light should be cast on the significance of the new media as culture techniques.

The concept '*communicative action'* refers to Habermas (1981) and will be rendered both concrete and updated here. What is new about communicative action in current developments is that technology is of greater practical importance in the communication situation (Krotz 1991), and that action on communicative platforms is of considerable significance in cultural and social processes. With our choice of a micro-sociological perspective, we are attempting to concretise something of Habermas' 'grand theory'.

Both journalistic production and reception are communicative actions. Firstly, we will take a close, concrete look at the new media's potential for new forms of communicative actions in order to reflect over the character and meaning of the acts in the analysis of our material. For the present, we suggest that wellknown communicative actions change and

new forms of mediated communication are introduced, not necessarily in conformity with the Habermasian communicative sphere.

In order to describe the location where the new communication takes place we have chosen the metaphoric expression '*forum*'. An alternative expression was 'arena' but this represents a division between an audience and actors on stage. Such communication form is more in line with the old rather than the new media. Forum, with its source in the classic meeting place in ancient Rome, describes, on the other hand, a place where actors meet on the same plane in order to exchange goods and information and to be entertained. As such, forum indicates a place of interaction that is characteristic of the new media. A weakness with this metaphor is that it describes a communication space where the actors are directly present. Mediated communication takes place precisely not in this way. Participants in new mediated communication meet in an electronic presence rather than a forum; the connotations of the metaphor however, remain fruitful.

We will develop constituents of a theory by making use of empirical user research as material for a 'grounded theory', by utilising hermeneutical media- and culture theory in a critical and creative manner, and by expanding the media-scientific perspective with theories from other disciplines (such as rhetoric, phenomenology, philosophy of technology and information science). The outcome is anticipated to be rudimentary to an innovative theory of media and culture that we frame with the concept 'culture techniques'.

Developing a theory for contemporary processes is problematic, but a mapping and tentative analysis of current phenomena is nevertheless necessary. The debate on far reaching new phenomena is typically characterised by either utopian dreaming or fearful dystopian visions; an example is the ongoing public discourse about the Internet. Research needs to be sober, unbiased and down to earth. Without attributing an absolute truth-value to empirical case studies, we are of the firm belief that they are well qualified in providing information about how a phenomenon behaves in reality, in this case in specific media users' everyday practices.

The project operates primarily on a micro-level. This may appear paradoxical in relation to the huge cultural and social scientific implications of this field of research, but it is a conscious choice. Microsociological perspectives open a hermeneutic view, at once deep and detailed, of the individual's social life and communicative behaviour. The results may

be briefly characterised by the key words 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) and 'analytical complexity' (Gentikow 2002). Such a view is proven to be particularly suited in the investigation of unknown phenomena in open exploratory approaches. The new media culture, in which we now find ourselves, is just such an unknown field.

Experiments with New Interfaces

The project operates with practical experiments, developing new interfaces for 'better', that is to say more democratic mediated communication. The Anglo-American term 'interface', in Norwegian translation 'grenseflate' and 'brukergrensesnitt', needs some explanation. It designates the relation between the user's person and that part of technology that is specially created to communicate with the user. We have chosen a cultural definition of the concept 'interface', drawing on Lev Manovich's thesis as a point of departure. In the same way that the media's technologies are not generally neutral, a medium's and an operative systems' interface with the user are more than just a tool. Manovich uses the concept 'cultural interface' to point out 'new sets of conventions for organizing cultural data' (Manovich 2001:117); Johnson (1997) talks about 'interface cultures', transforming the ways we communicate. Such notions have affinities with our concept 'culture techniques'. They also correspond with our particular interest in gaining access to users' experiences; a phenomenological and rational experience that takes place precisely through the materiality that the interface provides (Manovich 2001:66ff.). In other words: The 'interface' of different media creates different communicative spheres of action for the user. As far as this aspect is concerned it may be interesting to examine the relation between user needs and interests and the logic of commercial interests.

So far, the Volda staff of the project (with Lars Nyre as the main promoter) has developed a journalistic and technical experiment with talk radio on the Internet called *Demostation*. It focuses cheap and easy production and reception equipment, user friendly access and a new power balance between producers and users, thus testing out technologies and techniques for increased democratic participation on the Web (www.demostasjon.net). The practical work clarified problems of defining 'democratic'. The ungoing critical analysis of the experiment aims at presenting constituents of democratic communication, in terms of empirically enriched theoretical deliberations.

New Users,
New Communication Cultures?

The media user as actor in the communication process undergoes important changes. Even a brief look at traditional research suggests that neither the notion of 'reader' nor of 'the audience' is totally applicable in relation to the new media that are investigated in this project. The reader and audience concept is strongly linked to texts. The new media can continue to present traditional text types (in line with their remediative characteristics, Bolter & Grusin 1999), but more typically, they offer operational options. A further important change is that a mass medium such as television has a communicative regime of transmission from one to many, a factor that is fundamentally different with new media's individualised access and functionality.

An alternative concept such as 'user' seems to us a poor provisional solution. Developing a better concept that articulates new users' fundamentally new characteristic traits will be an important innovation. One possible approach towards a definition is, as suggested, an analysis of how new media and their interface constitute their users. According to Manovich they must master solutions to many and changing tasks at a fast pace; thus 'multitasking' becomes a new cognitive and social norm (Manovich 2001:210). The empirical data of the qualitative interviews are central in the conceptualisation of the new media's users. This is where the user can describe him/herself, either directly or through own operations and evaluations. Not at least accounts of own experiences, in people's own words, can provide important knowledge producing data.

More generally, there remains the re-articulation of the traditional receiver/audience concept in light of the new media's powerful perceptual, physical and action oriented user involvement, an involvement that also demands new competences. At the same time it must be taken into account that new media are not only positively open to new users but that they also shut others out. Statistics still show a demographic difference regarding both access to, and use of new media, and these differences can just as easily make old divides greater rather than narrow them. It must also be kept in mind that interactivity, or dialogic communication, is far from being the only way of democratic media use; broadcasting's (like Jesus') "radically public" dissemination is an important other one (Durham Peters 1999: 53). Our empirical research so far shows that the 'passive' use of 'old' media like radio and television still is strongly supported.

The shape of new communication cultures and social practices is, to a large degree, constituted by economic, social and political conditions in society at large. As a part of that society *research* in new media and their functionalities also contributes in constituting them. An important research incentive from the project will be to adapt for democratising fields of practice, developed and tested in relative freedom from market demands.

See more about the project on http://www. kulturteknikker.hivolda.no

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