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Media and Communications

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COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL THEORY: LEGACY AND DEFINITIONS

Of all the social sciences, sociology has the most distinguished record of contributions to the study of media and communications. Throughout every decade of the twentieth century, important sociologists have made it a central topic – Tarde, Park, Blumer, Ogburn, Lazarsfeld, Merton, Katz, Adorno, Habermas, Tuchman, Schudson, Gans, Luhmann, Bourdieu, among many others. Yet communication is not simply a specialty in sociology; it is in many ways the historical precondition of modern social theory. Its founding thinkers such as Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Tönnies rarely mention communication by name, and yet their picture of modern society, with its individualism, participatory institutions, and new possibilities of large-scale social conflict, administration, and integration, centers on the symbolic coordination of individuals and populations. Concepts as diverse as Marx's class consciousness, Durkheim's collective representations, or Tönnies' *Gesellschaft* all point to social relationships that transcend the face-to-face. Neither ancient nor feudal society had any use for a notion of pluralistic, inclusive, and horizontal sociability. Modernity, with its political and transportation revolutions, foregrounds the symbolic aspect of social coordination. Communication becomes an axis of modern society. Association not anchored in place or in personal acquaintance is the central topic of both modern social theory and mass communication theory. Classic European social theory in this sense was always the study of communication without knowing it.

It was the Americans who made the explicit connection of sociology and communication. Drawing on German political economy and the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer, such first-generation American evolutionary sociologists as Lester Frank Ward and Franklin Giddings saw the movement of goods and ideas as the lifeblood of modern society. Even more emphatically, Charles Horton Cooley, Robert Ezra Park, and W. I. Thomas, along with their philosophical co-conspirators John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, saw society as a network of symbolic interactions. Communication was the secret of modern social organization. In Dewey's famous declaration, "Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may be fairly said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication" ([1916] 1944: 4).

In its intellectual development, "communication" has meant many things (Peters 1999), and this was no less true in sociology. Communication's sense could include the dissemination of symbols, cultural transmission, and also more intimate processes as dialogue, socialization, or community-creation. For the Chicagoans, communication could mean the descriptive total of human relationships as well as an ideal of democratic participation. American democracy, they thought, depended on citizens becoming co-authors in the symbolic and material shaping of their worlds. Park and Burgess offer a characteristic pair of sentences: "[T]he limits of society are coterminous with the limits of interaction, that is, of the participation of persons in the life of society. One way of measuring the wholesome or the normal life of a person is by the sheer external fact of his membership in the social groups of the community in which his lot is cast" ([1921] 1924: 341). A straightforward descriptive statement (that communication defines social order) is followed by a normative one (that participation is the criterion of healthy social relations). This normative loading of communication persists in social theory to this day. For Jürgen Habermas, for instance, communication is not just linguistic exchange or social interaction, but a principle of rational intersubjectivity, even of social justice. For him, communication is much more than the sharing of information; it is the foundation of democratic deliberation. In seeing communication as the mesh of ego and alter, he is a clear heir to the early Chicago sociologists. "Communication" has always worn a halo, offering inklings of the good society.

Communication as a concept also splits along symbolic and material lines. In E. A. Ross's classic definition, "Communication embraces all symbols of experience together with the means by which they are swung across gulfs of space or time" (1938: 140). *Communications*, in contrast to *communication*, often makes just this distinction, referring to the institutions and practices of recording and transmitting symbols rather than to an ideal of community. It typically includes telecommunications such as the postal service, telegraph, telephone, satellite, and computer networks; sometimes railroads, highways, air and sea travel; sometimes also fundamental modes of human intercourse such as gesture, speech, writing, and printing.

We can also speak of these institutions and practices as *media*. The term has several senses. First, and least interesting, *media* in popular usage refers indiscriminately and often disparagingly to the personnel or institutions of the news media, taken as a lump. Second, *mass* media often refers to a complex of culture industries, especially the big five – radio, television, movies, newspapers, and magazines –

which share the features of being for-profit institutions that use industrial-era technology to engage in largely monologic transmission to massive audiences. Media sociology arose in the heyday of these media, roughly the 1920s through the 1960s or 1970s, but it is now clear that these definitional criteria may be valid only for a passing historical moment. Hence a third definition of media is needed: any vessel of cultural storage, transmission, or expression. In this sense, architecture, cities, sculpture, bumper stickers, skywriting, or the human body could be media, in the same sense that one speaks of artistic media such as oil, watercolor, or papier mâché. This expanded sense of *media* is used by thinkers outside of the mainstream of media sociology such as Harold Adams Innis, Lewis Mumford, and Friedrich Kittler (1999) who link basic media forms with larger civilizational consequences. Though less precise, this more open definition broadens the historical and comparative vistas of media studies. A more expansive definition is helpful for understanding current transformations in communications pushed by digital media.

Standardizing and localizing trends

In broad strokes, a fundamental task of twentieth-century media sociology has been to assuage the anxiety that modern communications homogenize culture and society. Sociological research has repeatedly minimized fears of media power. Though new communications media seemingly rupture social scale, local community life does not disappear, say most sociologists; rather, it takes different shapes.

In the early twentieth century, the main challenge came from the anxiety, deriving largely from crowd psychology and Tocqueville's notion of democratic leveling, that modern communication, thanks to its contagious sweep and increased radius of influence, would wash all personal, cultural, and geographic diversity into a standardized ocean of sameness. Cooley (1909: ch. 9) responded by arguing that improved communications enhance "choice" and weaken "isolation" as the basis of individuation. His point, familiar in turn-of-the-century social thought, was that communication had superseded geography as the chief constraint on human sociability. A community of isolation would differentiate, like Darwin's finches, in idiosyncratic directions, but a community of choice, one united by the interests rather than location of its participants, was a harbinger of a renewed democracy. In a sense Cooley theorized virtual communities by suggesting that new forms of communication allowed for remote associations based on interest rather than place. Thus Cooley, like his colleagues, identified countervailing tendencies against the supposed time- and space-destroying powers of new forms of communication. The first generation of American sociology answered the specter of uniformity with the hope of the great community.

Malcolm Willey and Stuart Rice, in a forgotten but highly suggestive early study of new transport and communication media, made a similar argument: "Contacts within the community are multiplied out of proportion to contacts at a distance" (1933: 57). Rather than eviscerating local life, cars and telephones actually multiplied the intensity of contacts. Though new means offered an unprecedented opportunity to escape locality, they were more often used to link familiar people and places. "Individuals north, south, east, and west, may all wear the garments of Hollywood. At the same time each may hold with undiminished vigor to certain

local attitudes, traditions, and beliefs. An increase in overt standardization may be accompanied by retention of inward differences" (Willey & Rice 1933: 213-14). The Payne Fund studies were published around the same time: 13 book-length reports on cinema and children by sociologists such as Herbert Blumer and psychologists including L. L. Thurstone. The studies themselves, though undercut by an alarmist and moralizing popular summary volume, challenged the fear that America's children were altogether movie-made. One nearly forgotten Payne Fund sociologist, Paul Cressey, dismissed "sweeping statements about the motion picture's 'effect': what the movie-goer 'perceives or fails to perceive upon the screen, what he feels or does not feel, what he remembers or fails to remember, and what he does or does not imitate," wrote Cressey, "are inevitably affected by his social background and personality as much, or more than, by the immediate motion picture situation" (1938: 521).

In a somewhat similar way, the tradition of work on media effects associated with Columbia University sought to check the fear that media were bulldozing collective bonds and individual judgment. The hallmark of the research done by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his students at Columbia in the 1940s and 1950s was the proposition that media have strong influence only when mediated by such psychological variables as selectivity or sociological variables as interpersonal relations. Work at the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research focused more on the short-term attitudinal effects of media campaigns than on the larger trends favored by the Chicagoans, although Lazarsfeld's blueprint, at least, of the mission of communications research did include the macro, long-term consequences of media for social organization.

The Columbia tradition's insight that the power of mediated messages is constrained by extant social-psychological conditions has proved remarkably influential and adaptable. Against the inflated fears (or hopes) of some propaganda analysts, Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948) argued that mass communication could be persuasive only under special conditions such as the absence of counter-propaganda, the reinforcement of media messages by face-to-face discussion, and the strategic exploitation of well-established behaviors. The power of unaided mass media to win wars, sway voters, or sell soap was, they argued, overrated. In their 1955 book, *Personal Influence*, Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz argued for the priority of personal over mediated influence. People, not radio or newspapers, turned out to be the key channels of communication. Opinion leaders first expose themselves to media, then talk to friends and family, thus serving as links in the larger network of communication, by dancing "the two-step flow" of communication. The "discovery of people" in the process of communication, as Katz and Lazarsfeld whimsically called it, was not only empirical; it was a gambit in the debate in 1950s sociology about whether postwar America had become a mass society of lonely crowds, disconnected from each other but connected by media. (In the same decade, however, Bureau researchers and many other media sociologists applied the "two-step flow" findings to the Cold War search for effective propaganda design, in sometimes-classified work for the military and other federal agencies.) In its front-stage, published work at least, Lazarsfeld's Bureau expounded people's immunity to media-induced atomization and assimilation, thus fitting the broader American legacy of understanding media as agents of social differentiation rather than homogenization. Localizing

factors were again deemed as important as standardizing ones in the effects of mass communication.

The same argumentative logic appears in later work in the same tradition. In a study of the worldwide reception of the television program *Dallas*, Tamar Liebes and Katz (1990) argue against the widespread fear that a new imperialism of television, music, and film would lead to a global (American) monoculture. Instead, Liebes and Katz showed that different groups used their own cultural and ideological predispositions and resources to interpret *Dallas* in distinct ways. Russian Israelis, for instance, often read *Dallas* as a self-critical exposé of American capitalism while Israeli Arabs often focused on its intricate kinship structures and clan-loyalties. Against the classic fear of a powerful media stimulus, updated here to an international setting, Liebes and Katz affirmed the inevitability of diverse and local responses to a homogeneously disseminated text. (In this, they were in line with trends in literary and cultural studies work on audiences, even if the affinities were not often recognized.) Though the context was different from the founding generation of American sociology – electronic media threatening national diversity worldwide vs. national railroads and newspapers threatening island communities – the sociological response was similar: outward (media) standardization, inward (social) differentiation.

The critical tradition of media sociology contests this *Gemeinschaft*-after-all optimism. Though home-grown variants like C. Wright Mills (1956) emerged in the 1950s, the main body of critical sociology appeared in the United States during the aftermath of the New Left's self-immolation in the late 1960s. For theoretical coordinates, sociologists largely turned to the chastened Marxists of the post-1917 West, who decades before had sought to explain working-class consent to dominant class rule. Western Marxists like Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno had grappled with the market's awesome staying power. They had identified culture and ideology as potent weapons in the capitalist arsenal, capable of convincing the masses to tighten their own chains. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the Frankfurt School scholars, the "might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds . . . Immovably, [the masses] insist on the very ideology which enslaves them" ([1944] 1991: 127, 133). Though Horkheimer and Adorno had clashed with Lazarsfeld (Adorno's erstwhile employer) during their New York exile in the 1940s, most of the Western Marxist canon – including the critical theorists' "The Culture Industry" essay – was not translated into English until the early 1970s. Gramsci's theory of hegemony left the strongest imprint on critical media sociology, in works like Todd Gitlin's *The Whole World Is Watching* (1980).

Lazarsfeld's tradition, like that of the Chicago school, ultimately sees the media as agents of social integration; the critical tradition agrees that media achieve integration – a forced reconciliation in the interest of a few. It is a remarkable irony, to recast the point, that Katz's "And Deliver Us from Segmentation" (1996) overlaps so much with a Marxist screed like Herbert Schiller's *The Mind Managers* (1973). The former, a homage to the nation-binding vitality of limited-channel TV, subscribes to Schiller's core thesis with a more voluntaristic twist: that mass communication acts as a societal glue, adhering its members to one another against a common, mediated horizon. Media sociology, whether critical or mainstream, has turned on the question of social homogenization and control.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

The national frame

All complex societies, ancient and modern, organize communications in various ways and to diverse ends. For much of the past century, communications generally and the mass media in particular were designed to link the nation-state with the household. In Habermas's language, media have been a chief agent in coupling "system" (the market and the state) and "lifeworld" (civil society and the family). Modern media history, especially that of the press and broadcasting, is an open book of large-scale social integration. Modern media have had the task of tying micro-level parts of social life (taste, consumption, the household) to macro-level cultural, political, and economic structures (corporations, the nation). Raymond Williams (1974) coined the suggestive term "mobile privatization" for the contradictory historical processes shaping the emergence of broadcasting: increased mobility in goods, people, and ideas, together with the solidification of the household as a site of entertainment and consumption. (Note too the hint of political pathos: this was not public mobilization!) Newspapers, realist drama, brand names, opinion polling, mail-order catalogs, soap operas, call-in shows, or TV guides are diverse examples of practices that mediate feeling and structure, household and society. As media always involve negotiations along the border of public and private, their study raises explicit questions about the constitution of social order (Carey 1989). What was significant about modern media was not only the pervasiveness of their reach, but also the intimacy of the site in which they touched us.

In Benedict Anderson's thesis (1991), the modern newspaper, even with local circulation, invited its readers to imagine themselves members in a vast national community. Network broadcasting, which did achieve national distribution, likewise operated in the frame of the nation-state. The national focus is clear in such names as NBC, CBS, ABC, BBC, and CBC, each of which indexes the polity: National, Columbia, American, British, and Canadian. Radio first established the crucial arrangements in the two decades between the world wars: nationwide distribution of programs to a domestic audience trained to simultaneous reception. Despite differences between the market-sponsored system in the United States and the state-sponsored systems of Europe and elsewhere, something sociologically remarkable was achieved in broadcasting: the coordination of national populations over time and space. Perhaps what emerged earlier on Sunday mornings in Protestant countries, with the whole population effectively tuned to the same "program" (the vernacular Bible), was similar, but broadcasting was new in the conjuring of a simultaneously co-oriented national populace and in its address of a listenership at home. Cinema too, from the First World War through the 1960s or so, was organized nationally in production, content, distribution, and exhibition. In their heydays, both broadcasting and cinema were at once a mode of production, a set of stylistic conventions, and a set of social relations involving audiences and cultural forms (though these, as we will see, were importantly different for the two media).

Due to technical, regulatory, and economic developments, the national frame for cinema and television has been waning in the past 35 years. (In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, radio is still the medium of national integration, but for most

industrialized countries it has long been the medium of musically differentiated taste cultures or "formats.") The domestic box office is only one important source of revenue for Hollywood films today, along with foreign box office sales, video sales, and merchandising. Instead of a studio system churning out variations on well-known genres for a national audience, one shift has been to blockbusters (genres based on a single case), from *Jaws* to *Avatar*, for distribution (and merchandising) across the globe. Television audiences, while often still huge in relative terms, are increasingly fragmented into demographic segments thanks to channel proliferation and the migration of programming onto the internet. Given the digital encoding of all content, media are increasingly inseparable from communications. The air once carried radio and television programming, but increasingly fiber-optic cables are the main medium for news and entertainment, just as the air is becoming the prime medium of voice and data transmission thanks to mobile telephony, in a rather stunning switch of the old order. In 1950, mail, telephones, phonographs, radios, televisions, and movie theaters were all separate platforms with distinct content such as print, interactive voice, sound, image, and money; now they are all carried on the internet in digital form. Broadcasting to a national audience, then, just like national cinema, may turn out to be a momentary historical deviation. When social scientists were minting concepts for media analysis at mid-century, mass communication had paradigmatic status. Today different conditions such as smaller audience size, differentiated niches, altered social norms, and user-generated content raise new questions.

One such question is the fate of social integration amidst the proliferation of channels and fragmentation of audiences. As recently as the 1970s, the three American television networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC, shared up to 95 percent of the viewing audience. That figure has dropped to just over 50 percent, shared among NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox, owing to competition with cable services, but also satellite, video rentals, home computers, mobile devices, and the internet. Since the 1970s, advertisers have sought purer demographic segments (Turow 2006). This is clearly a radical shift from the national provision of news and entertainment – though not an utter meltdown. A common fear is that citizens will be mutually isolated by their idiosyncratic tastes. Instead of national newspapers people will read "the daily me"; identity politics will vanquish the common good. Yet the potential to fragment into a Babel of private cultural tongues is tempered by various attention-gathering exercises afforded by the internet. Overwhelmed consumers have in effect turned to each other: user-generated YouTube reviews, virally spread link-advice, micro-blogging endorsements, and even professional "curators" at the Huffington Post and elsewhere. To some extent, social networks have replaced the broadcast networks as the conveners of our attention. Clearly channel-multiplication has created neither cultural nor cognitive chaos, as some postmodern writers once feared (or celebrated). The statistical limits on human energy always centralize attention. Audiences still take shape, albeit smaller and asynchronous ones. The fear that media segmentation will cause citizens to retreat to a cocoon of private egoism (a fear in social theory that dates at least to Tocqueville) is checked by the habitual preferences of audiences for programming that engages a broader frame. Fragmentation has replaced homogenization as the chief fear aroused by media.

The shifting moral economy of media

The waning of a nationally organized schedule of programs as a cultural grid suggests a more significant, but more subtle transformation of the place of media in the general moral economy. Because it entered the homes of the nation, broadcasting historically accepted constraints on topics and forms of expression. Radio, like television, was painted as a guest in the family circle, and was hence pressured to embody a culture of middle-brow mundaneness and normality, a tonality that continued from early radio through much of television, though never with full compliance. From Mae West's banishment off the airwaves in 1938 for inviting the puppet Charlie McCarthy to play in her "wood pile," through the 1978 Supreme Court case *Pacifica* which found that broadcasting's "unique pervasiveness" justified tighter content controls than in other media, radio and television have been bound by a thick set of normative, if obviously ideologically loaded, constraints (the nation as patriarchal family). Because they spoke to the nation at home, radio and television in their heydays were regarded, for better or worse, as forums whose tone should be suitable to all.

Film, in contrast, never quite assumed the same burden of public decency as broadcasting, despite an even more intense history of attack by the guardians of public morals. The theatrical exhibition of movies took place outside the home, in dark spaces set apart for collective fantasy on extraordinary topics such as romance, sex, crime, and adventure. The dangers of such fantasy were buffered by collective viewing; the assembled peer group of fellow citizens, as Cantril and Allport (1935) argued, immunized against anti-social consequences. Wandering eyes and hearts were cathartically reserved to the film palace. For both film and broadcasting around mid-century, the audience experience was intensely normed: one watched movies collectively and took part in broadcasting with the awareness that one's reference groups were also simultaneously doing so.

The division of media labor – broadcasting as normalizing the family circle, film as fantasizing the collective psyche – has crumbled. The multiplication of channels and shifting modes of exhibition and delivery suggest shifting constraints on the audience experience. The old standard of broadcast decency has weakened, as has the sense of a simultaneous collectivity of fellow watchers. Katz (1996) argues that proliferation of channels breaks the collective norm of obligatory viewing. Viewing becomes an asocial experience, not a simultaneous communion of reference groups that sets the agenda for water-cooler discussions the next day. The very notion of a "Home Box Office," the first dominant cable channel (1975) and a leader in getting content hitherto allowed only in theaters onto television screens, signaled the beginning of these changes.

In an age of increased fragmentation, content once taboo for a national audience fills channels aimed at a few but available to many. Conservative backlash against cultural industries, and efforts to label, rate, or otherwise police the vast output of new film, television, and music commodities will likely remain part of the political landscape. Legislation like the Communications Decency Act (1996), the Child Online Protection Act (1998) – both found unconstitutional – and the Children's Internet Protection Act (2000) are state-sponsored answers to the decline of moral inhibitions in the wake of splintering audiences and globalized programming flows.

What some read as symptoms of large moral or civilizational decline reflects, in fact, changing industrial and technical conditions. As long as profit is the chief value that governs media production, new kinds of content will continue to appear that can make money from marginal audiences.

The normative frame of much American television programming has shifted from common culture to private club, allowing forms and contents of expression adapted to homogeneous in-groups. No longer under the ideological and economic constraint of reaching general audiences, American television today includes R-rated prime-time drama, explicitly indecent talk shows, and caught-on-tape programs featuring, for example, animals (or police officers) attacking people. As programs proliferated into niches, television lost its halo as the collective hearth, even if still viewed by a plurality of citizens. Nowhere is this loss clearer than on the internet. The invitation of YouTube, the Google-owned online video site, to "broadcast yourself" signals the shift in a single phrase. Once broadcasting was impersonal and collective; today it can be a project in self-expression bordering on narcissism. The blogosphere allows everyone with time, access, and skills to be a journalist, and Facebook allows users to personalize their content (and advertisers to specify their appeals). The internet has become the world's leading purveyor of pornography. What during the broadcast era was a niche medium available only through shops, the mail, or certain urban districts, now has a potential outlet at every computer screen connected to the internet. Totalizing pervasiveness is down, differentiated ubiquity is up.

Channel-multiplication creates a huge demand for content. Prime-time television drama is still sometimes lavishly or at least expensively produced, as in the case of *CSI* or *Lost*, but talk, game, and "reality" shows have the advantage of attracting saleable audiences with low production budgets. (For one thing, actors taken off the street do not charge huge fees.) The race for content also makes control over the rights to film, television, and music libraries industrially crucial (and worrisome to historians and purists, who fear such commercially-motivated tampering as the colorization of old black-and-white movies). The scarcest commodity today is not channel capacity, as it was when broadcasting emerged; it is desirable programming.

The proliferation of channels, then, does not imply social fragmentation; it implies a changed social place for the public delivery of content and an attendant loss of moral inhibitions. Nonetheless, live collective mass television viewing is likely to recur on an intermittent basis with "media events" such as royal funerals, sports extravaganzas, or natural or human disasters such as tsunamis and terrorist attacks (Katz & Liebes 2007).

Globalization

Media flows have long been conceived as threats to national culture. In the 1970s, the common critique was that American film and television were agents of cultural imperialism since national entertainment industries could not compete with their slick products. While such arguments could serve to fortify nationalist sentiments at home, they correctly saw Hollywood's comparative advantage in its production values and economies of scale. For the price of creating one hour of original TV, countries can lease from 10 to 100 times as much US prime-time drama. Audiences

worldwide prefer local or national content, but the hitch is always production quality. Still, globalization and Americanization are not the same thing. Like everything else, media globalize unevenly. The media are not as American as they used to be (Tunstall 2008). Multiple centers of production trouble the old model of one center and one periphery: Brazilian telenovelas in Russia, Mexican programs in Latin America, Egyptian television in the Arab world, Bollywood movies in East Africa, Eastern Europe, and China, or Hong Kong action cinema in the US. There is important regionalization of media flows, often based on common language and culture, but also mixtures and pockets (Indian "Vedic" metal, karaoke in the Philippines, or the wild diversities of global hip hop, etc.). Even so, America remains the most dominant exporter. Compared to the vast majority of other nations, the US is ironically quite lacking in foreign media content. Countries average about one-third foreign TV programming, but the US has about 2 percent. The American market can absorb Power Rangers and Pokémon, but in entertainment, as in news, it remains isolated by its gigantism. It is strange indeed that the world's chief exporter of cultural matter is relatively blind to what every other nation sees constantly: media content from elsewhere.

States often seek to protect national culture by building dams for media flows. France, Canada, and New Zealand, for instance, all have quotas for the radio play of nationally produced music. States also find other motives for blockage, usually sex and politics. Some Muslim nations are nervous about satellite television. China continues to maintain its Great Firewall and censor online content. In all efforts to block media flows, the state walks a tightrope between global political-economic pressures (since regulation erects a statist obstacle to global capitalism) and national-political ones (preservation of national distinctness). Besides state intervention, there are other subtler impediments to media flows, such as cultural accessibility. Violence and sex may travel more readily across national and linguistic borders than culturally-specific and dialogue-heavy programming such as comedy and drama.

The miniaturization and cheapening of media production also fuels transborder media flows. Much can be done at a desktop, in a basement, or even on a phone. Email and other internet-based social networking tools are the bane of repressive governments from Tehran to Rangoon. The ease of citizen production (and piracy) bypasses traditional gatekeepers. *Titanic* was banned in Iran, and yet it was almost instantly available there in bootleg versions, recorded by hand-held video cameras in movie theaters abroad. Digital file-sharing sites make the process even easier (Cenite, Wang Wanzheng, Peiwen & Shimin Chan 2009). The heavy artillery of media once touted by modernization theory, which not only require capital investment but also a complex division of labor, have been outflanked by do-it-yourself media. As conceived by modernizers such as Rostow, Lerner, and Schramm, literacy, newspapers, and national broadcasting are the crown atop industrialization and infrastructural development such as roads, schools, and hydroelectric dams. Instead, relatively cheap, oral media such as mobile phones and radios have spread in such non-industrialized regions as Africa or the Middle East. If we count piracy, much of sub-Saharan African is well plugged into global cultural circulation (Larkin 2004). Media are a chief exhibit of the disjunctive character of globalization (Appadurai 1996). Clearly, modernity is not a package deal.

Given shrinking cost and access to media production, how to explain the persistent concentration in media corporations? The long muckraking tradition attacking media power that stretches from Upton Sinclair to Noam Chomsky to Robert McChesney, with its doctrine that concentration of control means uniformity in content, risks missing the curious ways that huge cultural industries have learned to allow, like the Catholic Church, all kinds of internal variety in cultural production. Likewise, Horkheimer and Adorno's classic analysis of the integrated culture industry was quite apt for Hollywood in the 1940s, when vertical integration of film production, distribution, and exhibition was at its height, but finds only partial resonance today. Corporate power should be a foremost issue on the agenda of media studies, but *modi operandi* have changed. The recording industry majors, for instance, are hardly the monolithic trusts of yore. Non-existent synergies, fragmenting audiences, and competition from digital upstarts have led the big conglomerates to sell off major units (Time Warner), split in two (Viacom), or get out of the media business altogether (GE). Rupert Murdoch's efforts to colonize Chinese TV screens by satellite went bust. The media barons are scrambling.

Implications of digital media

Driving much of the transformation of media is the growing power and shrinking size and cost of computing. The "convergence" of telephones, televisions, and computers on the internet creates both a new medium and a zoo of diverse media species – raising again the paradox of simultaneous bigness and smallness in media today. Marshall McLuhan argued that the content of a new medium is an old medium. The internet contains all previous media forms – telegraphy, telephony, phonography, radio, television, film, books, magazines, newspapers, and videogames – and, alas, advertising. Indeed, the internet has recapitulated radio's early transition from a culture of anarchic, technically minded renegades (amateurs/nerds) into a corporate engine of mass entertainment and commerce.

Like channel-multiplication in television, digitization raises questions of the public organization of cultural menus. What is to keep cultural consumption from being identical to cultural production, as people learn to treat digitized products as code to be manipulated? (The "mash-up" is a favored YouTube genre.) Again, the fear of private cocoons or the utopia of universal creativity should both be limited by the recognition of opportunity costs and the ongoing need for shared cultural experience. Information is not scarce in a digital world, but intelligence is – one reason why aggregation sites are proliferating. The packaging (pre-processing) of information is always crucial, especially in situations of programming abundance. Information bottlenecks make clear the principle that media are not just pipes, but have unanticipated consequences. As Innis (1950) insisted, new media create monopolies of knowledge and hence aid formation of new power-holding classes, such as search giant, Google, the world's *de facto* library.

The internet is a huge well of digitized code – sounds, texts, images – available for creative appropriation, raising fascinating questions for art and economics. One issue is the unprecedented manipulability of digital texts. Digital technology allows for editing *within* the frame, instead of between frames, blurring the formerly separate domains of production and post-production in film and video. The docu-

mentary or testimonial function of photography or sound recording is now more dubious. Probably the biggest issue arising from the plasticity of digital content is intellectual property rights. Advocates for the internet as a cultural commons and citizens as mash-up artists who remix culture to their own visions face uphill battles against corporate power and entrenched copyright law (Lessig 2008). A related issue is the infrastructural architecture of the internet. Will domain names continue to be assigned by the American ICANN or will a more global form of governance emerge? Do nation-states have a legitimate interest in regulating internet access? Google's agreement to do business in China at the price of censoring searches the Chinese state deemed sensitive was widely criticized, but few have complained about how Google.de regularly censors anti-Semitic sites in accordance with German laws against hate speech. What are the bounds of privacy in a time when massive amounts of personal information are collected from every move we make online? Every search and its subsequent "clickstream" ever made on Google is recorded on its computers, and even though that company still presents itself as a search utility, its corporate mission is data analysis, and on a peta-byte scale, something unprecedented in history. Questions about power and surveillance will continue to shape inquiry about the internet (Andrejevic 2007).

Digitization intensifies an old principle of electronic media: economies of scale. In contrast to print media, which always had steep unit costs (paper and ink), audiovisual media generally faced gigantic first-copy costs and cheap unit costs. Even a feature-film print, costing over 10,000 dollars, is inexpensive compared to the cost of the original; cutting a vinyl LP copy is even cheaper; but a digital copy costs next to nothing. Whereas analog media require a physical tie to the original, digital media can be transported anywhere with enough bandwidth. Media industries are today principally in the software business, spreading their goods across many platforms. Newspapers and magazines have watched their business models collapse as they migrate online, with new, revenue-siphoning advertising competition and a generation of consumers unwilling to pay for their now-ethereal products. Prominent scholars and journalists have answered the white-knuckled prophecies of doom with calls for nonprofit ownership and foundation-supported investigative journalism along the lines of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Pro Publica website (Downie & Schudson 2009). It is an index of print-media desperation that its fortunes are widely seen to rest on the success of Apple's media-on-a-screen mobile devices.

The dream of universal accessibility of culture, of an Alexandrine library on the wires, is nowhere in sight, Google Books notwithstanding. Consider how fragile – how fugitive – are the quanta of online expression. The valiant efforts of the Internet Archive and other digital preservationists have not solved the technological problems of incompatibility and turnover. All records are subject to degradation, but we have lots of experience with writing and printing, whose (not inconsiderable) decoding apparatus is literacy, and little experience with digital storage in an economy of planned obsolescence. This age, eager to record everything, could ironically be a sealed book in the future if playback machines are not preserved. Digitization may mean traffic jams as much as information flows. As always, the sociology of digital media should recognize centripetal as well as centrifugal trends.

The great communications switch

Perhaps one of the strangest and subtlest shifts of our time is the increasing mediation of interpersonal interaction – by phone, email, social networks, etc. At the same time, mass media discourse has grown increasingly conversational. In the 1940s, Adorno attacked “pseudo-individualization” in mass culture, the pretense of establishing one-on-one relationships with audiences in commercial forms of address like “especially for you”; and Merton attacked the “pseudo-*Gemeinschaft*” of media-promoted communities. Both grasped, from distinct positions on the theoretical compass, the ways that media imitated interpersonal styles and vice versa (Thompson 1995). Just as broadcasting and telephony have switched media (from air to wires), perhaps the richer nations of the planet are in the middle of a great communications switch: in face-to-face talk intimates broadcast at each other while media are full of strangers making peer-to-peer connections with us.

A hallmark of twentieth-century cinema, drama, and literature – and sociology – was the gaps between people, that is, the distortion and difficulty of dialogue. People were seen as sending messages to each other and never quite connecting. Broadcasting and the press, in contrast, have consistently imitated dialogical and intimate styles of talk, a development motivated by both domestic reception and commercial purpose (Scannell 1991). Though some scholars have treated “parasocial interaction” (the feeling that people have personal relationships with media figures) as a pathology, it is clear that most relationships, face-to-face or otherwise, are imagined in some sense. There are elements of fictionalization in interpersonal relationships, not only in fan clubs or the more prototypical kinds of parasocial interaction. Harvey Sacks’s (1992) conversational analysis showed just how tortured and fraught – and intricately ordered – everyday dialogue could be. Knowing what is dialogue and what is broadcast in daily interactions is often difficult in an age when people routinely talk in public to an invisible partner (on their phones). The disembodiment of interaction represents a longer trend that theorists such as Luhmann and Giddens associate with modernity generally. There is, too, the calculated spontaneity of the Facebook status update – extroversion with a motive, to an audience of hundreds. Interaction has become precisely something to be managed, not a natural reciprocity.

While everyday speech has grown more fraught, public discourse has grown more personal. In the nineteenth century, it was considered undignified for presidential candidates to make personal campaign appearances. Aloofness was honorable. Today it is a truism that leaders project their sincerity to the camera. From Teddy Roosevelt onward, the personalization of political leaders has grown massively, thanks to developments in the audiovisual capacities of the press and a more general process of social informalization (Elias 1998), a process, once started, that did not stop with Reagan’s smile and Clinton’s tears, but made public the former’s polyps and the latter’s semen.

Sociologists in the sociology of media

A paradox of media sociology is that most of it, at least over the last 40 years, has been the work of non-sociologists. Sociology as an organized discipline largely

abandoned the study of mass communication in the early 1960s, after three decades at the center of the interdisciplinary field. The reasons for the fall-off are complex, but two important factors stand out: a major shift in federal funding for social science after Sputnik, along with the emergence of the would-be discipline of communication. In effect, PhD-granting journalism schools took over the formal study of media, in part by drawing media sociologists into their well-off orbit (Pooley & Katz 2008). In *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), Merton had positioned the sociology of mass communication as the American answer to the European sociology of knowledge. As it turned out, schools of journalism supplied the answer, however ungainly.

The irony is that sociology, the only discipline with the ambition to understand social life as a whole, has for many decades neglected a central dimension of the modern experience. One consequence is that sociological theory, by now an established subdiscipline, touches on media questions only glancingly. Even the sociology of culture, gathering momentum since the mid-1970s, has largely sidestepped media institutions in its studies of expressive culture. There are exceptions, of course, including the efflorescence of newsroom sociology associated with Herbert Gans and Gaye Tuchman, among others, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Looking back, however, this literature comes off more like a rule-proving interregnum. The neglect is mutual, as scholars of communication – beset by status anxieties and the taint of vocational instruction – are sealed off from sociology.

There is a final, happy irony. In the last decade or so, sociologists have been returning to communication questions – a gathering interest galvanized by the internet and other new media technologies. This sociology of the internet, epitomized by the work of Manuel Castells and Barry Wellman, has its roots in the study of social networks and urban life. There is, in its motivating questions, more than an echo of Chicago. Castells and Wellman conceive of social networks, including but not limited to those afforded by the internet, as something like social structure – as the flexible sinew by which societies and institutions hold (and adjust) their shape. Recall Dewey’s phrase: society exists *in* communication.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Benjamin Peters for helpful commentary.

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