

NEW MEDIA: ANYONE, ANYWHERE & ANYTIME

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Abstract:

In its processes of creating and disseminating news, the media aims to satisfy the public's needs for information and knowledge as well as entertainment. Beyond the traditional publication of news via traditional media such as print, radio or television, the new trend is accessing news online. Blogs, forums, social networks and search engines are all environments in which information is becoming increasingly visible, increasingly accessed and increasingly read. Warts and all: these means are defined by a series of characteristics, but they also conceal certain dangers: ideological polarization, filter bubbles, selective exposure etc.

Keywords: *Internet, old media, new media, blogs, forums, social platforms, citizen journalism.*

Introduction

Beyond the classical dissemination of news through traditional channels – newspapers, radio, and television – news began to be increasingly visible and accessed online after *the advent of the Internet* which significantly changed the communication environment by introducing new communication channels: e-mail, online publications, websites etc. Moreover, the Internet fostered interaction between people and technology; that technology was not completely new, it already existed, but through creative ways of using it, technology attracted public attention.

If 30 years ago Romanians had access to radio and television services at certain times of the day, today the Internet – the gateway to

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an unlimited volume of information (text, image and sound) – facilitates rapid and relatively low-cost interaction between two or more people, regardless of their geographical location. The Internet brings people together, creates the space for them to communicate regardless of the time of day, facilitates the exchange of ideas, opinions, experiences, photos, helps them sell or buy etc.

Without a standard definition, *new media* refers to those technologies that already exist, but which have acquired high popularity through the creativity of their users. Whether we refer to blogs, social networks or citizen journalism, *new media means new world*, where information online becomes more visible, more accessed and more read than in print. *New media offers a different perspective* on news, where the subject of interest can be known and understood without the journalist's presence and where the news consumer has full power to intervene at any time to make his or her opinion known. They can (dis)agree on a particular subject or issue of domestic or international interest at one click distance, using all the means at their disposal – reaction, comment, share.

New media – understood as means of communication via the Internet – thus refers to traditional online media and social media, also called vertical and horizontal online communication channels. While vertical channels define traditional media based on a hierarchical structure (which implies the existence of journalists), horizontal channels refer to social media which allows the combination of the roles of producer-consumer/sender-receiver of information (McCombs, 2014).

New Media: advantages and disadvantages

One of the main defining characteristics of new media refers to *the ability* of individuals to operate, in their own name, *with an impressive volume of information* and to pass it through all stages: collection – storage – processing – filtering – dissemination.

Other characteristics include: *interactivity*, which makes it easy to manipulate, select, link and distribute the data and information; *connectivity* (thanks to search engines and social networks); *density* of information; *variety*, through the unlimited supply of information;

spontaneity; *decentralisation* (as opposed to the old media, which relied on a publisher, radio or TV broadcaster etc.); *dual role* (the consumer of information can become its producer at any time); *free access* (an individual can access and use any information or communicate via a blog, forum or social network at any time, from anywhere); *feedback* (unlike the limits imposed by old media, an individual can now express his or her opinion on a subject at any time); *spatial limitation* (in the Internet environment, any cultural/social/ etc. barriers disappear); *cost reduction* (whereas in the old media era, the whole process of collecting – processing – disseminating information required a premises, a distribution system, a studio and radio or TV equipment, in the new media era, the colossal amount of digital content requires a computer and access to the Internet); *active participation* (involving a theoretically unlimited number of people); *simultaneous communication* on several digital media (Gane & Beer, 2008).

Thus, under the new conditions, an individual can choose to *react* (positively or negatively) to an already existing piece of information, but also has the possibility to create content himself (on a blog or on a personal account from a social network), to *disseminate* it and to wait for reactions (likes, comments or shares) from those who follow him or her. In turn, his or her followers have the opportunity (which is not guaranteed by old media) to react to the content posted, through feedback, in line with their own beliefs, anytime and anywhere. A significant number of people *can interact and engage* in different actions at the same time thanks to the new means of communication.

Moreover, in recent years, there has been a growing trend for publications, radio and television stations, public institutions and private companies, personalities and individuals to go online using websites and social platforms. Anyone can live now in the virtual environment and can be contacted by anyone, anytime, anywhere.

On the other hand, given that the online environment gives the consumer control over the content they host, it should not be forgotten that they can also ask for something in return.

Some of the disadvantages that new media come with can be: a continuous information cycle that generates an endless flow of information *can become stressful* for the consumer; the sources that

disseminate content *become more important* than those that process and filter it; the consumer might become *trapped in a filter bubble* where he is “fed” only with the information he uses and accepts, thus ignoring other opinions and other realities; *control* over what is disseminated *can easily be lost*, as the person creating content in online does not necessarily need a minimal training or studies in the field; as a result, *distrust of content* published online *can increase* (lack of filters allows misleading content to circulate freely); *clickbait culture* can be amplified by content with sensational or bombastic headlines, full of superficial information, poorly documented or intentionally invented (Kovack & Rosenstiel, 2001).

Viewed in opposition, the two media – *old and new* – differ, as might be expected, on several levels: homogeneity vs. heterogeneity (while old media is defined by a unitary structure, new media advocates diversification of media); centralization vs. decentralization (old media is solidary in terms of the content disseminated and serves as a catalyst for public discussion, while new media have fostered the development of numerous groups of individuals with their own specificities and interest in only a few topics); local vs. global (while old media is theoretically limited to the language, culture and events of a single city or state, new media presents events and allows reactions from all over the world, in all languages); limited vs. unlimited (even if old media offers diverse content, this cannot be compared to what new media provides); passive vs. active (while old media requires passive attendance to what they present, new media encourages and allows free expression) (Monosson, 2005).

At the same time, other differences between these two are obvious in terms of: *transparency* (while old media sets the degree of transparency, new media extends its limits; *dissemination* (old media processes and distributes information, new media gives freedom to individuals to create and post content of any kind); *freedom* (old media activity is regulated by law and takes into account certain ethical standards, while new media activity does not feel constrained at the moment); *autonomy* (old media is characterized by a hierarchical structure, new media promotes the individual imprint of users); *influence* (whereas in the centralized hierarchy of old media the

authority lies with the company or agency producing and disseminating information, in new media anyone is free to exert influence on anyone) (Jodoin, 2014).

On the other hand, the relationship between the two media can be characterized by three phenomena: competition, complementarity and integration (Neuberger, 2010). Competition is the rivalry created between the two media in the rush to increase popularity and attract advertisers. Complementarity plays a significant role as content writers are rather attracted not by the major issues themselves, but by highlighting some of the issues they generate. Integration takes place through the reciprocal use of media as a source of information.

In the context of new media, we are talking about the generation gap and the difference between individuals born before the launch of new media (for whom this represents a technological boom) – *digital immigrants* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) or *baby boomers* (Tapscott, 2009) and individuals born after this technological boom (for whom new media is natural) – *digital natives* (Palfrey, 2008) or the *Net Geners* (Tapscott, 2009).

Clearly, this difference between the two generations is nothing new. What is striking, however, is the peculiarity that individuals of the first generation tend to borrow, consciously or unconsciously, from the behaviours exhibited by individuals of the new generation. Thus, often, adults are those who learn from their children how to enjoy the benefits of new media.

New media has the greatest influence on young people, involving them in all the activities they cover. Whereas the old media told individuals what information to consume, the new media leaves all freedom to the consumer (they can choose and process any information themselves), which is particularly important given that “the Net Geners don't just take what they are offered. They are initiators, organizers, readers, writers (...). They don't just observe they participate. They research, debate, play, critique, investigate, ridicule, search and inform” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 21).

New Media, New Challenges

Changes produced in the media, including the expansion of the Internet, also involve a number of challenges for agenda-setters as mass communication (known in its classical sense) is transformed into multi-channel mass communication.

Several factors have contributed to the *hybridization of media systems*: the new role given to the information consumer (who can now act as both author and recipient of information); new ways of using the media available to the consumer; changes in the way programs are transmitted; and the diversification of types of media communication. The *reversal of producer-consumer roles* may also lead to a scenario where the media may no longer be able to set the public agenda and will therefore be forced to obey it. Such changes are based not only on the process of hybridization, but also on the (increasing) commercialization of media content.

Competition (mentioned above) may be a good reason for more and more content producers to focus first and foremost on meeting the knowledge needs of their consumers (e.g., see the media's appetite for providing considerably more soft news at the expense of hard news when it comes to public policy). This situation quickly translates into a challenge for agenda-setting theory, if we consider that the return to consumer needs implies that the activity of selecting topics for the media agenda should be decided, as appropriate, by readers, viewers, internet users (as consumers) and not, as hitherto, by accredited journalists (as producers). The likelihood of reverse agenda-setting (where the public agenda affects the media agenda) (Weimann & Brosius, 2016) can also be attributed to the growing interest in increasing audiences and earnings.

Today, various profile agencies are monitoring the activity of search engines, blogs, forums and social platforms to track what issues are of interest in order to develop new topics, designed not only to get consumers' attention, but also to get them to react according to their own beliefs - to provide feedback (Ragas et al., 2014). Media research and the ranking of topics according to audience preferences greatly affects the structure set by the media agenda.

As a result, new agendas are identified: in addition to the real-world agenda, the agenda of blogs, forums, social networks or search engine queries have been highlighted. While the real-world agenda is known to be composed of major issues that are part of the immediate reality and are distinguished by socio-economic-political indicators (unemployment, climate change, protests, etc.), the online agendas are composed of roughly the same topics, but the importance given to each leads to a different ranking.

The development of new media has brought blogs, forums and social platforms into the online space (and, also, bloggers and users of forum or social network accounts). As public journals (blogs), spaces for discussion (forums) or complex activities (social networks), they all offer great freedom of expression and exposure in the virtual public space.

For example, a blogger/social networker can act as an early warning or opinion leader. These types of people are of importance either because they are recognized as representatives of the public, or because they are representatives of the media, or because they are representatives of the political agenda (if we think that behind a blog or an account there can be an ordinary citizen, a journalist, a celebrity, a political personality etc.). The topics that such a person highlights at a given time as being of interest can then be picked up, publicized and debated by accredited journalists. And this happens. By communicating directly with the public, many bloggers or social media users have become much better known, followed and read than well-established journalists. This is where the dual nature of the citizen, who consumes content while becoming a content producer himself, comes in. This phenomenon has been a turning point in journalism: many journalists have chosen to reach out to the public via a blog or an official Facebook/Twitter/Instagram page, thus jumping over the editorial barrier.

Citizen journalism is that activity undertaken by ordinary amateur citizens who have no journalistic training, but who generate media content about breaking news events or other types of news (Blaagaard, 2013). The chance to be in a certain place at a certain time, where a certain event – earthquake, flood, accident, explosion, protest etc. – is taking place, can turn them from ordinary citizens into

occasional journalists. Today, any individual who owns (at least) a mobile phone and witnesses an event (with impact on society) can record, take pictures or do live sessions from the scene. Moreover, the person concerned, as a witness, can also provide some information – an account of what happened – about the event in question. Breaking news is the most common occasion when anonymous citizens – who become “accidental” bystanders (Harrison, 2010, p. 245) – share images, footage or testimonies with their peers via social networking accounts and groups, video-sharing platforms, free messaging apps etc.

What is important to note here, however, is that not all such photo and/or video material can be labelled as citizen journalism? To talk about this type of journalism, it is necessary for the citizen to play an active role in all steps of the process: capturing the information (photo/video), analysing it (through its own filter as the witness to the experience) and disseminating it on the various platforms; in other words, it is the citizen who is responsible for all the steps involved in the process of making a news story.

These conditions *differentiate citizen journalism from participatory journalism*, where there is collaboration between the citizen-witness and the journalist. In this case, a photo or video of a person/event, which is taken by a citizen – witness, is then provided to journalists. Many domestic and international media companies have understood the importance of this type of journalism (cost-effective – it is much cheaper and more efficient to create content from incoming photos or recordings than to send teams on the ground) and have created dedicated contact details and spaces for this type of content: *iReport* (CNN), *uReport* (Fox News), *Your news* (BBC) etc.

As far as citizen journalism is concerned, *three key-elements* need to be mentioned: a) information about the event was acquired through the use of low-cost tools (mobile phone, camera etc.); b) information about the event was freely published on interactive platforms (blogs, forums, social networks etc.); and c) the distribution of information was not mediated by another entity. The new paradigm transports us into an atypical informational zone, where content is created, recreated and distributed in such a way that it breaks the traditional pattern of consumption (Suárez-Villegas, 2017).

The establishment of an *intermediate agenda*, materialising between the traditional media agenda (journalists) and that of the new opinion formers (bloggers or social media individuals), would mean that journalists use blogs or social accounts as sources of information (thus giving them legitimacy) and the latter would rely on traditional media as sources of information. And, in this way, a cycle of news sources would be created, where news content is sent for “resurrection” from one medium to another: traditional media launch a story, online opinion leaders pick it up and popularise it, and then return it to the first sender to be debated as a trending topic.

On the other hand, the type of *agenda based on search engine queries* could also affect the media agenda. This type of agenda is seen as relevant to public opinion all the more so as human search behaviour here is both natural and independent (Ragas et al., 2014). Given that individuals use search engines in an individual and anonymous manner, the query-based type of agenda may reflect the public's desire for knowledge much more accurately than it would be reflected, for example, through opinion polls.

The implications of the relationship between old media and new media have also fostered the emergence of the concept of *agenda-melding*, which merges elements from different agendas into a personal agenda of a recipient or community and allows for the creation of a personalised picture of the world (Shaw & Weaver, 2014). The realisation of an individual or group agenda can (also) be determined by their socio-political preferences.

On the other hand, the development of new technologies can also result in “the amplification of various types of disinformation in circulation”, which pose potential risks to democracy, national security and society (HLEG, 2018, p. 10). The phenomenon of disinformation is already a major challenge for journalists, who are now caught up in a vast process of checking and sorting the information to be disseminated to the public. The move of newspapers from offline to online and the consequent job cuts in the industry are contributing significantly to the degradation of journalism. Together, all this paves the way for another phenomenon: *fake news*.

Conclusions

In the absence of a standard definition, new media is represented by those technologies that already exist, but have gained notoriety through the creative ways in which they have been used by individuals. Blogs, forums, social networks or search engines – new media – are environments in which information becomes increasingly visible, increasingly accessed and increasingly read. All of these are defined by a series of characteristics – interactivity, connectivity, variety, spontaneity, free access etc. – but they also conceal certain dangers: ideological polarization, filter bubbles, selective exposure etc. Old and new media differ on several levels: homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, centralization vs. decentralization, transparency, autonomy, influence etc.

The emergence of blogs, forums or social platforms in the online space today offers wide freedom of expression and a high degree of exposure. A blogger/influencer on a social network becomes – thanks to the number of followers – much better known, followed and accessed than journalists or well-established media sources.

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