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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 them 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 call 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's Gesellschaft all point to social relationships that transcend the face-to-face. Neither ancient or 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."

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[*] Blackwell Companion to Sociology, ed. Judith M. Blau (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 16-29.

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 (1921, p. 341) offer a characteristic pair of sentences: "the 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." 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." 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 refer 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, diffusion, 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 <u>media</u> is used by thinkers outside of the mainstream of media sociology such as Harold Adams Innis and Lewis Mumford, who link basic media forms with larger civilizational consequences. Though less precise, this more open definition is helpful for understanding current transformations in the social place of media and for broadening the historical and comparative vistas of media studies.

Standardizing and Localizing Trends

In broad strokes, the 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 superceded 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 assimilation 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 (1933, p. 57): "Contacts within the community are multiplied out of proportion to contacts at a distance." 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 and Rice, 1933, pp. 213-4).

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 '50s 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 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 Personal Influence, Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld argued 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. Personal Influence 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 more recent work in the same tradition. In a study of the worldwide reception of the television program <u>Dallas</u>, 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 <u>Dallas</u> in distinct ways. Russian Israelis, for instance, often read <u>Dallas</u> 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 the sociology of media audiences generally.) 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 is similar: outward (media) standardization, inward (social) differentiation.

The equally venerable critical tradition of media sociology, whose chief architects were scholars of the Frankfurt School and whose classic statement is "the culture industry" chapter in Horkheimer and Adorno's <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u> (1944), differs principally on this point. For critical theory, the standardization of culture cannot be separated from that of society. Whether cultural industries are totalities or differentiated formations is one of the great theoretical fault lines in media sociology, not only in the mid-century face-offs between figures such as Lazarsfeld and Merton vs. Adorno and Horkheimer, but also in more recent debates in feminist research and cultural studies about the interpretive autonomy of media audiences. For critical theory, the defense of popular autonomy serves as an apology for an invasive consciousness industry, by placing the responsibility for media effects on the individual rather than the system; for mainstream sociology, to ignore audience interpretation is to ignore facts. Lazarsfeld's tradition, like that of the Chicago school, ultimately sees the media as agents of social integration; Adorno's tradition agrees that media achieve integration--a forced reconciliation in the interest of a few. The Frankfurt School insisted that any adequate analysis of modern media had to link the social-psychological study of socialization, personality, and family with the historical-economic study of cultural-making institutions; the rationalization of culture went together with the duping of consciousness. A similar notion of media as linking personal dreams and social structures is found in the thought of Gramsci and Althusser and their disciples. 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 twentieth century, communications generally and the mass media in particular have been 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 quite literally 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 is significant about twentieth-century media is not only the pervasiveness of their reach, but also the intimacy of the site in which they touch us.

In 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, CBC, each of which indexes the polity: National, Columbia, American, British, 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 quarter century. (Radio, in some regions such as subsaharan Africa, is still the medium of national integration, but in the 1950s United States, it became 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, video sales, and merchandising. Instead of a studio system churning out variations on well-known genres for a national audience, one shift in the past quarter century has been to blockbusters (genres of one), such as Jaws or Titanic, 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 in the transition to 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, mails, telephones, phonographs, radios, televisions, and movie theaters were all separate channels with distinct content such as print, interactive voice, sound, image, and money; now they are all carried on the internet in digital form (Mueller, 1999). Broadcasting to a national audience, then, just like national cinema, may turn out to be a momentary historical deviation, as media now return to their origins in wires (the telegraph). 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, and altered social norms 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% of the viewing audience. By the late 1990s, that figure has dropped to about 65%, shared among NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox, owing to competition with cable services, but also satellites, video rentals, home computers and the internet. Since the 1970s, advertisers have sought purer demographic segments. This is clearly a radical shift in the national provision of news and entertainment--though not an utter meltdown. A common fear is that citizens will be 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 Tower of Babel, each of us speaking a private cultural tongue, is a problem only for the very rich, as unlimited programming choices remain, for the time being, outside the reach of most. Clearly channel-multiplication has neither created cultural nor cognitive chaos, as some postmodern writers on information blizzards fear. The statistical limits on human energy always centralize attention. Tastes in programming are not infinitely diverse, but cluster into taste cultures. In the case of Germany, Italy, and Greece, for instance, four television networks shared 65-75% of the television audience in the early 1990s, as in the United States. In England, just two channels draw a comparable percentage (Curran, 1998). Of the twenty-five or so radio formats in the US, the top five have nearly half of the audience. Format concentration is found diverse across media (Neuman, 1991), though we should not assume that popular demand alone is the controlling factor. 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 societal 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 broadcasting 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 concerning the broadcast of comedian George Carlin's satirical monologue about the "seven dirty words" that could never be said on the air, a case which found that broadcasting's "unique pervasiveness" justified tighter content controls than 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 argued (1935), 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 (1998) 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, signals these changes.

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 such as animals (or police offers) attacking people. As programs proliferated into niches, television lost its halo as the collective hearth, even if still viewed by a plurality of citizens. Such programs as MTV's <u>Beavis and Butthead</u>, with its sophomoric humor and crudity, were even designed to scare away viewers over a certain age, thus purifying its demographics for advertisers in search of young buyers (Turow, 1997). Now programs can be designed to expel as much as to include.

The national-social logic of broadcasting taught viewers that there were other, unknown audiences out there. Hence as a cultural field, broadcasting is a breeding ground for worries about effects on others (third-person effects). Broadcasting breeds offended viewers, if not for themselves, for children or other vulnerable souls in the audience. In our age of increased fragmentation, this logic persists, as 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. Such initiatives as the V-chip, a content-regulating device required by US law to be installed in all new TV sets, or the Communications Decency Act, which President Clinton appended to the 1996 Telecommunications Act in an effort to protect both children in cyberspace and his election prospects, and which was almost instantly found unconstitutional, 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 reflect, 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.

Channel-multiplication creates a huge demand for content. Prime-time television drama is still sometimes lavishly produced (or at least expensively, as in the case of <u>Seinfeld</u>), but talk, game, and caught-on-tape shows have the advantage of attracting saleable audiences with low production budgets. 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). Amid the general frenzy of media mergers, a clear trend is union between producers of hardware (electronics or delivery systems) and software (programming): General Electric and NBC, Matsushita's short-lived purchase of Universal Pictures and MCA (later bought by Seagram), Sony and Columbia Pictures, Viacom, CBS and Paramount, AOL and Time-Warner. 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 of broadcasting and an attendant loss of moral inhibitions. Will stations and networks continue to exist? Will there be a need for a nationwide program schedule if video on-demand becomes available? Probably, given the social (and economic) value of centralized audiences and the utility of cultural packaging. Such changes have created an institutional identity crisis for European public service broadcasting, whose mission of providing quality programs to the nation is threatened by the transnational appeals of commercial television. Perhaps the unique mission of public service broadcasting should not be a national program schedule but a distinct kind of social contract with the audience: commercial-free quality programming available to all within a morally moderate national frame (Curran, 1998).

Globalization

Media flows have long been studied for their 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 ten to one hundred 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 aren't as American as they used to be. 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, wordless Polish cartoons in Greece, Bollywood (Indian) 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 (Chinese heavy metal, Franco-Maghrebi rap, karaoke in the Philippines, etc.). Even so, America still dominates and without reciprocation. Compared to the vast majority of other nations, the US is quite lacking in foreign media. Countries average about one third foreign TV programming, but the US has about 2%. The American market can absorb Power Rangers and Teletubbies, but in entertainment as in news, it remains isolated by its giantism. Strange indeed that the world's chief exporter of cultural matter is blind to what every other nation sees constantly.

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 ban dangerous performers (Madonna) or depictions (of kissing). Both China and Singapore police e-mail by way of firewalls. 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 travel readily across national and linguistic borders: the martial-arts of a Jackie Chan or musclebound antics of an Arnold Schwarzenegger, the beautiful people of <u>Baywatch</u> or <u>Beverly Hills: 90210</u>, require little translation; culturally-specific and dialogue-heavy programming such as comedy and drama do. Because of its topical references and involuted humor, <u>Seinfeld</u>, the number one rated program in late 1990s America, will probably prove a less profitable export than <u>Baywatch</u>, which never scored big at home.

The miniaturization and cheapening of media production also fuels transborder media flows. Much can be done at a desktop or in a basement, thanks to websites, CD pressing, color photocopying, video editing, etc. E-mail and the fax machine, which played a key role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising and dissident movements since, are a bane of repressive governments. The ease of citizen production (and piracy) by-passes 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. Music tends to travel more readily than film or video, in part due to cheapness and the global compatibility of playback technology. "Small media" such as tape cassettes, samizdat carbon copies, or flyers can work more effectively for political agitation than traditional, capital-hungry media such as the press and television. The heavy artillery of media touted by modernization theory, which not only require capital investment but also a complex division of labor, vie with do-it-yourself media (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994). As conceived by modernizers such as Rostow, Lerner, and Schramm, literacy, newspapers, and national broadcasting are the crown atop industrialization and infrastructural development (roads, schools, hydroelectric dams). Instead, relatively cheap, oral media such as mobile phones, radios, and VCRs have spread in such non-industrialized regions as South Asia or the Middle East. The relative autonomy of media from other modernization processes is 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 unprecedented concentration in media corporations? The long muckraking tradition attacking media power that stretches from Upton Sinclair to Noam Chomsky, 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, 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 not the monolithic trusts of yore. Oligopolistic organization is not incompatible with some creative independence, in order to insure flexibility and innovation. In recording, like other oligopolistic media industries such as film, television, and publishing, financial control is centralized but decision making is decentralized (Rothenbuhler and Streck, 1998).

Digital Convergence?

Driving much of the transformation of media is the growing power and shrinking size and cost of computing. Some foresee a universal medium that digitizes all other media, indeed, the totality of recorded human culture, into a boundless ocean of zeroes and ones. The vaunted "convergence" of telephones, televisions, and computers is best seen not as a union of existing media but the assimilation of all media by the computer. The internet is 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--telegraphy, telephony, phonography, radio, television, film, books, magazines, newspapers, and videogames-- and, alas, advertising. It offers an interesting case of a still normatively unsettled medium of communication. On the one hand, the internet seems to be as free from social obligations as home video viewing: anonymity and the lack of face-to-face acquaintance allow for uninhibited venom and narcissism in expression. Yet the leading internet service provider, America On Line, with its significant name and policing of indecent material, may represent the revival of an older normative model. Indeed, in many ways the internet is recapitulating radio's early transition from a culture of anarchic, technically minded renegades (amateurs/nerds) into a corporate engine of entertainment and commerce. The ongoing fight will concern access and intellectual property.

The internet is a huge well of digitized code--sounds, texts, images--available for creative appropriation, raising fascinating questions for art and economics. One is the unprecedented manipulability of digital texts. Digital technology allows for editing <u>within</u> the frame, instead of between frames, blurring the formerly separate domains of production and post-production in film and video. The documentary or testimonial function of photography or sound recording is now more dubious, as they become less records of events than fabrications of art. The dephysicalization of entertainment, information, and other forms of programming also opens new problems in intellectual property, thanks to sampling technologies, intensifying questions such as "copyright of personality," which protects celebrities and their likeness, voice, or even gait from appropriation. Dead celebrities such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and John F. Kennedy have all been digitally resurrected in advertising and film. Monroe has even lent her voice to the London underground's public address system (with a suitably anglicized accent). Digitization allows the uncanny practice of harvesting fresh images, words, and sounds from the dead.

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? Again, the fear of private cocoons or the utopia of universal creativity

should both be limited by the recognition of opportunity costs and the on-going need for shared cultural experience. Information is not scarce in a digital world, but intelligence is, one reason why search engine services are proliferating. The packaging (pre-processing) of information is always crucial, especially in situations of programming abundance. Information bottlenecks reinforce the principle that media are not just pipes, but have unanticipated consequences. As Innis insisted, new media create monopolies of knowledge and hence aid formation of new power-holding classes, such as the operators of internet portals such as Yahoo!.

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 often faced gigantic first-copy costs and cheap unit costs. Even a feature-film print, costing over ten thousand dollars, is inexpensive compared to the cost of the original; cutting a vinyl LP copy is cheap. Whereas analog media require a physical connection to the original, digital media can be transported anywhere with enough bandwidth. Media industries are today principally in the software business. The recording industry is considering "digital kiosks" where customers may choose an album, download it and have the CD burned on site, thus eliminating distribution and inventory, just as film distributors are developing digital projection to avoid the significant expense of transporting cans of 35mm film. The etherealization cultural commodities also provokes worries: the record industry wants to assess fees, similar to radio, for internet airplay of music, instead of the internet culture of unlicensed usage, an example illustrating some of the radical changes in distribution, ownership, and financing that digitization of content poses for large-scale media production.

The dream of universal accessibility of culture, of an Alexandrine library on the wires, is nowhere in sight. First are obvious impediments to access, both in terms of access to hardware and to competence or desire. (In the late 1990s, 70% of American homes did not have a modem.) Second are technological problems of incompatibility and turnover. Texts written in the 1980s on 5¼ inch floppy disks are in some ways more irretrievable than those written 700 years ago on medieval parchment. Vinyl LPs are all but obsolete, and estimates vary on how long the current CD format will last. All recording media are subject to degradation, but people have lots of experience with writing and printing, whose (not inconsiderable) decoding apparatus is literacy, but 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. Massive data-dumping is the flipside of gigantic downloading. As always, the sociology of digital media should recognize the centripetal as well centrifugal trends.

The Great Communications Switch

Perhaps one of the strangest and subtlest of the social consequences of twentieth-century media is a change in interpersonal interaction. A chief feature of modern interpersonal life is its mediation--by mail, phone, e-mail, and so on. At the same time, 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." At the same time, Merton attacked the "pseudo-Gemeinschaft" of media-promoted communities. Both grasped, from distinct positions on the theoretical compass, the ways that media had assumed interpersonal features and vice versa. 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 chatting with us.

A hallmark of twentieth-century cinema, drama and literature--and sociology--is the gaps between people, that is, the distortion and difficulty of dialogue. People are shown 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 sense that people can have personal relationships with media figures) as a pathology, it is clear that most relationships, face-to-face or otherwise, are mediated in some sense. There are elements of fictionalization in interpersonal relationships, not only in fan clubs or the more prototypical kinds of parasocial interaction. Knowing what is dialogue and what broadcast in daily interactions (i.e., what to take personally) is often difficult. E-mail's disembodiment of interaction represents a longer trend that theorists such as Luhmann and Giddens associate with modernity generally. Harvey Sacks's conversational analysis showed just how tortured and fraught--and intricately ordered--everyday dialogue could be. 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 must photograph well and project their sincerity over television. 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), 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.

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