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What are New Media – a Characteristic

The term *new media* has been in use for several dozen years or so. However, rarely do we think about what it means or try to define what *new media* are and how do they differ in terms of quality from the old media. The phrase new media was first used in the 1960s. Among the specific characteristics of new media there are: mutual connectivity, access to individual users who can play both the role of broadcaster and recipient, interactivity, multitude of uses, openness, omnipresence, space infinity and delocalisation¹. New media have also brought with them new quality into culture – intertextuality, unification of form and genres on TV².

Dennis McQuail states that the Internet should definitely be considered a new medium. In 2001, in the United States, 60-70% of people were users³, and in March 2008 this percentage increased to 73.1%⁴. It shows that in the US the level of internauts is at a stable level and, in consequence, we are dealing with a process of gradual saturation. It should also be noted that new information technologies (including the Internet) have been spreading extremely rapidly for the last 20 years, especially from mid 1970s to mid 1990s. In 2000, in the US, as many as 95% of public schools had Internet access. In comparison, it took radio 30 years to gain 60 mln listeners, TV – 15 years and the Internet – 3 years⁵.

Mass media encyclopaedia defines new media as any broadcast techniques and technologies generally used since the mid 1980s. The beginnings of the new media era are tied to popularisation of PCs, satellite TV and video⁶.

Even though new media predominantly include visual and audiovisual broadcast technologies, there are also non-monitor technologies such as telefax and mobile technology⁷. However, it is generally the Internet which is considered to exemplify new media due to its communication specificity.

There is no consensus among media experts regarding what new media are. Some consider television to be the determinant of new media creation, with new media being techniques of data acquiring, processing and transmission created much later than traditional television⁸. On the other hand, others say that in attempts to classify new media used should be the criterion of carrier and interactivity, pointing to new media allowing for better and non-traditional, that is requiring activity from the recipients, use of electronic devices⁹. Going by that rationale, entirely new technologies are only computers and the Internet, excluding television.

A similar theory regarding new media is proposed by Lev Manovich. According to him, new media are analogue media converted to digital form. Their fundamental characteristic is free and unlimited access to data and its copying without losing quality

¹ D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego*, Warszawa 2007, p. 57.

² J. Skrzypczak, *Popularna encyklopedia mass mediów*, Poznań 1999, p. 376.

³ D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania...*, p. 58.

⁴ www.internetworldstatp.com/statp.htm.

⁵ M. Castells, *Spółeczeństwo sieci*, Warszawa 2007, p. 47 and 354.

⁶ J. Skrzypczak, *Popularna encyklopedia...*, p. 375.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

(digital media can be copied numerous times with no effect on quality) and interactivity, that of user and the media object¹⁰. There are five key elements of new media characteristics¹¹:

- *numerical representation*: the object may be described in formal language (mathematical) and undergo algorithmic processing, ie. photo processing using a specific algorithm;
- *modular nature*: new media object is comprised of independent segments, up to the non-split 'atom' level –pixels, 3D points, text marks and modular make-up facilitates the elimination of elements or their replacement;
- *automation*: new media allow for greater automation of numerous activities such as the creation and processing of content as well as its availability;
- *greater variance*: the new media object is not something that is 'set in stone' but can be adapted and exist in numerous shapes and forms, new media can be compared to maps in different scales, with various level of detail;
- *transcoding*: allows for changing media into computer data and switching from one format to another.

The Internet, most often associated with new media, in contrast to traditional, isn't solely used for production and broadcasting of news but also for processing, exchange and storing of information¹². The Internet and other new media can be used for both private and public communication and their functioning does not have to be professional or organized in a bureaucratic way, as is the case with traditional mass media¹³. This influences the quality of the created broadcasts, possibilities for monitoring, censorship and manipulation attempts. It has been said over and over again that the Internet is the only truly free and autonomous medium which allows anyone to articulate their needs and express their objections.

What kind of new quality are we dealing with in the new media as compared to the old? First and foremost, it is digitalisation of all elements (pointed out by Manovich), the convergence of different media, shifting from mass communication to Web communication, audience interiorisation, fragmentation, shifting away from media institutions and lessening their influence on society¹⁴. There remains the issue of whether new media should be regulated more extensively or should they be left alone with interference into their functioning only in justified case¹⁵.

When discussing new media it is impossible to omit the issue of the convergence process. Henry Jenkins, the author of *Convergence Culture: the clash of old and new media*, defines it as, "content flow between different media platforms, cooperation of various media industries and migration behaviour of media recipients"¹⁶. Tomasz Kulisiewicz describes convergence as the coming together or merging of computer science, telecommunications and electronic media¹⁷. Media convergence is tied to digitalisation. Mass media, telecommunications and computer in the old, analogue era were three separate media, today they are one¹⁸. As Derrick de Kerckhove points out, the process of digitalisation eliminates

¹⁰ L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów*, Warszawa 2006, p. 119–120.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 91–118.

¹² D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania...*, p. 151.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów...*, p. 153.

¹⁵ Por. M. Szpunar, *Internet a wolność (od) wypowiedzi*, [in:] *Media – między władzą a społeczeństwem*, ed. Szpunar, Rzeszów 2007.

¹⁶ H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji: zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, Warszawa 2007, p. 9–10.

¹⁷ T. Kulisiewicz, *Konwergencja w komunikacji elektronicznej i jej wpływ na operatorów, media i odbiorców*, [in:] *Kultura 2.0. Wyzwania cyfrowej przyszłości*, ed. E. Bendyk, Warszawa 2007, www.pwa.gov.pl/pl/binary/235/raport_kultura_2.0.pdf, p. 7.

¹⁸ K. Krzysztofek, *Status mediów cyfrowych: stare i nowe paradygmaty*, „Global Media Journal – Polish Edition” 2006, nr 1, p. 14.

barriers between media and creates a common denominator regarding regulations of their activity¹⁹. The basic premise of electronic convergence is availability of service, regardless the channel of transmission, be it a TV set, a computer or a mobile phone²⁰. The media, previously differing in terms of quality, now exist in a common symbiosis and it seems that, all the more so, they are co-dependent. The prediction is that soon they will be all available within one mechanism, a so called 'black box'. The scope of functionality of the different devices is continually increasing. The idea of *mediaboxes*, combining audio, video and Internet services, is quickly gaining popularity. There are more and more *all in one* devices such as modern computers with TV, radio, video and Internet services, with wireless and remote control access.

According to McQuail, these are the key characteristics of new media²¹:

- *interactivity*: user/recipient reaction factor to the broadcasted offer;
- *social presence*: the feeling of being in personal contact with others;
- *media wealth*: reduction of ambiguities, numerous aids, independence from the source and its control;
- *user friendly*: media as a source of entertainment not necessarily only a work tool
- *privacy*;
- *personalisation*: broadcast uniqueness and personalisation.

Media wealth, according to Sherwyn P. Morreale, Brian Spitzberg and J. Kevin Barge, is about the availability of feedback, verbal and visual. Speed is another factor, the time from the message creation to its reception. The shorter the time period, the richer the medium. The final measurement of media wealth is its *completeness*, or the scope in which a given medium broadcasts its non-verbal and emotional message content. The richer the medium, the more competent the communication²². Some types of Internet communicators, such as Skype, Gadu-Gadu or chats, enable people to see each other via Internet cameras (videoconferencing). This type of communication and this medium are considered rich. They make available communication which is almost the same as *face-to-face*, as it allows for the reception of nearly the same signals, including non-verbal ones.

Tools used for synchronous (real time) communication are characterised by high speed, almost instantaneous reaction to the message and high level of interactivity (messages can be written simultaneously, sentences can be broken off or continued just like in *face-to-face* conversation). Such tools meet the completeness requirement enabling people to present emotions and send non-verbal signals.

Non-synchronous communication tools such as e-mail or discussion forums are not as advanced as far as communication. In this case, we are dealing with a more limited variety of non-verbal and visual tools. Also emotions expressed this way are more restricted even though there are such possibilities as emotikons, acronyms or the use of upper cases. Non-synchronous tools, therefore, are a lot less interactive.

Chart 1. Media wealth continuum

HIGH
Face to face

¹⁹ D. de Kerckhove, *Inteligencja otwarta*, Warszawa 2001, p. 34.

²⁰ T. Kulisiewicz, *Konwergencja w komunikacji...*, p. 7.

²¹ D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania...*, p. 156.

²² P.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Komunikacja między ludźmi. Motywacja, wiedza i umiejętności*, Warszawa 2007, p. 241–242.

Virtual reality
Videophone
Telephone
Chats
Support group decision systems
Mail

Letter
Note/reminder

Special report

Leaflet/bulletin
LOW

Source: By author, based on S.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Communication between people...*, p. 243.

Another key new media characteristic is *interactivity*, defined by McQuail as user/recipient reaction factor to the broadcasted message. The faster the recipient's reaction time to the broadcasted message, the more interactive the medium. Spiro Kiouisis formulated a definition of interactivity based on four criteria: *social closeness to others, activation of senses, perceived speed and presence despite distance*²³. Edward J. Downes and Sally J. McMillan, on the other hand, distinguish the following interactivity dimensions – *communication direction, time elasticity and roles in the exchange, perceived space within communication sphere, control level* (communication freedom) and *perceived goal* (exchange of information or persuasion)²⁴. Communication direction freedom, no longer one way, is considered advantageous, the same as level of engagement in the process of communication. As Kiouisis noted, interactivity means senses activation, the more intense it is, the more the medium requires exclusivity, the more interactive the medium. Radio, for example, is not very interactive since listening to it can be combined with other activities and it generally, with some exceptions, is not designed for two way communication.

The meaning of the term interactivity has changed over time. In the past people considered a PowerPoint presentation to be interactive as it enabled the presenter to change the order of the projected slides. As Kerckhove points out, interactivity is a phrase that can potentially generate profits worth millions and companies do everything to offer their customers interactive services²⁵. He states, "The entertainment industry is heavily investing in interactivity as it is something that people are drawn to. [...] Most such services should not even be called interactive as they are limited to people clicking a button in order for some image to pop up"²⁶. Webpages full of graphics are considered interactive since they give people the impression that a lot is going on, that they are taking part in something that is active. The adjective 'interactive' has been added to many Internet initiatives and it has become a sort of catch phrase or something obligatory in the sphere of new media.

Another measurement of interactivity is the range in which people communicating via a certain medium can do so simultaneously or react to messages²⁷. The more similar the communication to *face-to-face*, the greater the level of interactivity. Synchronous

²³ P. Kiouisis, *Public Trust or Mistrust? Perceptions of Media Credibility in the Information age*, „Mass Communication and Society” 2001, nr 4, p. 381–403; from: McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania...*, p. 157.

²⁴ E. Downes, P. McMillan, *Defining Interactivity: A Qualitative Identification of Key Dimensions*, „New Media and Society” 2000, nr 2, p. 157–179; from: D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania...*, p. 157.

²⁵ D. de Kerckhove, *Inteligencja...*, p. 31.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ P.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Komunikacja między ludźmi...*, p. 242.

communication, a large number of non-verbal symbols and the possibility to instantaneously react to a message are advantageous to interactivity. As Sylwia Szykowna points out, it should not be measured by options in the menu or clicks on icons. Citing Rod Sims, she distinguishes three levels of interactivity²⁸:

- *reactionary*: user control is dependent on programme generated possibilities;
- *co-active*: enables the user to control what happens next;
- *proactive*: the user is in control of structure and content.

Such classification of interactivity levels means that full interactivity takes place only on the proactive level where a user freely decides what he wishes to do, without any limitations. A regular Internet website is, hence, not very interactive as it includes a limited number of links created by the broadcaster who decides how many there are and what they are. The same case is with many hypertext novels, a seemingly large scope of freedom is restricted by a limited number of possibilities. As far as interactive creative writing, true interaction, according to Szykowna, takes place only when different users can add their own input so that the final work is not entirely the creation of one person²⁹. In interactive creating the authors and recipients enter into a so called creative union and the work constructed is a compilation of many efforts resulting in something that does not represent anyone or anything specific and, hence, becomes a pure medium³⁰. It is difficult to determine whether such a creation is the work of the creator or the recipient as they co-exist in a symbiosis where neither one is superior and where they are both entitled to action (interaction).

This situation is best exemplified by the stories created on the Web by many authors who can freely submit any content they wish and they all have a right to express their opinions. Even though there is generally one person who initiates the creation of such an interactive work, he/she quickly disappears among the rest of the project's participants. A guarantee of complete interactivity, according to Marta Raczek, is enabling interlocutors the means to express their individuality³¹, a situation in which both sides can take part in the decision making process of communication conditioning its course.

Presence regardless the distance is similar in effect to what we know in media as *telepresence*. Viewers watching a programme live are under the impression that they are witnesses of the event, that they are taking part in it, here and now. Media use various techniques to create the effect of telepresence in their shows, ie. direct questions to the audience, possibility to phone into the studio and influence the course of the programme. Telepresence, despite a limited spectrum of sensory experience reaching the audience, allows the recipients to have a feeling that they are physically close and part of the action³². As Roman Brombosz points out, technological intermediation does not impair emotions but only diminishes the sensory experience.

The imagination plays a key role in the creation of the impression of presence. For example, we imagine the person we are talking to on the phone. Manovich distinguishes two explanations for understanding telepresence. The first is virtual reality, presence within the environment created by the computer, the second – presence in real place as a result of live video imaging³³. This is possible thanks to Internet cameras, parents can see what their

²⁸ P. Szykowna, *Sztuka interaktywna w Sieci a problem kreacji*, [w:] *Homo kreator czy homo ludens? Twórcy – internauci – podróżnicy*, ed. W. Muszyński, M. Sokołowski, Toruń 2008, p. 30.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 32.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ M. Raczek, *Interakcja czy sterowanie – polska sztuka przełomu XX i XXI wieku w dyskursie z odbiorcą*, [in:] *Estetyka wirtualności*, ed. M. Ostrowicki, Kraków 2005, p. 279.

³² R. Brombosz, *Estetyczne aspekty teleobecności*, [w:] *Estetyka wirtualności...*, p. 109.

³³ L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów...*, p. 265.

children do in kindergarten, police can watch more dangerous spots in the city and intervene when there is need, viewers of reality shows can watch live what participants of such programmes are doing at almost any time of day. New technologies allow people not to be physically present in a particular place but feel like they are.

Another effect for which responsible are new media is that of *immersion*. It is defined as being immersed within the medium resulting in losing sensory contact with the real world³⁴. However, it is not only new media which are responsible for it. People can be immersed in an exciting book, film, etc. and temporary lose contact with reality even after what they have 'been into' is finished.

Surely, new media are changing the present model of communication characteristic of mass media as we know it. The audiences ceases to be a passive recipient without being able to react to the broadcasted message. Of course, new media do not eliminate the old. Instead, they converge with traditional media, erasing borderlines between various mediums functioning in different niches. Democratic structure, as is the case with the Internet, enables people to freely create broadcasted messages. This, in turn, results in different quality. Based on the discussed above characteristics of new media, we can say that they bring in new media quality and, therefore, justified is the use of the adjective *new*, in contrast to the old predecessors.

New media are influencing nearly all spheres of human activity changing work relations, communication processes, forms of relationships between people, ways of spending free time and even spirituality. Although it is difficult to make any conclusions on the character of these changes, we can surely say that media intermediation will definitely be a part of relationships and contacts between people in the XXI century.

³⁴ I. Fiut, *Media @ Internet. Szkice filozoficzno-medioznawcze z lat 2000–2006*, Kraków 2006, p. 137.