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Are media new? A polemic
Etymology of the term "media"

General popularity of media related issues has resulted in a multitude of academic and pseudo academic works which discuss the term *new media*. The following article undertakes an attempt of a polemic on the legitimacy of using this form of nomenclature and distinguishing new from old media. Further discussed will be the etymology of the term media, its definitions and analysis of a most dynamically developing medium – the Internet. using old and new media terminology and this form of nomenclature.

In the *Słownik wyrazów obcych PWN* (PWN Dictionary of Foreign Words) a "medium" "comes from the Latin word, *medius* – middle, meaning 1) a person susceptible to hypnosis, 2) a person, according to spiritualists, able to feel telepathic phenomena, an intermediary between the material and spiritual world, 3) a place or environment in which phenomena take place"[1].

We should also take into consideration 19th century definition of the word medium which described a person with paranormal abilities in the area of spiritualism[2]. Moreover, it is necessary to tie this meaning with similar and semantically complementary terms in order to present the present, special role of the media. The term "media" can also mean "device", "carrier", "channel", "signal" and "communicator" and is used in a wide variety of technical media spin-offs[3]. Even more significant seems to its connection to the definition of the Latin term *communication*, that is entering and maintaining relations with others, signifying a wide range of meanings. Etymology of the term indicates that in the 14th century it also meant activities related to communion, taking part and sharing and in the 16th – transmission, and finally in the 20th century – the moving of people and objects in space and the transmission of information over distance. It is evident that the terms "media" and "communication" have inseparable semantic ties[4]. It also shows a multitude of terms which even in their general definitions specify what media are.

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[1] *Słownik wyrazów obcych PWN*, ed. by J. Tokarski, Warszawa 1971, p. 462.
[2] G. Zaraziński, *Komunikacja i media. Wprowadzenie*, Siedlce 2006, p. 23.
[3] T. Goban-Klas, *Cywilizacja medialna. Geneza, ewolucja, eksplozja*, Warszawa 2005, p. 19.
[4] B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Komunikowanie polityczne i publiczne*, Warszawa 2006, p. 61.

The basic function of media, that of being a transmitter, can be considered a basis for further theoretical divagations as well as the first and general indicator of what media are.

What are the new media?

In order to determine what new media are, we should take a look at the definition of the term. In academic literature, they are basically defined two ways. According to Grzegorz Zaraziński, media are:

- "technical transmitters, forms of gathering and storing information and knowledge,
- […] expanding […] of abilities or capabilities of the human body […]. The mutual relation between man and medium results in the fact that they both influence each other and condition their development"[5].

The above definition signifies a three way look at media:

- material – as a matter necessary in order for transmission to take place,
- organizational – a collection of institutions making up public broadcast,
- functional – according to function they play, i.e. information or entertainment function, etc.

What makes media new then and what are they characterized by? Lev Manovich lists the phenomena that are described this way in popular press, "the Internet, www cites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMs, DVDs and virtual reality"[6] and expands the list to also include computer texts and visualizations. The first element which does not fit the academic definition of the term is the narrow and infantile definition range. He delineates the division line between old and new media at about 1830 (the inventions of Charles Babbage's analytical machine and Louis Daguerre's daguerreotype) stating that, "new media are a result of the crossing of two different processes; history of calculation techniques and history of media techniques" and is a result of rejection of an in-depth analysis of media genealogy carried out by numerous researchers[7].

Dating back new media to mid XIX century clashes with Alvin Toffler's theory which points out three waves of society progress: the agrarian, the industrial and the information[8]. All of these, according to Roger Fidler, correspond to mediamorphoses or different media

[5] G. Zaraziński, *Komunikacja...*, p. 24.
[6] L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów*, Warszawa 2006, p. 81.
[7] Ibidem, p. 82.
[8] A. Toffler, *Trzecia fala*, Warszawa 1997, p. 43–45.

development stages[9]. The divisions should not be strictly delineated, due to the fact that the majority of inventions is not a result of a single man's doing but a compilation of the work and thought processes of entire societies. The domination of technology within a given period of time allows us to define different eras of development, ie. the writing era, the print era, or the television era. Toffler's progress waves are strictly tied to the evolution of social structures which allows us to define their time frames. The agrarian wave took place at the time of feudal societies, the industrial – in early capitalist and social ones, with factories being the driving force and presently we are in the early stage of the information era. It is controversial then to place the division line between old and new media in the middle of the industrial era. The new media are developing so rapidly (the Internet in its present form is only a little over 15 years old) that they rather indicate how mass media they are[10]. The term new media is legitimate but it should be specifically defined, including characteristics which make these media unique.

Manovich states that it could be five factors which determine the new media status: numeric representation, modularity, automation, variation and cultural trans-coding[11]. If the goal, however, is to determine whether media are new, we should take into consideration chronology which allows us to interpret phenomena according to the role they played within a given time period. It seems appropriate to mention Goban-Klas' frame genealogy of media evolution and match it the phenomena taking place. Goban-Klas distinguished the following mediamorphoses: writing, print, mass information and propaganda, mass iconosphere, music and word targeted at the masses, mass communication, media digitalization, web media and media mobility[12].

The selection is valuable as it allows us to organize a chronology of events and to attribute social phenomena to them, with regard to each mediamorphosis. Secondly, it may serve to clearly define goals, specificity and structure of media and well as the resulting social consequences.

Media changeability should be determined not via a strict division line but via the specificity of the factors determined by Manovich, that is numeric representation, modularity, automation, variation and cultural trans-coding. New elements are those for which

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[9] T. Goban-Klas, *Cywilizacja medialna. Geneza, ewolucja, eksplozja*, Warszawa 2005, p. 29.
[10] The history of the Internet proves its dynamic growth. Since 1961, when four universities were connected, it has been developing its structure at an astonishing speed, with social connotations of global scope. According to comScore World 3 – 45. Metrix, in December 2008 the number of users Has reached 1 billion – www.computerworld.pl/news/334517/Liczba.uzytkownikow.internetu.przekroczyla.miliard.html).
[11] L. Manovich, *Język…*, p. 67, 83.
[12] T. Goban-Klas, *Cywilizacja…*, p. 47–161.

digitalization is the base. Their development is determined by digital technologies and the way they are used. Modularity is one such form because it is a fraction of new media structure[13]. Different media elements constitute a base for the building of new, more complex and, what is imperative, independent of each other fragments that make up the whole. There are many examples of which one is the construction of HTML (HyperText Markup Language). Also here, the two factors (numeric representation and modularity) were used as an element in the building of media in the process of automation. This regards not only the creation of media or making them available, they cannot be enclosed within strictly determined frames but are variable in character as a result of fluidity. The last factor, transcoding, is not limited to material or technological bases. Here two layers merge – the computer and the cultural. This is a wide area for academic reflection but what should be noted is the base on which it relies – the act of communication in new media.

"New" media on the example of select patterns of acts of communication

If we assume, according to M. McLuhan, that media's basic function is the continuation of human senses, we can presume that their goal is to facilitate communication. Communication, as mentioned above, can be understood as the transfer of people and objects in space as well as the transfer of information over distance[14]. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the transfer of information which can regard not only the human world but also animal and plant. In defining this process, first mentioned should be the basic elements of an act of communication, according to Aristotle's triad: speaker – speech – recipient[15]. Literature on the subject includes several patterns of acts of communication, explaining the processes going on between participants. Models which pertain to new media are those which take into account technological development and mathematical diagrams of signal transmission by C. Shannon and W. Weaver as well as alternative communication models by J.L. Bordewijk and B. van Kaam[16].

Shannon and Weaver's diagram only considers the transmission of signal in technical systems, which suggests an association with new media specificity, according to Manovich. It would take a more in-depth analysis of the model to state whether it possesses the new

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[13] L. Manovich, *Język...*, Warszawa 2006, p. 95.
[14] B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Komunikowanie...*, p. 61.
[15] Ibidem, p. 62–64.
[16] T. Goban-Klas, *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu,* Warszawa 2008, p. 58, 77–78.

quality. As the graphic reproduction shows, the act of communication takes place only in certain conditions, under the influence of factors present.
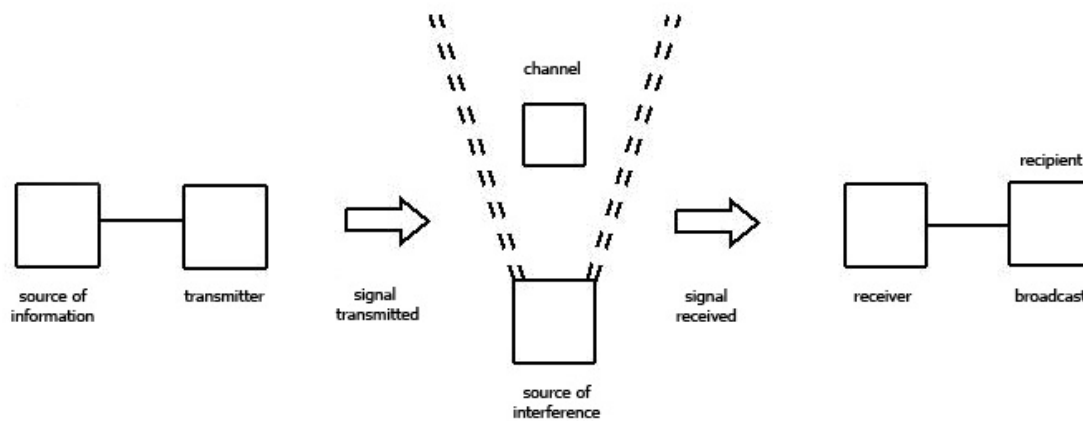

Chart 1. Shannon's model of signal transmission

Source: T. Goban-Klas, *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu,* Warszawa 2004.

The element which can be considered "new" in the above diagram is the signal transmitter. The Internet has lead to the democratization of factors marked source of information by popularization of access to opportunities of transmitting content all over the entire globe, for example, via www. cites. A lack of central point in the path of signal, that is the possibility to bypass points temporarily inactive, is the Internet's basic premise and an innovation determinant in this way of sending information. As mentioned above, in the industrial age, those in possession of information sources were powerful political or commercial organizations. The Internet, delineating the convergence of media today in the aspect of technological solutions and the aspect information creation, can be considered a new medium. Before the web era, individuals could also be sources of information, however, the scope of their potential influence has now dramatically increased. It should be noted that influence is only a possibility with regard to entire societies. In practice, influence can be attained by those who are in possession of proper knowledge and means. Additionally, in the category of "new" we can examine another element – the signal transmitted in digital form, that is data in binary code. This requires technological means which enable sending,

transmission and reception of signal, and these can be considered different than those used in the era of mass transmission, according to Toffler[17]. A detailed review of equipment characteristics and requirements is another issue which is not the aim of this discussion. In order to focus on forms of communication which can be considered new, let's take a look at alternative models of transmission by Bordewijk and van Kaam.

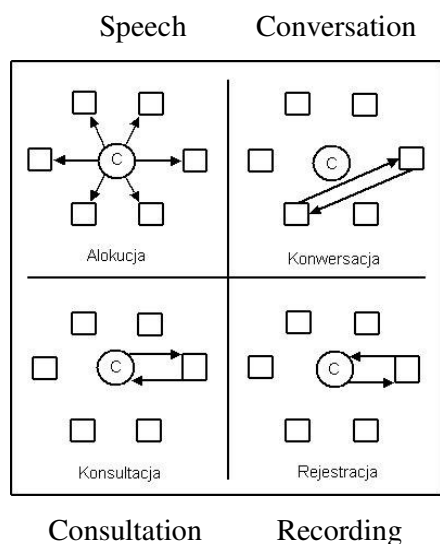Speech   Conversation

Consultation   Recording

Chart 2. Alternative models of acts of communication by Bordewijk and van Kaam

Source: T. Goban-Klas, *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu*, Warszawa 2008.

All variants of this model include two basic elements:

- interactive communication assuming the presence of those elements of communication which have been so far present only in *face to face* contact,

- partial (when used is technology owned by organizations possessing this knowledge) omission of means possessing knowledge and obtaining information directly from the source.

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[17] Mass transmission is also modern form of communication via the Internet. The basic determinant of such communication is two way transmission, allowing conversation in real time and, what is more, positive feedback. Mass communication, according to Toffler's second wave, assumed the existence of large centres of signal transmission (organizations) with one way communication.

The above allow us to come to the conclusion about the dual nature of media which, by definition cited above, are considered to be the result of coexistence of the idea of continuation of senses and technical means used to strengthen them. The basic idea, not function, is to know more, speak louder and transmit thought over longer distances. The functions which media play are not only about the realization of this idea but the outcome of mutual interaction taking place in the process of communication between two people, an individual and group, and between groups or a person (group) and machine. Realization of this process results numerous interdependencies of personal and social character. It is possible to determine the influence of media on individuals or societies but it does require in-depth research, also of phenomena so far unclassified. It should be noted that found can be analogies to web societies, the history of social development and anthropology of culture. For example, for breaking the rules within primitive societies or within particular web group, the result of exclusion from the group. This is, of course, a simplification but the fact is that there is not enough research carried out regarding behaviour and existence within the new media environment. As far as media functions, it would be appropriate to cite again the elements of models of communication. The pointed out elements are realized according to McLuhan's model, regarding entire media and without a division[18]. It delineates media functions by the following questions:

- what makes a medium stronger or better?
- what replaces a medium?
- can it regain from the past what was put aside?
- what can it transform into, reaching its maximum?[19].

With regard to the Internet, we can obtain:

- on the broadcaster side: the ability to transmit different ways of expressing thought,
- on the recipient side – the ability to use a larger number of sources of information,
- regarding signal – new paths and opportunities for technological transmission (also interference) of signal.

The issue of replacing or pushing back other media is more about the convergence within the network, it is part of the functioning cycle based on the principle that a newer invention

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[18] T. Goban-Klas, *Media…*, p. 304.
[19] Ibidem.

replaces or supplements the older. As in the past, optic telephone was replaced by electric and analogue communication by digital. The possibility to combine and complement other media into one is another indicator of innovation. As far as the Internet, regained from the past was, for example, *face to face* contact (*Skype*), which in the second wave of mass media was pushed aside in favour of one way, visual forms of signal transmission. Regarding transformation and reaching the maximum, at this stage of such dynamic development it is too early to tell.

Conclusion

All in all, we cannot explicitly say that media are new or not since we are dealing with too many ambiguous issues which have so far not been properly researched. Among them, there is "new media" specificity and their precise definition, taking into consideration a detailed classification of forms of expression through media as well as social connotations resulting from the existence of a given medium within that culture. Media structure development can be examined on two levels – the ideological plain and the technological plain. Media's dual nature may result in that, on the one hand, technological means of communication could be considered new while, on the other, ideas and needs that they meet are still the same although perhaps expressed slightly differently. Moreover, it should be noted that technological development predominantly regards the strengthening of senses, which influenced the development of media in previous eras, mainly sight and hearing. Research on the other senses is still in the experimental, not mass, stage. This is another reason why the term "new media" can be untimely. An alternative term to be used in this case could be "modern media".