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DOES THE MEDIA HAVE A FUTURE?

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ABSTRACT

Media-related practices have so long been configured in a particular one-to-many pattern that the mass communication paradigm has seemed automatic as both frame for research and fact of social life. The paradigm is summed up in the English term '*the* media'. But what if the very idea of 'the media' is also imploding, as the interfaces we call media are transformed? Does the implosion of 'the media' generate a crisis of appearances for government and other institutions? Three dynamics are considered - technological, social and political – that are potentially undermining our idea of 'the media' as a privileged site for accessing a common world. The article concludes that, instead of collapsing, the social construction of 'the media' will become a site of intensified struggle for competing forces: market-based fragmentation versus continued pressures of centralisation that draw on new media-related myths and rituals.

KEYWORDS

'the media'; fragmentation; centralisation; myth; media economics

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Introduction

Media are part of the landscape of everyday life. Although media have always included a mixture of centralized and interpersonal communications, media-related practices have so long been configured in a particular one-to-many pattern that the mass communication paradigm has seemed automatic as both frame for research and fact of social life. The paradigm is summed up in the English term 'the media', sometimes treated 'ungrammatically' (as in my title) as a singular noun;[1] just a decade ago this could still provide a reference-point for critical research (Silverstone 1999). But something general about media *is* changing. At stake is not just a single relation (the 'self' versus the 'net', as Manuel Castells once put it: 1996: 3), for digital media are now integral to how selves appear at all. A deeper transformation is under way that challenges the ontology on which the mass communication paradigm was based. Producers and consumers of media are often now the same person; professional and amateur cultural production are not distant, but closely overlapping, regions of the same vast spectrum.

Some reach drastic conclusions about the obsolescence of centralized media institutions, their replacement by new models of collaborative communication ('we-think' as Charles Leadbeater has called it: 2007), even the death of 'the media'. My approach, by contrast, is to

acknowledge the new challenges to the legitimacy of media institutions – and those challenges' basis in a real shift in media's field of possibilities – but then to explore a whole range of intersecting pressures that resist the collapse of media institutions. I will approach this via challenges to what I have elsewhere called 'the myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry 2003), arguing that this myth is now both more openly contested and more actively produced than before.

A New Media Geometry?

We need to capture a very general change in the media field (I use 'field' here not as the term of art within Bourdieu's sociology, but as a general term for the space of possibility in which media are produced and consumed). The digitalization of media contents and the normalization in many societies of fast internet access, whether from fixed points or via mobile devices, means that, in principle, every point in space is connected through mediated communication to every other point; and that connection is always potentially two-way, since either end may be sender or receiver (or both). As a result, one way senders - specialist media producers/distributors - and one-way receivers – 'mere' consumers or audience members - become less common in their pure form, while hybrid sender/receivers, in some form at least, become more common. By contrast, in the pre-digital era, 'media' were productions that radiated outwards from a limited number of production/distribution points, received by the members of a separate, much larger 'mass', the 'audience'. This was not technological necessity, as the early history of radio shows, but the result, first, of the high capital required for much media production/distribution (Garnham 1990; Benkler 2006: chapter 2) and, second, of the fit of such capital-intensive media with the developing organisation of the modern state.

Something has changed, but what exactly? Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* boldly claims that a fundamental shift is under way:

> emerging models of information and cultural production, radically decentralized and based on emergent patterns of cooperation and sharing, but also of simple coordinate existence, are beginning to take on an ever-larger role in how we produce meaning. (2006: 32-33)

While market-based media structures will not disappear (2006: 121, 23), 'we have an opportunity to change the way we create and exchange information, knowledge and culture' (2006: 473, cf 162-165). Benkler models this transformation in an attempt to reorientate policy debates about digital media (2006: 23). But, however welcome Benkler's vision,[2] our task in sociology of communication is different: to identify not just the possible, but the *likely* dynamics of change. Yet who can doubt that media research currently faces profound uncertainties: about what *are* 'media', what *is* the future of media institutions, what dynamics of change *are* the crucial ones?

We should not be misled by the generality of the transformation that has occurred. Let me explain through an analogy from mathematics. Consider the transformation from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional world: the result is to transform the space of objects, but this tells us nothing about what particular objects will exist in the new three-dimensional world. For most or all objects in that world may along their third dimension have a value of zero or close to zero; they may be basically flat, and so treatable like two-dimensional objects. So the shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional geometry only describes a change in abstract possibilities. Similarly Benkler captures well how new configurations of media consumption and media production are possible in the abstract (and in some specific cases),

changing our understanding of how a future information infrastructure *might* be built (2006: chapter 3), but this tells us little about what actual configurations will predominate.[3]

More specifically, Benkler tells us nothing about whether, and why, the *demand* for information and media might change (delli Carpini 2001), to fit with the potential shift in supply he identifies, and even less about people's *usage* of the new media landscape. His discussion of Internet architecture, for example, draws exclusively on the literature on links between websites (Benkler 2006: chapter 6) and says nothing about how such links might relate to users' practice of following those links (or not). Yet understanding the terrain of habitual use is crucial to analysing how the abstract possibilities of all technologies develop into everyday culture (Marvin 1987; Silverstone 1994). Benkler also fails to address the wider constellations of practice and social organization built around media use. These constellations involve the wider framings of practice and social organisation. The idea of 'mass media', as a framing of the media field, has for a century seemed to fit automatically with the 'nature' of society and media. What if this also is being undermined? If so, Benkler's vision would have much more in its favour. If by contrast there are good reasons to *doubt* whether that idea will change, then the weight we give to claims such as Benkler's changes completely. It follows that our attention, as sociologists of communication, should be directed not to isolated challenges to the binary divisions between producer and consumer, professional and amateur media producer, but towards the wider dynamics shaping the landscape in which the production and consumption of media occur. To put it more drastically, does 'the media' have a future? If not, what are the consequences? If yes, that social construction will continue but in what new forms?

The Death of 'the Media'?

Political economy approaches to mass media have always needed a cultural supplement. If we define those approaches broadly as concerned with the 'ways that communicative activity is structured by the unequal distribution of material *and symbolic* resources' (Golding and Murdock 1991: 18, added emphasis), then it is not enough to note the highly unequal distribution of resources that makes media *mass media*. While mass media are, in one sense, 'just there', they need to be made sense of, legitimated; 'living with' the existence of media institutions is part of the wider organisation of economic, social and political production, indeed the sustaining of the nation-state in modernity. This *intensifies* the significance of political economy analyses: for by being naturalised through cultural means (narratives, rituals, categories, discourse),[4] the material inequality in symbolic resources that media institutions represent becomes itself more fully entrenched (Couldry 2001); the 'hierarchy of the media frame' becomes naturalised so that those outside media institutions fail even to recognise their acts of media production and dissemination as 'media' (Couldry 2000: chapters 3, 7 and 8).

I have tried to develop such issues by looking at beliefs about media institutions and, particularly, the idea that 'the media' stand in for a social centre (Couldry 2003). By 'the myth of the mediated centre' I mean the claim that 'the media' are our privileged access-point to society's centre or core, the claim that what's 'going on' in the wider world is accessible first through a door marked 'media'. This myth about media enfolds another myth about social 'order' (Wrong 1994), 'the myth of the centre': the idea that societies, nations, have not just a physical or organizational centre – a place that allocates resources – but a generative centre that explains the social world's functioning and is the source of its values.

This myth of the mediated centre is not simply an explicit ideology imposed from above; if it was, it wouldn't work. Instead it is, in part, a form of understanding we enact in our talk, action and thoughts. Nor is the mythical object - 'the media' – a trivial construction. The term 'the media' condenses an answer to Durkheim's 100 year-old question about what bonds sustain a society *as a society*.[5] Durkheim's account of how social bonds are built through ritual has remarkable overlaps with how we have talked about 'the media' – as what everyone is watching, as the place where we all gather together (Couldry 2003: chapters 1, 2). We must be wary of functionalism in our readings of society and media. But some version of that functionalism is a *real force* in everyday life, and helps instal media institutions, for all their particularity, as a site of general importance in our lives (Debord 1983).

But what if the very idea of 'the media' is also imploding, as the interfaces we call media are transformed? Does a crisis in the notion of 'the media' generate a 'crisis of appearances' for government and other institutions? Three dynamics - technological, social and political - are potentially undermining our sense of 'the media' as a privileged site for accessing a common world.

Technological fragmentation?

Does the *technological* multiplication of media interfaces (fixed and mobile, primary and aggregative) *itself* make any unitary construction of 'the media' unsustainable? That would be misleading. What I loosely call the 'technological' challenge to the idea of 'the media' comes not from technology itself: the internet's distinctive ability to link up previously separate contexts (think of YouTube) makes it *easier* in principle to sustain something like 'the media' as a common reference-point. The 'technological' challenge more plausibly comes from two

complex factors related to, but distinct from, changes in technology: media habits and changing media economics.

, , , and media habits

The older notion of 'the media' was in part sustained by the practical convergence of habits of media consumption, the way people could assume others were doing much the same as them, when they switched on the TV or the radio (and producers could make parallel assumptions). True, this in part derived from the sheer convenience of the information and entertainment bundles media evolved: the prime time news bulletin, the newspaper delivered or collected every morning, the daily or weekly instalments of a soap opera. But that previous convenience was based on scarcity. In an era of information plenty, convenience works in a different way. What is convenient may be not large media packages (with advertisements built into them) but the glance past online news headlines ten times a day. Hence industry fears that traditional media forms are on the brink of calamitous change: no newspapers within 10 years, a new generation that doesn't even remember what it was like to watch a TV news bulletin. What if, through the convergence of once separate media, people's *trajectories* across the media landscape become so varied that neither audiences nor industry can assume a pattern any more?

We need however to look cautiously at the available evidence. Here there are important differences between the UK and the USA. In the UK, in spite of much hype to the contrary, the Internet is very far from taking over from television as people's principal media focus. According to recent UK figures from Ofcom (OFCOM 2007: fig 3.1), only 6% in 2007 used the Internet as their main news source compared with 65% for TV; while hours watching

terrestrial news still (at nearly 2 hours per week) dwarf those spent on Internet news sites (just over an hour a month), a multiple of eight (OFCOM 2007: Fig 3.4 and Table A2.26).[6] Overall UK TV viewing was *unchanged* between 2002-2007 (Ofcom 2007-8). While exactly comparative European figures are difficult to obtain, in Germany in 2008 76.5% still used TV daily for news, compared with 14.9% for internet (Oemichen et al 2009: table 9), and overall TV viewing *rose* (from 214 to 225 minutes daily) during 2002-07.[7]

In the USA - the origin of the most drastic prognoses of change - the picture differs, not surprisingly given much earlier internet diffusion. While regular US figures on people's main news source are not available, a Harris June 2007 poll suggests a much narrower advantage to TV news, with 39% quoting network or cable TV as their main news source, versus 18% for the internet (quoted Miller & Associates 2008: 107); and television news consumption at 30 minutes per day compares with 9 minutes per day for Internet news consumption, less than half the UK multiple (Pew 2008: 9). Yet even this different picture is stable, with time spent consuming TV news changing little since 1996, well before the Internet's main growth.

So will the significant minority in the US (and increasingly in the UK) who have the Internet as their main media focus ever become a majority? Industry debate assume the new generation of media consumers is fundamentally different. But the perennial difficulty of age-based variations is to distinguish major shifts between generations from matters of life-stage. No one is suggesting the age-related factors that shape long-term media habits – owning or renting one's living space, having a stable partner and/or children, having regular paid work – are becoming irrelevant to media use. So while the move away from hard copy newspapers amongst the young bears many signs of being terminal (perhaps because online sites substitute *well* for most of our uses of newspapers), the case of television is much less clear.

Even in the US more people (on 2004 figures) use TV to multitask while online, than the other way round (VSS 2005-9: 177). So television may well remain the primary medium for most people for the foreseeable future, even if television content is for some audience sectors more often delivered via computers than television sets.

Media hype about the pace of change generally underplays the role of habit in media use (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2006). Maybe *new ways* of simplifying media use online are becoming habitual: what Philip Napoli (2008: 60) calls the potential 'massification' of the internet whereby most online activity converges around rather fewer sites than we would first expect. Changing media habits' implications for the myth of the mediated centre remain uncertain.

. . . and shifting media economics

While the direct economic risks of the digital landscape for media industries are well-known (falling advertising revenues for traditional media, an unresolved search for how to make stable profits from selling access to people's trajectories online), it is reasonable to assume that some solutions will be found, even if at the cost of major industry restructuring. But Joseph Turow's pioneering work (Turow 2007) on the audience selling process within media suggests that this shifting economic terrain could undermine *the myth of the mediated centre* even more drastically. Turow argues that the increasing difficulty of reaching consumers in a digital landscape encourages the targeted search for high-value consumers; in the long-term this will erode the idea that media producers are selling (and so through their media productions targeting) a general audience. Indeed high value customers are less and less reached through specific media packages (in which particular advertising can be placed) and

increasingly reached through continuous online tracking which targets them, as they move online, with advertising tailored to their *individual* online consumption.

How complete this projected shift will be must, in turn, depend on the changing habits of media use just discussed, but Turow has, I believe, uncovered a key *cultural* dynamic *within media's economic landscape,* working against the construction of media institutions as having general relevance any more. But there may be other counter-dynamics which simultaneously are reinforcing the construction of 'the media'. This is where we need to turn to the two other tensions to which that construction is subject.

'The Media' and the Social

The second quite different reason why the familiar construction 'the media' might be being destabilized is *social*. The myth of the mediated centre has for decades been condensed, in part, in categories that capture a sense of social compulsion to keep up with 'the media' (Couldry 2003: 96-101, cf Hagen 1994). The word 'liveness' captures our sense that we must switch on centrally transmitted media to check 'what's going on': a major news event or anticipated entertainment event (Feuer 1983; Bourdon 2000). But what if new forms of 'liveness' are now emerging through online interfaces and mobile media that are primarily interpersonal and so potentially more continuous than mass media have ever been? Is there emerging a sense of *social* 'liveness', mediated, but not by central media institutions (Couldry 2004b)? Manuel Castells' recent book on 'mobile youth culture' suggests that mobile digital media enable young people to 'set up their own connections, bypassing the mass media' (Castells et al. 2007: 1). So will interpersonal media become people's primary mode of

connection, with centrally transmitted media becoming incidental to our checks on what our friends are up to?

Again the situation is more complex. There is not only the 'lifestage or generational shift' issue, but huge commercial pressures to access such new social spaces for commercial purposes. If we take social networking sites (SNS), their capacity to intensify a sense of social 'liveness' is obvious, but it is very unclear whether this will develop in opposition to, or in tandem with, connections to centralized media. Media institutions (BBC, NBC, music majors, commercial brands) are building profiles in social networking sites. We know that personalized data on SNS is of great interest to marketers. In addition, the intensity of social feedback loops on SNS make them particularly well suited to create a 'buzz' around both niche and general products. This can feed back into mainstream media themselves: leaving aside various media incidents where horizontal networking sites such as Youtube have played a key role, it is interesting to note that, of UK newspaper websites, it is *The Sun* that draws most of its traffic from social networking sites, more than twice as much as its newspaper rivals (Hitwise 2009: 10).

Instead of interpersonal media becoming divorced from centrally produced media flows and offering an alternative social 'centre' to that offered by the media, it is more likely that 'social' media and centrally produced media become ever more closely linked. The social dynamics of the online environment provide no reason to think 'the media' will wither away, only that the components required to sustain that construction will change, with perhaps uneven consequences for different actors.

'The Media' and politics

This leads us to a third factor – another potentially stabilising one for the construction of 'the media' - *politics*. 'The media' in Britain at least, with its early public broadcasting, have always stood in for a link to the state as the legitimate focus of social and political struggle. In Tony Parker's interviews after the 1980s UK Miners Strike, one miner remembered when Margaret Thatcher went on TV to condemn those on strike:

> and then the day came when she said me and my mates were the enemy within. Within our own society, that it was our work that had created . . . In all my lifetime, those words made more impression on me than anything anyone else's ever said. (Parker 1986: 23).

'*The* media' have served well as the site where governments appear to the people, and equally where the people appear to governments. We might go further and see the construction of 'the media' as underwriting *a space of appearances* for government as well as other major institutions. But can we assume that the construction of 'the media' will continue to perform this role in the future? We know - in Britain at least - that interest in electoral politics (at 51%) is at historically low levels, with less than 50% of those under 25 saying they are likely to vote at the next election (Hansard 2008). To explain such figures by simple apathy is, as Russell Dalton (2000) among others has argued, a mistake. In the Public Connection project which I led at LSE between 2003 and 2006, even those *engaged* through media with UK national and local politics felt they had few places to take action and little, if any, sense that government *recognized* their engagement (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007: 189). This suggests a long-term problem for governments, if digital media's intertextuality makes it easier to *choose not* to expose ourselves to political news (Prior 2008: 257). So will governments adapt by using social media or other online entertainment forms to appear to their populations?

Certainly we should not expect governments to remain disengaged from the media's fate. President Obama's use of SNS in his 2008 campaign was closely watched by the UK New Labour government which believes it has implications for how public services communicate. Two arguments for discounting governments' interest in the construction of 'the media' should be rejected. One would be that, based on the evidence of the US neoconservative regime, governments will care less about their general popularity, targeting increasingly narrow niches of the population (a variation of Turow's argument for political marketing). But it is not just positive support, but *basic legitimacy* that is at stake in the space of appearances the media provide; basic legitimacy, as the current financial crisis has demonstrated, remains a fundamental asset even if states accept a role as merely a 'node of a broader network of power' (Castells 1997: 304). This links to the second, misleading reason for dismissing governments' interest in shoring up the construction of 'the media': that the myth of the mediated centre is only plausible in the dense fabric of the nation-state and nation-states now matter less. But globalization does not simply entail the weakening of nation-states, since this ignores the complex dynamics *within* nation-states, some of which (for example economic and executive power) may in some countries be strengthened by transnational forces (Sassen 2006). The construction of 'the media' can easily find its place within the 'multiple partial normative orders' of a globalized world (Sassen 2006: 10).

We should also be wary of the argument that, simply because new forms of horizontal political cooperation are emerging online, this has positive consequences for wider democratic engagement. There is no doubt that the new media 'geometry' enables very different types of interaction between governments, state authorities, and citizens from those of the pre-digital era. The aftermath of the protests against the London G20 meeting on 1 April 2009 offers a vivid example: protesters or general observers produced video material for

quick circulation to challenge police narratives of events open up official accounts to direct scrutiny in new ways. Note however the role of mainstream media (particularly the BBC and the Guardian) in orchestrating these new possibilities of witness. Consider the video of a seeming police assault on a bystander Ian Tomlinson (who later died) publicly released on 8 April: as of midday 9 April the Youtube version had had 35000 views,[8] but I suspect that the views of the same video from the Guardian and BBC websites were much higher. That is not to deny that peer-to-peer exchanges may sometimes generate fast and effective challenges to powerful actors without passing through mainstream media (Benkler offers one example: 2006: 219-225), but equally important is media corporations' obvious interest in channelling such processes through themselves.

Conclusion

Rather than 'the media' disappearing, the subtle play of interdependencies for which this term stands is already shifting into an open-ended crisis of appearances, affecting many actors (media corporations, commercial interests generally, governments, civil society). Instead of collapsing, 'the media' will become a site of a struggle for competing forces: *market-based fragmentation* versus *continued pressures of centralisation* that draw on new media-related myths and rituals. The construction 'the media' will continue to frame not only the activities of media institutions, large and small, but also the actions of individuals that operate across the producer/consumer division. Because it has lost the unquestioned, unchallenged status of a 'fact of nature', 'the media' now must be more actively defended and reaffirmed; uses of that construction will be increasingly contested by many actors, not just by media institutions themselves. Meanwhile pressures of audience fragmentation closely tied, as Turow argues, to the changing economics of media industries' advertising income-base will operate not in

contradiction to but against the background of media's increasing insistence on their general importance in our lives. There are many areas (consumption, fashion, sport, celebrity, 'reality production', media events, politics) where the reproduction of the myth of the mediated centre can be actively researched in the coming years.

The point is not to deny the possibility of change in the media field - many dynamics of change have been noted above - nor to deny we *might* be seeing the start of processes that will eventually challenge the paradigm of mass communication. The point instead is to recognise that, behind our academic paradigm of 'mass communication', lie many continuing social, political and economic forces which it is our task to trace, not judge in advance.

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[1] Compare Gitlin (2001: 5).
[2] A vision I welcome, having called for an end to 'most people's absence from the process of representing whatever worlds we share' (Couldry 2003: 143).
[3] Thanks to Liesbet van Zoonen for comments which helped me clarify my argument here.
[4] For a historical parallel, see Curran 1982, reprinted as Curran 2002: chapter 2.
[5] Lukes (1973).
[6] In the Netherlands, the multiple was almost as high (6.8: 46.7 minutes per day spent on consuming television news versus 6.9 minutes spent on internet-derived news). Source: Mediamonitor (2009): www.mediamonitor.nl . Thanks to Irene Costera Meijer for alerting me to this source.
[7] Source: Medien Basisdaten for 2009 www.ard.de/intern/basisdaten/onlinenutzung/ . Thanks to Andreas Hepp and Jeffrey Wimmer for supplying this information.
[8] 'Video of police assault on Ian Tomlinson, who died at the London G20 protest' at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HECMVdl-9SQ