Broadcasts and Networks

(note: ‘networks’ doesn’t refer here to TV networks, but to networked media; traditional TV is a broadcast medium; the internet is the paradigm for networked media)

Introduction

- Mass Media (Broadcast Media) vs. Networked Media
- Paradigm shift - from what to what?
- From a mass communication (broadcast) paradigm to a networked communication model
  - This is not an ‘either/or’ game - the mass media aren’t about to disappear, but they are transforming under the impact of new communication technologies.
  - In particular, the relations between production, distribution, and reception are being reshaped.
  - This has political, cultural, and economic consequences.

What is the Mass Communication Paradigm?

- The Mass Media / Broadcast Media Paradigm
- Messages are mass produced by the few
- Messages are distributed in one direction only
- Audience receives messages passively
- Messages are mass produced for a mass audience
- Summary of BC paradigm:
  - Messages are mass produced by the few for the many, who receive them passively.
Which media are broadcast?

- Not just the obvious ones (TV, Radio)
- But also print (newspapers, books, magazines), cinema - any media that travels from centralised source to many passive receivers

But What is Mass Media?

- When we say 'the media', we are referring to the medium of communication.
- So the question really is, 'what is mass communication?'
- What is the 'mass' in 'mass communication'?
- What is the 'communication' in 'mass communication'?

What is the 'mass' in 'mass communication'?

- Mass communication is made possible by the development and use of technologies of mass production.
  - Copying books by hand → Printing press – masses of words (books, pamphlets, newspapers)
  - Painting → Photography – masses of images
  - Theatre → Cinema – masses of stories
  - Live music → Recorded music – masses of records
  - TV / Radio → Images and sounds to masses of people (more on that later...).
What is the ‘mass’ in ‘mass communication’?

- Mass production (of books, photos etc.) makes it easier to make lots of copies of one thing (one book), but it also makes it easier to make many copies of many different things (many different books).
- So mass produced media increase two things
  - The availability of information (lots of people reading one book)
  - The diversity of sources of information (lots of people reading lots of different books)

- Scarcity creates an elite
  - Hand copied books → Literacy and knowledge in the hands of the few
  - Printing press → Masses of books for masses of readers
  - MC stimulates widespread literacy, education, ‘democratisation of knowledge’
  - MC spreads knowledge throughout the people and changes the balance of power between the elite and the masses

- MC has an inherently political dimension; it does not cause political change, but neither can it be treated separately from it.
  - The history of modern politics cannot be understood without an understanding of its relations to mass communication

The ‘Communication’ in Mass Communication

- ‘Communication’ is etymologically related to both “communion” and “community”: it comes from the Latin communicare, which means “to make common”
  - If I communicate with you, we share something in common
  - If a group of people share enough in common – ways of speaking, of thinking, of understanding the world, they share a discourse
  - If a group of people share enough in common – if they share a discourse - they constitute a kind of community
- So communication is intertwined with the social, the cultural and the political.
The ‘Communication’ in MC

- Why is this important?
- Because the rise of mass communication helps to give rise to a whole new type of community – “the masses”
- The rise of MC is coextensive with the rise of universal suffrage and mass politics
- Mass Communication → Mass Politics

---

The ‘Communication’ in MC

- For example: As MC extends its reach (esp. from the 19th C. onwards), the right to vote tends to be extended to more and more of the population (say, in the US, from white male landowners, to white males in general, to women, to non-whites, and so on)
- Why? Because MC shares information indiscriminately and enables a shared political discourse
- It does not cause universal suffrage, but it is one of its enabling conditions

---

The ‘Communication’ in MC

- Now this still sounds pretty good so far – so what’s the problem?
- In a general sense, you could argue that it’s because the rise of the ‘unwashed masses’ as a political force made the traditional power elites nervous
- But the criticisms of the effects of mass communication are a little more complex than that.
MC as Propaganda

- MC is not just coextensive with the rise of mass politics, but with increasing industrialisation, shifts of population from country to city to find work in the factories, urbanisation, and thus a collection of masses of people from many different places together in a small area – the ‘unwashed masses’

- Discussion of these masses often referred to them as ‘atomized’
- That is, isolated from traditional social networks of family and community
- Therefore socially and psychologically isolated, and vulnerable
- Vulnerable to the mass media, and its messages…

- Now MC may share information with the masses, but control of the sources of information still remains in very few hands
- Why?
  - 1) It costs lots of money to set up a newspaper, or a TV station, or a film studio
  - 2) Information flows in one direction from a central source to a mass of passive receivers
- So MC is both practically and technically a ‘one to many’ model of communication – i.e., a broadcast model
MC as Propaganda

- So the fear is that ‘atomised masses’ are therefore vulnerable to the manipulation of these few
- The few control the messages that the many share
  - The few control the discourse that constitutes the masses as a community (all that the ‘atomised masses’ share in common are the messages the media pipes down to them)
  - The many can’t talk back (you can yell at your TV, but you can’t communicate with it)
  - It’s much harder for the many to communicate laterally (amongst themselves), except on a strictly local scale

MC as Propaganda

- So the fear is that ‘the masses’ are vulnerable to ideological manipulation by the few
- Bertolt Brecht – Broadcast radio as inherently Fascist
  - One-to-many communication – the one has power over the many
  - A less dramatic version: advertising brainwashes us into buying things we don’t need
  - This can be said of all traditional MC (print, radio, TV, cinema etc.) – all are more or less one to many models of communication

The Mass Culture Critique

- There’s another kind of fear that arises with MC – the Mass Culture critique (Theodore Adorno).
- This looks at MC as an industry
  - From this perspective, the masses are not an community, but a mass market – an audience
The Mass Culture Critique

- The mass as audience
  - Without MC, a book, a song, a play is limited to a very small—and therefore elite—group
  - With MC masses of people can share the same experience (the same song, same book, same photograph, same film)
  - MC creates a Mass Audience → popular culture, or mass culture, as we understand it today is a product of mass communication, of mass produced media (there were no pop stars before recorded music).

The Mass Culture Critique

- Why is this bad?
  - Pop culture/mass culture is culture that aims to be liked/bought by as many people as possible
  - So mass culture inevitably aims at the lowest common denominator (the biggest possible audience)
    - So MC is dominated by sensationalism, sex and violence rather ‘higher’ cultural values

The Mass Culture Critique

- Thus: masses of generic ‘low’ culture swamp society, corrupts us, depraves the populace, drags us down into barbarism
- Pop culture is bad for you and bad for society — “no one reads Shakespeare any more, they’re too busy watching Alien vs. Predator”
Both these understandings of MC are too simple, too limited, and more complex models have been suggested. People are not just passive receivers, an audience either duped or controlled by the media. They (you, we) have an active relationship to the media in many ways. Both in terms of what we do with it, and whether and how we adopt it at all.

But this kind of control is limited in scope and scale by the difficulties of making our own media, our own messages, and distributing them on any kind of scale. This is what networked media allow us to do: In doing so, they challenge the core assumptions of the MC paradigm.

The paradigm for networked media is the internet, which, combined with the digitisation of the media directly challenges traditional notions about the relations between media producers and audiences. The internet is all about networks, connections, links. First of all, it is the multimedia medium par excellence, specifically designed for mixing and juxtaposing sound, still and moving image and text; Second, the net forms a distributed network where every point (every internet user) is connected to every other user.
What is Networked Media?

- This means that all you potential producers, distributors and receivers of media can (at least in theory) link to everyone else directly.
- Now this is radically different to the traditional, analogue media. These work on an essentially broadcast model of one to many – one source of production distributed to many passive receivers.
- i.e., a newspaper to its readers, a TV station to its viewers, a radio station to its listeners, and so on.

What is Networked Media?

- The internet offers us a model for this different kind of media/audience relationship – a networked relation of any to any, rather than a broadcast one of one to many.
- any to any – potentially any individual producing and distributing media which can be received and interacted with by any other individual on the net.

What is Networked Media?

- What’s more, because the net is a two way communication system, it allows for an active and interactive user, rather than a passive audience.
- If mass communication technologies are dominated by a one way, passive one to many structure (broadcast), the networked media are dominated by two way, interactive, any to any structures (networked communication).
How do Networked Media Challenge Broadcast Media?
- The 'sender – message – receiver' model of the media ignores the fact that people have an active relation the media they use.
- Well, networked media make it much simpler and easier to be active with the media.
- Not only because it functions as a two way (or many way) communication network, but also because its digital nature means it is relatively easy to make your own media, or alter/edit/sample existing media, and then distribute it to the world.

How do Networked Media Challenge Broadcast Media?
- Anyone can talk to anyone
- Two way communication (synchronous and asynchronous)
- Active/interactive users who make the media, not just consume it.
- Messages can be individually produced and distributed globally to those who are interested
- No 'mass' audience, no 'unwashed masses', no THEM as an object of fear and anxiety
- The many talk to each other, rather than the few talking to, and about, them

Mass Audiences & Peer Communities
- Centralised communication flows constitute passive, mass audiences
- Networked communication flows allow for active niche communities of interest
Mass Audiences

- Traditional mass media are premised on a passive audience who receive messages (TV programming, films, radio, newspapers) but respond in limited fashion only.
  - The response is mainly limited to I like/I don’t like (I watch, I don’t watch) – the ratings model.
  - Information about mass media audiences is largely limited to how many people watch/read a given show/film/newspaper.
  - You experience the media as an individual, but the media experiences you as an undifferentiated mass.
  - A mass audience is passive not just because it can’t talk back, but because it has to take what it is given.

Mass Audiences

- Mass audiences are passive not just because they can’t talk back, but also because it’s difficult to communicate laterally/horizontally to any but those in close proximity.
  - You can discuss the show Friends with your friends, but not with the whole audience of the show Friends.
  - So even though you do share something in common with that audience, the shared discourse of that audience as a mass is imposed largely from above;
    - Centralised, hierarchical, vertical, one way communication

Trekkies, Fan-Fiction & Soap Opera Tragics

- Some mass media/broadcast media products develop more complex lateral audience relationships (between audience members)
  - Star Trek / Fantasy / Sci Fi / Soap Operas
  - Some of these shows generate intense audience commitment and investment
  - To the extent that the passive reception of the show is not enough to satisfy them – they want to participate
To satisfy their interest/desire/investment they are driven to create much stronger lateral connections with their fellow audience members than usual:

- Shared interest
- Shared speculation / discussion
- Sharing of knowledge
- Sharing of their own creative responses to the show (even after it ends)
  - Slash fiction / fanzines

These groups seek (to varying degrees) to participate actively in the show:

- Conventions, dressing up, alternate plots, filling in of background 'detail'
  - i.e., invention of Klingon “language” (Slim Dusty’s Klingon clock)
  - Trekkies lobbied for the show to remain on the air (as did fans of Firefly)
  - The proliferation of spin-offs and movies is testament to their ongoing engagement

Star Trek is an example of centralised, vertically organised mass media product aimed at a passive mass audience.

Despite this, the audience not only actively appropriated it, but did so via shared lateral/horizontal communication (peer to peer)

- in doing so they created many “unauthorised” readings/extensions/appropriations of the show
- There are many examples of this (X-Files, many sci fi series, LOTR, many soap operas etc.)
Trekkies, Fan-Fiction & Tragics

- They represent a form of peer community without the communications infrastructure to adequately support them.
- They also demonstrate that such peer communities are a function of the audience’s desire for the active appropriation of the mass media - not the technology itself.
- Such active engagement is not caused by the networked media, but the networked media make it qualitatively easier for it to happen.

Niches, not Masses

- It’s significant that the kind of shows that generate such intense commitment are often not widely popular or successful on a mass scale (at least at first).
- Star Trek was canceled after only a few series – even its current spin-offs tend to play late at night (i.e., they don’t appeal to a mass audience, you have to be committed to stay up and watch).
- Such “cult” shows do relatively poorly as “mass media,” but do well as the focus for niche communities of peers.
- Peer communities, or niche communities are not mass audiences defined by an externally imposed discourse, but small groups who share a self-generated discourse (which can often serve to exclude “outsiders”).

Niches, not Masses

- The internet provides the perfect medium for the growth of such peer cultures.
  - Not all networked media move through the net - mobile phones are also capable of operating as a networked media form, and now also intersect with the net.
- It is no accident that the very first email list (back in the 70’s – before the internet technically begins) was for the discussion of Star Trek.
- Networked communication suits the formation of peer communities.
  - Lateral, horizontal, two way (any to any), decentralised, participatory, active, creative communication.
  - Not vertical, one way (one to many), centralised, passive, reactive communication (“turn that rubbish off!”).
Networked Peer Communities

- The internet was designed to facilitate sharing of information (not selling).
- It is designed for peer to peer interaction, not centralised control of information.
- Such communication is self-organising (no top-down control).
- Because it is active, rather than passive, participants communicate by choice, not by lack of choice (“I’ll watch it because nothing else is on.”)

Networked Peer Communities

- Rather than a limited number of sources (i.e. TV stations) accessed by anonymous masses - audiences - you get much smaller communities of choice.
- You get niche communities of relatively intense interest, rather than mass audiences who are often indifferent to the messages they receive.
- I.e., the shows available for you to watch on TV aim at getting the biggest possible audience, so they’re less likely to address your specific interests or passions, whatever they may be - they offer a loose fit at best for you.

Examples of Networked Communities

- Fan communities
  - YouTube: even a really successful clip will only reach a small group by broadcast TV standards (in the thousands rather than 10s or 100s of thousands of views/viewers.)
  - Sci-fi shows, X-Files, Anime etc.
  - LOTR
Game communities
- Sims, Quake, Massively Multiplayer
- On-line Roleplaying Games – (large niche community: 200,000 subscribers to World of Warcraft within a day of its release late last year)
- Mod culture
- Machinima

Examples of Networked Communities
- Open source communities
  - Linux etc.
  - Crackers & Hackers
- File sharing communities
  - YouTube
  - Napster, LimeWire etc.
- MPEG encodes video as well as audio (films, TV as well as music)
- Mobile phone communities
  - 'just in time' social organisation
  - Swarming
  - Flash mobs

Examples of Networked Communities
- Blog communities
  - Personal
  - Political
  - Academic
  - Topic based
- Art (The Dullest Blog in the World) – over 500 comments for this entry alone: "My knee had a slight itch. I reached out my hand and acce..."
  - Reviews / cultural discussion and evaluation
- Many of these have a 'journalistic' function (commentary on current events), but without the centralised (editorial etc.) control of broadcast journalism.
Networked Communities are Value Neutral

- There is nothing inherently good or bad about networked communities - they are not ‘inherently democratic.’
- Paedophiles and Neo-Nazis are communities of interest too, and actively use the net to maintain those communities.
- Al Qaeda also use the net and mobile phones to organise terrorist activities

Decentralisation & Recentralisation

- Most, if not all, of these networked communities engage with ‘vertical’ (broadcast, centralised) mass culture products in some way
- Much of what they do is an expression of their active relation to that mass culture
- They extend, adapt, steal, discuss, appropriate, disseminate in relation to that mass culture
- Networked culture is structurally distinct from mass media culture, but it engages with – alters and is altered by – mass culture.
- Much of this behaviour challenges the control of mass media industries over their intellectual property and copyright
  - p2p filesharing, parody, sampling

Decentralisation & Recentralisation

- No surprises then that mass media industries often react harshly and negatively to networked culture.
- Fox reacted to Millennium fans networked culture by attempting to reassert centralised control over their product using legal pressure
- AOL (even before it became AOL Time Warner) attempted to recentralise its online users into a less active audience by corralling them through ‘Portal’ sites controlled by them (the internet as one-stop-shop rather than rambling bazaar)
- Music industry has tried to recentralise music distribution by shutting down p2p file sharing sites.
  - NBC’s initial reaction to YouTube.
Decentralisation & Recentralisation

- Mass media industries do see networked media/new media as a threat to their control over their audience, and over their product.
- But the mainstream popularity of the net means most mass media (and other) businesses have an on-line aspect to them.
- But most attempt to maintain as much centralised control as possible, while adhering to the rhetoric of ‘interactivity’.
- Thus you can buy cinema tickets on-line ‘interactively’, check out the ‘interactive’ web site for your favourite TV show, use an ‘interactive’ program guide on DTV.

Interactivity

- When these companies say ‘interactive’ they mean ‘you get a series of options you can choose from’.
- This is still largely passive – you just get more choice in the media you receive passively.
- This treats the network as a slightly more complicated broadcast structure.

I would argue that genuinely interactive media requires at least two things:
- Any to any communication between members of a community
- Creative responses to media messages (from any source, broadcast or networked) – people doing stuff with media, not just sitting back and watching it.
Networked or Broadcast? Or Both?

- Networked media do present real challenges to traditional mass media, but opportunities as well.
- They will not replace mass media, but they will engage it, alter it and participate in it (whether mass media wants them to or not).
- They can also act parallel to the mass media, providing alternatives, providing critique, providing access to a wider group of voices, doing things the mass media can’t.

What we find when we look at the impact of networked media on traditional broadcast TV is an industry struggling to work out how best to respond to the new avenues their audiences (the eyeballs they sell) have for accessing and participating in TV.

I suspect that TV’s future will involve the full spectrum of possibilities from a traditional broadcast model to varying degrees of ‘networkedness’

- That is, varying degrees of interactivity and participation, varying degrees of ‘niche’ communities, varying degrees of networked distribution patterns.
Some of the variations already in existence to some degree or other include:

- Datacasting (interactive services via broadcast spectrum, not allowed to be ‘TV like’ - Australia)
- IPTV (various forms of TV over the net.)
- p2p TV (which includes p2p distribution of broadcast TV, with or without the participation/permission of the original broadcaster.)
- User generated TV
- Integration of TV as part of home multimedia environments (major push from Microsoft, but possible right now if you’re enough of a techie.)

Summary:

- TV’s centralised model (which refers to the method of distribution, but also to the power that broadcasters have over their audiences - and over politicians) is being challenged by the decentralising drive of networked media.

This challenges the trad. business model of TV (by diluting broadcaster’s control over viewers access to TV),

- the very concept of ‘the audience’ (from audiences to niche communities),


and even the premise that ‘content is king’ (this assumes a passive audience)
- to varying degrees users’ engagement with media in a networked world is driven by active participation
- The quality of content on YouTube, for example, is not as high as, say, HBO.
  - But users can comment and respond - even by creating and uploading their own material. It’s not the quality of the content but its ‘niche address’ to its viewers, and their ability to respond actively to it that draws them to YouTube.

Not everyone wants to be active all the time in their media relations - sometimes you want to sit back and watch, sometimes you want to ‘lean forward’ and participate.
- The future of TV will encompass the full spectrum between the two - but this means a significant dilution of the current control (and profitability) of broadcast TV as it has been for the past fifty years.