

Abstract

This research paper is based on two sociological surveys dealing with internet and mobile telephones conducted in Bulgaria in 2009 with the participation of author. The survey findings made it possible to trace several socio-cultural processes and trends showing convergent dimensions. The most important of them examined in this paper are related to: highlighting the mutual interchangeability of two meta-media in various contexts; the transformation of individual communication participation from a passive into an active endeavour; the revival of letter writing and changes in written culture; the emergence of a new kind of mobile determined culture; individuals' becoming independent media; the completion of the framework of processes of medialization (mediatization) of society.

Keywords: New Media, Internet, Culture, Socio-cultural processes, Mutual interchange ability, Individual communication, Mobile telephone, Meta-media, Mega-aggregates, Mediatization

1. Introduction

Internet and the mobile telephone, as new meta-media facilities, encompass in themselves all the media that existed before them – interactive television will soon join this group, as it is envisaged to be a new type of television that will provide interactivity and thereby change the one-line model of television communication, and will also be a vehicle for far higher quality internet and internet applications. With the exception of live art, which cannot be situated in the media, all traditional media, all arts, and all cultural activities of whatever kind, have a doubled and often modified existence or an unfolding existence. Many other media have also found a harbour in the internet; these are more or less defined as the new media and include collective or personal sites, blogs, vlogs, wiki forms, social networks, profiled communities, and so on which also exist on mobile phones and interactive television.

These new mega-aggregates of media and cultural contents have transformed our notion of culture and cultural life, of creativity and co-authorship, of participation and co-participation, of perception and possession of cultural products, of access and inaccessibility, of purchase and sale, and so on. Fundamental for these mega-aggregates is permanent modification, in other words, their lack of a fundamental feature. They are perhaps a

continuously supplemented media mix: they are this and that and that.

At the time when video players and cable television appeared, together with the format TV channels specialized for target segments of the public, it was said that a 'top media' had appeared. The possibility they provided for asynchronous communication, for selection of productions, and for possession of the audio-visual products themselves, represented an evolution that radically transformed the notion of mass communication, setting the start of de-massification processes. Actually, that time was only 20-30 years ago.

Today, no respected scholar would call some new means of communication a 'top media'. After the Internet and mobile phones, after the laptop and many other media constructs, no one would dare predict how far media development might reach and what positive or negative democratic developments might be attained by culture and communications in various countries, especially among young people.

The painter Vincent van Gogh once wrote in a letter to his brother Theo that the most important thing for him was for his paintings to reach the homes of people through reproductions. Television responded to this desire, and through it culture was able to enter the homes of people. In the new media there is not only reproduction but also the possibility of cultural co-participation of people, and – why not? – of the transformation of part of the audience into author of the cultural production. The mobile telephone, together with the other new media, such as Internet, digital cameras, etc., is a personal media that has made it possible for an individual to take part in cultural life, to become an active rather than passive participant.

Separate individuals assumed the role of independent media of sorts. They create and disseminate video clips through mobile phones, they create personal and group blogs, etc. This new role they play, and their presence as authors in fan fictions, add a very strong confirmation of the idea, suggested about ten years ago, about the mediatization of society (06). With the appearance of internet and mobile phones, a new dimension of culture has in fact been opened. Culture is becoming increasingly mobile in nature. It could be said that a new media culture has emerged, the main feature of which is mobility. With the increasingly wide use of the internet and mobile phones, several media-determined socio-cultural processes have started to emerge, related to mobility; these processes define present-day and future changes in everyday cultural patterns and in culture as a whole.

2. Relevant Theories

Mobile character of culture and communication as new media determined cultural transformations is without any analog in the history of culture and communications. Some aspects of Diffusion of innovation theory have been incorporated into the field of our mind and interpretation.

As we have known diffusion research goes one step further than two-step flow theory. It is well known that the original diffusion research was done by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde who plotted the original S-shaped diffusion curve. As Rogers was

written "Tardes 1903 S-shaped curve is of current importance because most innovations have an S-shaped rate of adoption"(09). Indeed Rogers diffusion of innovation theory with his four stages: invention, diffusion (or communication) through the social system, time and consequences is one of the relevant theories of explanation of our research results.

But present conceptualizations of mediatization of society and its consequences would have been our relevant theory findings and a base of future conceptualizations. (06; 02; 04; 05; 08; 10)

3. Research Method

The main focus of conceptualization in this article, which provides the framework of its structure, was drawn from two sociological surveys conducted with a uniform methodology in 2009 in the Laboratory of Sociology of New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The surveys were based on a representative nation-wide two-level cluster sample. In order to provide information for the research objective, the research covered 1122 respondents across the country, aged 10 to 75. The method used was direct individual enquiry.

4. Results

Research results indicate that, being mobile-determined, this new media culture is essentially a youthful one. The highlights of the results are presented below

The first aspect deals with the number of possessed mobile phones, frequency of logging into the internet and the universal quality of the cultural choices. Here, it was discovered that the young age groups possess more mobile phones overall than the older age groups. As bearers of new trends, they appear to also express new searching for ways of dealing with the differing costs among the various mobile operators in our country. One of the reasons why individuals possess more than one mobile phone is the possibility this affords of using the advantages of different tariff plans offered by the currently existing three mobile operators in our country.

The situation is different as regards the frequency of communication through the internet. A considerably greater share of young people than of older ones gets in touch through the internet, and youths use the full range of the internet cultural centres according to their personal preferences. Several orientations are evident:

- An active attitude to various kinds of communication choice;
- Universality of socio-cultural choices: for obtaining information, for cultural communication, for getting acquainted, for games;
- The use of the internet as a means for work and study.

The second aspect of the findings relate to issues dealing with creation of new practices of marking down agendas. In our traditional culture, noting the time of important meetings and special events was chiefly done in personal notebooks, on separate note sheets, etc. *Today this cultural manner has yielded its place to notebooks and organizers in mobile phones.*

The new practices in organization of time are in fact new practices in individual agenda setting for the day, the week, or the month. Research has shown that youths actually use mobile phones as notebooks much more often than do older age groups. This can be explained by the fact that older people have a tradition of using the usual paper notebooks, while young people have not acquired such a habit.

Its convenience and handiness at all times are the qualities that make the notebook function of mobile phones a preferred means among the young age groups. The same is true regarding the use of the mobile phone organizer.

Thirdly, there is the issue of the new cultural forms of interpersonal communication contacts.

The new cultural and behaviour transformations in communication are trends caused by the mobility and ubiquity of the new communication means. One such phenomenon is the increase of interpersonal communications and the changed structuring within the interpersonal communication itself. Interpersonal communications between friends and relatives are increasing but the electronic mode of conducting them is also growing in share. Mobile-determined communication is starting to predominate over direct face-to-face contacts.

Observations indicate that, with the growing use of mobile communication means and of tariff plans of mobile operators, there is an emerging trend of intense communication through mobile means. At times, communication goes on merely for the sake of exhausting the tariff plan. This tariff-determined situation in the intense mobile communication between people is part of the increase in the dynamics of interpersonal mediated communications. It generates a trend of restructuring of direct and mediated interpersonal communication in favour of the mediated ones. However, on the basis of the findings of this survey, it is not possible to say categorically whether face-to-face interpersonal communications are decreasing considerably while mobile-determined communications are growing at their expense. To ascertain this, a much more complicated research procedure would be necessary; I hope to apply such a procedure in future research. But it is a fact that there is an observable trend of increasingly frequent substitution of live meetings by electronic contact. The hypothesis has yet to be proven that there is an internal restructuring of interpersonal communications and a decrease of direct contacts.

Moreover, a new written culture is beginning to emerge. The survey data indicate there is a new situation of structuring of written communication, with a growing share of electronic letters and a decrease to a minimum of traditional letter-writing and stationary-telephone calls. There is an increased restructuring and concentration of writing in the mobile media in terms of: the number of acts of communication per unit of time; change of mediatization technique; and materialization. The new capacity for written communication through mobile media ultimately represents a new revival of the letter, though in a greatly modified form.

The modifications and varieties of written communication through text messaging, e-mails, chat, etc., have given rise to a new written culture that has a youthful character; the new

linguistic equivalent of this culture is a mix of national and international languages, a concentration of verbal and non-verbal (emoticon) explications as a set of digital and lexical signs and symbols. This new written culture, respectively reading culture – a predominantly youthful one – has revived written communication and accelerated the processes of reading; it has even caused some sociologists of reading to reject the frequent pessimistic remarks about the decline of reading. In their view, reading has not decreased at all, in fact it has increased many times over, but a large part of it is done through the new media. (11) We may add that traditional writing is also being transformed into accelerated writing through the new media. The personal blogs of individuals, including readers who contribute their own writings to the blogs, are one more argument in support of this claim.

In response to the question “Do you feel that text messaging has taken the place of sending traditional letters, telegrams, postcards, etc. on festive occasions related to relatives and friends?”, the greater share of respondents have indicated “Yes, I strongly agree”. Together with the response “Yes, I agree somewhat”, the total share of affirmative answers is 85,5 percent: respectively 51,4 percent for “strongly” and 34,1 percent for “somewhat”. “I mostly disagree” was the response given by only 8,4 percent of respondents.

It was not long ago when traditional postal services constituted the only form of transmitting written communication. In what way have things changed? Is there a rejection of the traditional letter? In fact written communication still exists in its traditional form as well, but with limited parameters and with an inner change of structure. Today traditional forms of letters coming from institutions (announcements regarding taxes, bank deposits, etc.) are prevalent over letters between friends and relatives; while telegrams are increasingly falling into disuse as means for rapid informing. The new situation is characterized by an increasingly assertive substitution of electronic communication for the traditional written one.

Findings further show the growing possibility of establishing almost instantaneous feedback.

Text messaging has taken over and left a modest place for telegrams, while chat, e-mail, coherent connections, etc., have turned traditional feedback into a nearly instantaneous connection. In fact, this instantaneous quality of feedback is the most revolutionary development of mediated written communications, the speed of which has evolved for centuries. This almost paradigmatic cultural change is tantamount to a revolution in written culture. In various degrees all age groups are tracing the trends in this cultural-communication change.

In addition, there are new possibilities for participation in cultural life with a national and international scope. There is also a significant transformation of individual participation. The internet and mobile phones generate new processes and forms of participation in cultural life. One of these is the transformation of individual participation from passive into active and the combination of the two. The individual is turning from recipient into communicator, from a viewer into an author, from consumer into producer, from contemplator into disseminator. He/she may often play the role of photo reporter, journalist,

photographer, movie director, etc., thus contributing to the creation of the general audiovisual culture. The video clips sent to specialized sites like YouTube are often used by world media organizations when creating their programmes. Such video clips are used as visual or audiovisual arguments in the verbal explications of TV programmes, and also as separate included audiovisual material.

Thanks to its video camera function, the mobile phone makes it possible to take pictures, make video clips, and make short films in all places where the user can possibly be present. There is an ample amount of examples of this DIY culture (do it yourself) in the specialized internet sites. In Bulgaria we all recall that when a fire started on a train along the Sofia-Kardam line, scenes of the incident were broadcast on TV thanks to films made through mobile phones by witnesses. Such possibilities afforded by the new media are potent arguments for considering the individual as creator and disseminator of his own film production

Again, the fanfiction culture is emerging. Creativity unfolds in the highest degree among the fans of literature, music, cinema, etc., in other words, in fanfiction culture. Fanfiction, a new creative phenomenon in internet communications, positions the recipients as creative communicators, who materialize their own cultural responses in new creative objects. The recipients who are the fans of a given work, turn into co-authors, of sorts, of the original authors and become co-participants in the creation and additional construction of the characters; the recipients objectify themselves as interpreters of what the original authors have created.

Usually classified as fanfiction are different variations of the original: continuation of the story, prehistory of the story, parody of the original, alternative story, a collage of several works (crossover), etc. One well-know fan film is "Star Wars: Revelations», filmed by Panic Struck Productions and based on "Star Wars". Even though they almost never achieve "professional" dissemination, fan fictions provoke interest not only among fans but also among the public at large. Moreover, fan fictions, as is well known, do not have a commercial purpose – they are meant to be read by people interested in such interpretations. Nevertheless, the production of such works is of a high standard: it is not only subjected to grammatical editing but, with the authors' consent, may be perfected with regard to contents as well.

Fanfiction has become widely disseminated since the appearance of the internet, when the possibility arose for accumulating data archive and when fans were enabled to organize themselves into so-called "fandoms". In fact, fandoms are becoming increasingly large formations, inasmuch as the people who participate in internet communications are growing in number. It is said that, since technical innovations supply them with means, the authors themselves have started to compete with their fans.

The beginning of this type of online communities is said to have been set by the non-profit site FanFiction.Net, in which each fan is allowed to upload cultural contents in a specialized fandom of his/her choice. The possibility this site offers for independent publication of fan fictions in a general archive that can be accessed without specialized knowledge, and the opportunity it

provides for reviewing other publications, including the reading of publications directly online, makes of the latter an outstanding example of the possibility of cultural transformations in the communication process.

In addition to internet sites and blogs, fan fiction is also disseminated in magazines, known as "fanzines" (from the combination of the worlds "fan" and "magazine"). Few fanzines turn into professional publications (sometimes referred to as "prozines"), but many professional writers first published in fanzines, and some authors continue to contribute to these even when they have already made a professional reputation for themselves. In fact, participation in fandom represents a transformation of cultural participation from a passive into an active creative act.

Roberta Pearson in her article *Fandom in the Digital Era*, asserts that fans have always been and are in the forefront of transformations, including as concerns reconfiguring relationships between producer and user in the digital age. In connection with reconfiguration in the musical sphere.(08) Nancy Baym in turn, writes in *Online Fandom*: "The dynamics among fans, and between fans and the industry that happens online, reconfigures and reshapes this industry and will continue to do so. The materials created by and for fans will continue to receive ever greater attention." (01) Convergent culture makes it possible for small communities situated in all parts of the world to gather and organize themselves by topics and interests, and to produce "information" on these. Fan fiction has become emblematic of creative cultural participation.

Equally discernible is the trend of the individuals as independent media. As creator and disseminator of his/her own "production", the individuals really assume the features of independent media. A person assumes the role of a sort of independent media likewise when creating personal blogs, vlogs, podcasts, etc.; this is another strong argument for the idea of mediatized (medialized) society, presented some years ago. (06; 07) In this context an extremely encouraging fact is that, when asked whether they had made video clips using their mobile phones, more than half of the respondents answered in the affirmative. For now the new opportunities for taking part in cultural life by creating video clips are typically used by young people. The data clearly show the young age category of the authors of audiovisual creations, as presenters of DIY culture.

The survey data also show some important changes with regard to the age of users. For the response item "No, because my telephone does not provide that option" the largest percentage, about 60%, is of people aged above 60. The share of people in the age range between 50 and 60 is also high compared with other age groups. According to these responses, while the younger age groups make up the potential new participants in cultural life, the older ones are not participating for lack of technical means.

Of course, as yet few people have actually sent their video clips to specialized sites. Of the surveyed persons, an average of 11,8 % have answered this question in the affirmative. Here again the younger age groups have a higher share, ranging from one fifth to one fourth. About one fifth to one fourth of the surveyed persons in the young age groups can be said to be actual participants in cultural life in this aspect. But these percentages

are highly encouraging, given that this practice is relatively new. The growing share of active communication at the expense of passive one, to which the mobile phone and the internet have contributed, are a new and significant demonstration that individuals are starting to act as independent media, and an additional confirmation of the mediatization of society. By way of summary it can be said that the mediatization of society is acquiring real and perceptible dimensions. The mediatization of society is a process with global dimensions. In fact, it is one of the most important consequences of globalization, just as globalization, in turn, is possible thanks to mediatization. The new mobile-determined culture is the new convergence-determined culture, a culture of global dimensions.

5. Conclusion

The results of the survey confirm some familiar observations made in other surveys (03), but reveal some new aspects, which are conceptualized in this article. Together with this, we have attempted to rethink some assumptions that are not sufficiently provable; we have raised issues that must be confirmed or rejected through further research.

Among the acceptable conceptualizations are the following findings: in the use of internet and mobile phones there is an evolution toward interchangeability and meta-media function; the internet and the cell phone have become interchangeable and this is a permanent characteristic in the modern restructuring of communication spaces; a new dimension of culture is being generated, and it is connected with mobility; feedback has become instantaneous and this is the most revolutionary development of mediatized communications and a paradigmatic change tantamount to a revolution in culture; individuals are becoming creators and disseminators of their own production, in other words they are becoming independent media.

Additional discussions and reconfirming of results through further research have yet to be made in connection with the following questions: the prevalence of mobile-determined interpersonal communication over direct communication; the considerations and dimensions for generating a new communication "ecology" and new emphases in media literacy. An issue that has yet to be interpreted is the economically determined structuring of communication space: further developments and, respectively, further research would confirm or reject assumptions in this direction. The consequences of this new type of mobile-determined cultural processes have yet to be interpreted.

It turns out that Rogers diffusion of innovation theory with his four stages: invention, diffusion or communication through the social system, time and consequences is our relevant theory of explanation of our research results and a base for future conceptualizations of mediatization of society.

6. References

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