

The Impact of New Communication Technologies in the Social and Journalistic Environment

Cristina-Georgiana VOICU*

Abstract: New Media has evolved as an interconnected network of audio, video and electronic communication that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and Mass communications. In this context, New Media has provided an alternate platform of expression for environmental communication. The adoption of new media has given a level playing field and has democratized the environmental communication and its debate. But on the other hand criticism exists on the spuriousness of the content and opinions given in this media and their objectivity. The following paper deals with the ‘environmental communication in the era of new media technologies’ and its impact. The paper focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of new media for social and environmental communication.

Keywords: New Media, communication technologies, institutional change, social and environmental communication

1. Introduction

Different conceptualizations of the term information society are based on a comparative approach: postindustrial society vs. information society, mass communication vs. new communication technologies and working capital vs. knowledge, information and communication. Besides the variety of analytical frameworks, most definitions associate the information society with a series of social transformations that would make the transition to a new type of society “that has become dependent on highly complex electronic information and communication networks; a society that allocates a substantial part of its resources for information and communication activities” (Melody, 1994: 56).

* Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Public Relations and Journalism, Apollonia University of Iași, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Romania.

The social transformations that relate most authors are subject to various types, which are then integrated into the paradigm or “regimes of accumulation”. The “technical-economic” (Preston, 2001: 138) founding paradigm, to which the whole literature on the information society is based on the economic implications arising from technological changes correlated with *creative entrepreneurship* and other aspects of the *innovation process*.

The new techno-economic paradigm reduces the technological determinism of Schumpeter’s model, articulating the relationship between technology, institutions and social structures. Many authors believe, however, that neither this paradigm integrates the social, institutional and cultural changes, so that the impact of new technologies to justify the speech about “social transformation”.

According to Preston, the adoption of a “social-engineering” paradigm, the technological component could be approached from the perspective of an “extra-economic processes of negotiation, conflict and social learning, which structures the entire trajectory of historical change.” (Preston, 2001: 165) According to the author, this paradigm would resonate with the “old notion of socio-technical system used in an attempt to overcome the technological determinism and to emphasize the importance it had in the past the interrelation between technological, social and institutional innovations” (Preston, 2001: 167).

Although not specifically mentioned, many authors use the paradigm of “socio-technical” to build the typology of social transformations involved in the information society. Anttiroiko (2001: 89) proposes the following typology:

- *Technological and economic systems* (global structures, restructuring and economic network, new information and communication technologies, new practices of media communication);
- *Institutional changes* (social networks, crisis of modern institutions, the decline of communities and of traditional social relations, the emergence of new types of communities, a new public space);
- *Ideological and value changes* (neo-individualism, new values and cultural codes; postmodern practices in everyday life).

The major problem of the various definitions and paradigms on the information society deals with the articulation of a “realistic” speech, which does not address the information technology in a progressive utopian key. This explains why most authors to prove that approach this issue still considers necessary to define the term of “informational technology” although there is a whole literature in the last two decades.

Emerged in the eighties, the term “informational technology” or “information and communication technologies” aimed a range of developments in computers, telecommunications and digital electronics. A British government program during

1982-1984 associated information and communication technologies with “computers extension, that can store a huge amount of information and process information in the few seconds; modern telecommunications, that transmit information almost on spot; microelectronics focused on organizing the information in a less expensive format” (Preston, 2001: 190).

Communication reflects the transfer and exchange of knowledge and values, a process, which in turn, generates information that influences knowledge and values. From this point of view, the analysis of the characteristics of an information society needs to report the characteristics of communication; in turn, the new communication networks are often the engine of information accumulation.

According to Melody, information and communication resources of a technologically advanced society are: efficient telecommunication networks on which information is collected, processed, stored and transmitted; microelectronics; hardware, software computer and services; telecommunications equipment and services, media, internet, databases and information services, traditional forms (libraries, publishing services, etc.). The stock of knowledge of a society depends on the institutions that maintain, implement and develop the knowledge: education, research and training media system, information networks.

2. Access to Public Space

New communication technologies significantly increase the ability of individuals to express themselves in public, however, they limit the individuals’ participation to political communication and thus to the public debate of political decisions. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that expanding access in public – through new technologies – in fact generates an excessive fragmentation of public space and the emergence of so-called “small spheres” (Bennet, 2001: 34) or “partial spaces” (Bennet, 2001: 40) without any connection to each other. Under proliferate individual experiences within the public space; the public interest cannot be negotiated.

The process of de-monopolizing the media institutions in the U.S. began in the eighties, and it later expanded in the Western countries and it has stimulated competition in the media space, generating a true television market. The media “offer” significantly diversifies while the analysts begin to refer to the “consumer” audience that can choose now to choose between different types of information and information styles. Simultaneously with the multiplication of sources of political information, media practices sell, offering the political information a sensationalist and populist dimension. For many authors, the emergence of the “consumer” public

coincides with the apathetic and cynical electorate from a political point of view and that avoids political participation.

The proliferation of new communication technologies has enhanced political participation of the public. On the other hand, the new technologies have not eliminated any ties of inequality in access to public space: many authors draw attention to the differences in resources between those who merely limits to the television to get political information and those equipped with sophisticated and up-to-date communication devices.

Equal access to (public) communication resources is a problem, which does not regard only the democratic status of the public, but also that of politicians, as well as the diversity of communication and the quality of political communication. The democratic dimension of the political communication should be assessed not only in relation to the access and participation of the public in the negotiation of public agenda, and in terms of decision-leaders' opportunity to interact with the public. In connection with this issue, two interpretative patterns have been outlined in the literature.

Thus, some authors consider that the current configuration of the public space visibility politicians. Miège, one of the promoters of this point of view, believes that the "fragmentation" of public space as a result of new communication technologies generated the political passivity of the public, so that, eventually, the public agenda is defined by elites acting in the "dominant" public space, first, by political elites. On the other hand, the political elites, participating in political communication, have benefited from the support of consultants' sophisticated devices, which increase the distance and inequality between politicians and / or institutions and voters / citizen: "Is not this asymmetry increasingly higher among individuals / subjects / citizens and social institutions, which thanks to several communication strategies reach to manage the social consensus with increasingly sophisticated media?" (Miège, 1995: 156)

3. A New Medium of Social Communication: The Internet

The emergence of the Internet as a new "medium" of communication led to a number of countries expected on democratization or the development of new structures and democratic practices. Literature on democratization of political communication through the Internet has particularly grown; the current debate is centered on issues such as:

- *The Internet and the overcoming of the traditional media boundaries.* Political communication cannot be dissociated from the media, media practices being constitutive to political communication process. In terms of

democracy, the media means, on the one hand, a considerable expansion of the access to public space and thus to political information and, on the other hand, the political limitation of the public participation. The claim that the media does not diminish political participation refers to the fact that the public indirectly participates in the construction of public agenda through mediated forms such as surveys and “media class” intervention (journalists, analysts, politicians, public figures, leaders etc.). It’s about the fact that media - being dependent on market processes - opts for certain media practices which may foster the political apathy of the public. In this respect, we refer to a so-called “political retreat” of the public, while many others point to the “political cynicism” more and more pronounced. In these circumstances, researchers are investigating the potential of the internet to stimulate the political participation by enabling the users to directly interact (“one to one”) with the institutions and political actors or other users, members of different communities and social groups.

- *The Internet and the de-monopolization of political information.* Stimulating the political participation primarily depends on the increased interest in political phenomenon. A topical issue concerns the internet as a source of “alternative” political information (“counter-information”) to the information provided by traditional media (Pelissier, 2001: 134).
- *The Internet and the development of local democracy.* The interactive potential of the Internet is also reflected in the ability of this channel to provide much more “identitarian information” (Page & Pellisier, 2001: 170) than traditional media, which, at first glance, may enhance the interaction between institutions and local citizens.
- *The Internet - a source of political speech communication.* One of the controversial issues of current political communication refers to the possibilities that the political actors have to address the electorate so that the political discourse is not “adapted” to the needs of journalists’ event media”. Some authors indicate that a symptom of political communication today is that public accesses increasingly difficult to the “mediated” (Breton, 1995: 78) political speech, namely to the original speech of the political actor. From this point of view, the Internet could improve public traffic of the political discourse insofar as the political leaders and parties integrate the Internet through political communication practices.

4. Towards a Digital Democracy?

An argument often put forward by those who vehemently criticize the marketing of political communication is regarding the degradation of democratic systems and, consequently, to the demonetization of democracy. Any doubts do not miss from those who have a less nostalgic speech and who merely limits to the observation and evaluation of the transformations which liberal democracies pass through in the last two decades.

Moreover, the very term of liberal democracy seems not to be relevant for researchers who refer instead to “late modern democracy” (Dahlgren, 2001: 129), “hyper-democracy”, “initiative democracy”, “direct democracy” (Stromer-Galley et. all, 2001: 45), “the counter populist trend” (Blumler, 1999: 97), “deliberative democracy”, “teledemocracy” (Denton, 2003: 35), “talk-show democracy” (Blumler, 2001: 95)

Recent studies demonstrate that the impact of new practices of political communication manifest on each key dimensions of democracy:

- status of majority and of the citizen
- public culture and democratic education
- forms of individual and collective participation;
- deliberative institutions of public space;
- political and media pluralism;
- political responsibility of government

Status of majority and of the citizen

Democracy involves major decisions, which is offering the opportunity to learn about the subject of the vote (usually, a topic of public interest) and to choose between several alternatives. From this point of view, the coverage generates contradictory effects on democratic practices:

- The coverage, political marketing and “new digital media” (Axford, 2001: 30) focuses the political action to a target audience more and more individualized.
- The new media divides the electorate generating by some authors “anomie” and “isolation.”
- The political action is transformed into a “solitary activity” while social identity is converting into virtual community, i.e. artificial. It is not less true that the new communication technologies stimulate direct interactions. At first glance, the political man is stimulated to reformulate his political agenda, therefore to have a “permanent agenda.”
- On the one hand, the new technologies and the publicized political communication seem to multiply the opportunities for direct participation,

unmediated to political life (always an ideal for modernity), on the other hand, the possibility of the political people to negotiate the “definition” of public interest is increasingly reduced.

Public culture and democratic education

Besides the direct participation is not sufficient to form a democratic majority, a “public culture” is also necessary that defines it as “a minimum of shared values, manifested through everyday practices, people thus experiencing themselves their status as members or potential participants in a democratic society.” (Dahlgren, 2001: 98)

The new communication technologies have developed various forms of social interaction, the local Internet and media recovering the “social dialogue”, long considered a poor resource of the liberal democracies. But in terms of social fragmentation, of dissipating the common space and of “social niches” proliferation, it has become increasingly difficult to build an agenda and a public culture.

Forms of individual and collective participation

Both culture and public agenda are maintained by the informed citizen and obviously interested to participate in political life. The logic of commercial mainstream coverage would have generated an apathy and a political disengagement of the public, a phenomenon known as “media malaise”: “The term of media malaise refers to the analyzes that support the current practices of political communication promoted by the new media and by the party campaigns that preclude the “civic engagement” i.e. to inform the citizen about public activities, the trust in government and political activism.” (Norris, 2000: 78)

“Media malaise” – a term proposed in the eighties of by Michael Robinson – concentrates the critical evaluations of the current media practices of coverage in the last decade (on which we stopped in detail in the previous section): the negativity of the news programs gradually become “anti-institutional” according to Robinson’s statement, the “tabloidisation” of political information (political entertainment or “infotainment”) and sensationalism (cultivated by popular journalism) (Norris, 2000: 106).

The phenomenon of “media malaise” would have been generated a true “culture of public cynicism” made of indifference, frustrations, political absenteeism and anomie (Putnam defines the American television audience set after 1950 as the “post-civic generation”). We emphasize here that the origins and extent of scientific discourse centered on “media malaise” is primarily encountered in the U.S., where the experimental researches on the coverage effects demonstrates that the “public cynicism” is the product of specific media practices: “Those who seek to track political life at television are more confused and more cynical than those who do not use television. And those who turn on the television are the most confused and

cynical” (Norris, 2000: 89). By contrast with the U.S., comparative and experimental researches performed in Europe show different reactions of the public. Finally, the “media malaise” is a term with a protester loading, rooted in the American media context.

Deliberative institutions of public space

The “culture of public cynicism” raises – by counterpart – the problem of civic culture and democratic education, both depending on the degree in which communitarian and deliberative practices are developed. In this process, the media should have a decisive contribution in triggering public debates. Therefore, the more the democratization of media is advanced, the more the likelihood of greater public debate.

In this context, Dahlgren’s remark seems extremely important (Dahlgren, 2001: 64) regarding the relationship between media, civic culture and democracy: ”In principle, everyone recognizes the importance of the media to keep the democratic nature of society but unfortunately, there are few who emphasizes the importance of media democratization (Bailie and Winseck, 1997 are some exceptions)” (Dahlgren, 2001: 137). The critics of trading coverage consider that we depart more and more from what it should be a “market of ideas”, the media not only promoting the pluralism of arguments, but also the political sensationalism generated either through entertainment, either by joining two contrary positions just for the sake of scandal and free contradiction. When new media or internet generates – yet – deliberative situations, it appears the risk that such broadcasts to turn more into a “group therapy”, lacking a practical purpose [14]. According to a widely spread point of view the logic of trading coverage encourages a populist form of deliberation maintained both by the journalists and politicians.

Norris emphasizes the importance of the media for a democracy and in particular television, to provide the public with a “practical knowledge”, i.e. relevant information to different policy contexts. Thus, the “citizen could estimate the probable risks of their decisions and properly, their benefits. From this point of view, people need practical knowledge that could help them in associating their available political preferences and social choices.” In this regard, the British author compares the elections when the useful information aims first the candidate’s person while during the general elections a complex type of information prevails that addresses a: balance of power and priority agenda, but also the personality of the candidate, the strategy of campaign of each candidate, and the risks and benefits of alternative that proposes versus the counter-candidates’ alternatives; not only “soft” information on seemingly secondary issues, but also “hard” information on future government action (Norris, 2000: 108).

In the literature on the future of representative democracy, we distinguish between the seemingly definitive conclusions reached by the American authors (Entman, Schudson, Cappella and Jamieson, Putnam) and researches still in progress of the Anglo-Saxon authors, first, those initiated by Pippa Norris, Blumler and Gurevitch, Axford and Huggins, Williams Miller etc.

Many American authors already refer to the “crisis of democracy” threatened by populism and by a nihilist electorate that swings between the lack of interest and the disgust towards politics; even a moderately author such as Hart who is not the follower of the verdicts is questioning the evolution of American democratic institutions while we, the “new citizens cannot distinguish between a politician and a pop star” (Hart, 1999: 90).

On the other hand, the comparative analyzes carried by Norris show an increase in the so-called “critical public” (Norris, 2000: 76) – a public still attached to democracy, but became more demanding side displaying of the functioning of the institutions of representative democracy. Currently this critical public would have more resources to punish the “media political show” resources that paradoxically are primarily capable of mediating. Far from being passive, the audience practices its critical behavior being stimulated by media alternatives, i.e. by different media styles.

In turn, Blumler and Gurevitch (2001: 98) shows that the Americanized phenomenon, some of its features, cannot be checked in the British political space (the authors take into consideration the campaign finance system, the marketable media, the volume of publicized election, the trend towards populism and journalistic style).

Among the British authors we meet other points of view that recognize the extent of the trade policy (Dahlgren, Golding, Murdock), but the phenomenon is discussed in the context of global developments (such as culture and differentiation of identity, restructuring the media national industry, the decline of public service) and structural specific to the consumerist society. Thus, Dahlgren points out that commercial coverage has eroded the concept of “public” become marginal in relation to the “interpretative communities” ‘or with the “consumerist majority” directed to entertainment (Dahlgren, 2001: 98).

Beyond the contrary conclusions reached by the American and British authors, we can not omit a common element of both research models, namely the “recovery” of the modern concept of public space.

As we have already seen the developments in the political sphere are treated as common to the post-modern society. Political and media post-modernism has different contradictory interpretations: on the one hand, a worsening crisis of representative democracy, on the other hand, an extension of the democratization process by the emergence of some direct democratic or deliberative practices. In any

case, in both the version of the negative and positive there is an association between the media and the politics, on the one hand and democratic practices such as public debates, civic participation, citizen exercising (effective citizenship), social and democratic learning, common good, unbiased communication, critical assessment and others. In the negative version, media marketing and generates an anomie of social policy and public cynicism, while the positive interpretation (or rather optimistic) refers to the new sources of social interaction and knowledge mainly attributed to the internet.

We assist in upgrading the traditional notion of public space from the founding work of Habermas – the public space, a source of social emancipation possible by the fact that the “public interest” results of a “rational consensus” based on “practical discussions” (Habermas, 1978: 145) between social actors who have previously accepted to follow the criterion of the best argument in the given situation.

The phenomenon seems extremely important if we consider that the occurrence in 1972 of Habermas’ work “The Archeology of the Public Space” generated then a whole literatures that removes the analysis of the German author regarding the degradation of the public space and of the political action under the media influence (symptomatically, most contributions on the concept of public space although there are reports criticizing Habermas, the German author is the main reference). The most common argument of this literature points out that the reality of the modern public space in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, in fact, never updated the concept of critical-rationalist public space formulated by Habermas. Moreover, the social logic of liberal democracy would not allow a “neutral” public space powered by “consensual” voices (but it is omitted the fact that Habermas himself has repeatedly returned on the launched theses in his fundamental work).

But the latest contributions in public space are those ones that updates the concepts such as deliberation, dialogue, communicational interaction civic and democratic “functions” of the media (Blumler, 2001: 85), “civic forum” (Norris, 2000: 95). A possible explanation could be the excessive trading of the publicized policy in the U.S., a phenomenon that stimulates the normative discourse of the American researchers.

The theorists’ return to the image of a deliberative public space is stimulated by the technological developments and expressive communication media (the advent of internet, satellite television, stylistic diversity of media professionals, etc.). This contradictory reality populated by major constraints for the democracy, but also by practical opportunities explains the presence of the normative discourse on media or political communication.

Regarding the democratic potential of the new communication technologies (“digital media”, “new media”), the Internet, firstly, the comments are skeptical for the moment. Thus, Stromer-Galley and Jamieson emphasize that the Internet facilitates direct contact to the politicians – through the web site, e-mail, online discussions – with the voters while the electorate can directly interact with each other. The American authors evoke in this respect the distribution of “Starr Report” – in the context of Clinton / Lewinski scandal – as a good example for exchange settings that the Internet can enter in political communication: “The report was broadcast on the Internet about the same time with the distribution of the document to the Senate, the Chamber and journalists. People rushed to the Internet to read and store the report for themselves (...). In response to the Starr Report, a very large number of citizens have contacted their senators and representatives in the Chamber.” (Stromer-Galley, 2001: 156). The Internet would introduce much image, speed, interactivity, dialogue and proximity in the political communication” (Axford, 2001: 93). The Internet expands the public agenda and the information sources because it is “a non-linear medium” (Stromer-Galley, 2001: 117).

On the other hand, the Internet access is still limited while the commercialization of this technology is increasingly pervading; the public interest is not at all stimulated because, according to Dahlgren, the Internet addresses not only to the “public” but to different “markets” (Dahlgren, 2001: 167). Not coincidentally, the internet is used as a source of political information by that part of the electorate interested in politics or involved into various civic organizations or social movements; also the internet is not used according to its potential of interaction, the electronic mail being the most active service.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, for the moment, internet usage tends to become a social practice, not a political one. Finally, the democratic potential of the new technologies need an institutionalization, the formal and informal protagonists of the political and media scene are those who will be able to use the Internet to diversify the interaction with the voters.

References

1. Anttiroiko, A.-V., „Communicative Needs and Preparedness of the Politicians”, Workshop of the EPRI-WATCH Seminar. Tampere, Finland 28 November 1997.
2. Axford, B. „The Transformation of Politics or Anti-Politics?” in Axford&Huggins (eds.), *New Media and Politics*. Sage, London: 2001.
3. Beciu, Camelia. *Politica discursivă. Practici politice într-o campanie electorală*. Iași: Polirom, 2000.

4. Bennet, Lance W. & Entman, Robert M. *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.
5. Blumler, J. „Political Communication systems all change: a response to Kees Grant”, in *European Journal of Communication* 14 (2), 1999.
6. Blumler, Jay G. & Gurevitch, Michael. „Americanization” Reconsidered: U.K.- Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time” in W.Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, Eds. *Mediated Politics Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.
7. Breton, Philippe. “Médias, médiation, démocratie : pour une épistémologie critique des sciences de la communication politique” in HERMES 17-18, CNRS éditions, Paris, 1995.
8. Dahlgren, Peter. „The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication” in *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.
9. Denton, Robert E. Jr., „Dangers of „Teledemocracy”: How the Medium of Television Undermines American Democracy” in Robert E.Denton Jr. Ed., *Political Communication Ethics – An Oxymoron?*. Westport: Connecticut, 2003.
10. Habermas, J. *L'espace public: Archeologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*. Payot: Paris, 1978.
11. Hart, Roderick P. *Seducing America. How Television Charms the Modern Voter*. Sage Publications: U.K., 1999.
12. Melody, William. „Electronic Network, Social Relations and the Changing Structure of Knowledge” in *Communication Theory Today*. Stanford University: California, 1994.
13. Miège, Bernard. „L'espace public: au-delà de la sphere politique” in HERMES 17-18, *Communication et politique*, CNRS éditions, Paris, 1995.
14. Norris, Pippa. *A Virtuous Circle. Political Communication in Post-Industrial Societies*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000.
15. Page, A. & Pellisier (ed.). *Territoires de la communication*. L'Harmattan: Paris, 2001.
16. Pelissier, Nicolas. „L'internet de proximité: dévalorisation ou révalorisation du territoire régional?”, Journée d'Etudes, Laboratoire *Communication et Politique*, C.N.R.S, Paris, 2001.
17. Preston, Paschal. *Reshaping Communications Technology. Information and Social Change*. Sage Publications: London, 2001.
18. Stromer-Galley, Jennifer; Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. „The Transformation of Political Leadership?” in Axford, Barrie&Huggins, Richard (ed.). *New Media and Politics*. Sage, U.K., 2001.