

Digital era: from mass media towards a mass of media

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We live in a digital era, which can be described in various aspects: the digitalization of analogue information storage, the emergence of web society, the replacement of the vertical mass communication model with horizontal social networks, the decrease in the influence of traditional media. The article deals with the main characteristics of the digital era: interactivity, momentariness, hypertextuality, and convergence. The discussion of social network phenomenon and traditional media crisis serves in revealing the following relevant issues of the information space: the information content creation, dissemination, economic models, and changes in consumer behaviour. The oppositions between information reliability, freedom of speech, sociability and individuality are highlighted.

Keywords: digital era, characteristics, mass communication, social networks, content creation and dissemination, economic models, information dissemination, consumer behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The speed of change in the digital era is incredibly high. The following technologies and their products emerged and spread in the first decades of the 21st century: high-speed and mobile Internet, blogs, podcasts, RSS, Google News engines, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, iTunes, mobile phone apps, touchscreens, HD, 3D, Wi-Fi, GPS systems, iPod, iPad, iPhone, smartphones, tablets, e-readers, Internet television, and image storages (media libraries). Information transmission technologies underwent rapid change.

The Internet has already come through two historical stages: *Web 1.0* and *Web 2.0*. The first one is linked to *Netscape* and *Google* browsers, and the second one is associated with individual content creation tools *Myspace*, *YouTube*, and *Wikipedia*. The new technologies bring fundamental changes to communicational skills, destroy the former hierarchy in mass communication, and cause identity crisis in traditional media. The increasing communicational professionalism among the audience and their ability to create content themselves *de-massify* the media; as R. Le Champion (2013: 13–15) puts it, *mass media* is replaced by *a mass of media*.

This text will describe the fundamental characteristics of the digital era, which determine change in information dissemination and audience behaviour. We focus on the relationship

between traditional and social media as well as issues of media content, its dissemination and perception, raising the essential question of media identity and its role in society. Individual behavioural change and its potential consequences will be looked into.

DATA NOMADS. DIGITAL ERA CHARACTERISTICS

A fragmented digit alters the consistent information transmission model. Analogue technologies have shaped the audience skills for over a hundred years. The pre-digital era was characterised by the vertical communication model (from one point out to many points), which shaped a passive mass audience.

What is characteristic of the digital era? P. Joseph (2008) identifies the following features: *interactivity, momentariness, mass authorship, declining physical spaces, and cost reduction.*

- *Interactivity* is perceived as a dialogue between communication partners, individuals or social groups. Various levels of interactivity are available: *selection* (selecting desirable content at a given time), *construction* (designing and redesigning content through manipulating available elements), and *communication* (communication by sharing links to the content on social networks) (Boullier 2000);

- *Momentariness* means spontaneous communicative reaction, a long time of content preparation, dissemination and consumption;

- *Mass (group) authorship* – each information consumer is, at the same time, a potential content creator;

- *Declining physical spaces.* Borders of states, and social and cultural territories are non-existent, everything is intertwined in the Internet space;

- *Cost reduction.* The preparation and dissemination of pre-digital media content requires big investments (headquarters, publishing houses, distribution system, radio and television studios, transmitters); whereas in order to create and disseminate digital content, a personal computer, the Internet and software downloaded for free suffice.

J.-F. Fogel and B. Patino emphasize the following digital network characteristics: *hyperlinks, decentralization, free disposal, open access, and variety* (2013; 2005; 2000).

- *Hyperlinks* are perceived as an unlimited possibility to access another content available online;

- *Decentralization* is the opposite of a centralized mass communication model, it is the absence of hierarchy (a single publisher or broadcaster). According to J. Naughton, there is no periphery on the Internet, only the centre (2000);

- *Free disposal* is a possibility to use digital networks communication at any time. Access to communication equals to basic chores (such as switching on electricity or opening the water tap);

- *Open access* means there are neither financial nor technological obstacles to staying connected;

- *Variety* involves endless content supply.

Among other features of the digital era, the following are also mentioned: mass audience fragmentation (*media without masses*), reactivity of actions, free-of-charge circulation (*a copy society*), anonymous authorship (Fogel, Patino 2005).

R. Monosson (2005) is looking, by means of opposition, for the differences between the audiences of the analogue and the digital era:

- *Heterogeneous vs fragmented.* M. Castells (1996) refers to the digital technology driven audience diversification as *digital exclusion*;

– *Disorganized vs disjointed*. Although the audience of the pre-digital era was not homogeneous, it was nevertheless united by the content disseminated by the main mass media, which served as a catalyst for public discussion. Whereas currently, social media groups sharing similar attitudes are an increasingly more common space for discussion;

– *State-level vs global*. Mass communication used to be mainly international in terms of its means of dispersion (state territory), content (principle of localness), and accessibility (language barrier). The space of the Internet users is global;

– *Vast choice vs unlimited choice*. Although the content presented by mass media is enormous, yet it is incomparable with the supply on the Internet browsers;

– *Passive vs interactive*. The main contradiction is the audience *controlled by the flow* (pre-digital one) and one *controlling the flow* (the digital one).

Some of the most commonly highlighted features of digital content preparation are *hybrid nature* and *convergence*. *Hybrid nature* is perceived as the circulation of information of various nature (professional content as well as that of amateurs, primary sources as well as selected and edited content) as well as the entirety of forms of expression (print, static and kinetic audiovisual work). The concepts of form of expression, genre, and content are replaced by a technological term *data*. According to L. Manovich (2001), a computer screen equals a battlefield, where depth and superficiality, opacity and transparency compete, where privacy and publicity, masses and individuality, commerce and charity come together.

Convergence is identified (Fogel, Patino 2013: 140) at the following various levels: *of means* (content is available in different storages), *of time* (navigating across time zones), *geographical* (communication without physical limitations), *of roles* (different communicative roles are possible).

The digital era is characterized by *mobility*. Technologies of the pre-digital era were positioned as home media. Digital mobile devices became symbols of the freedom of movement but at the same time they became means to isolate oneself from the environment. *A data nomad* (Flichy 1997) leading a *public private life* and refraining from extensive communication with the outside world reminds of the Ch. Baudelaire's observing, yet distanced, *nomad* or E. Poe's *man of the crowd*. The digital era is also characterized by *migration* (users of analogue products shifting to digital ones), *dematerialization* (the transformation of tangible physical storages into virtual ones), *refusal of mediators* (the client engages in direct communication with the producer), *targeted adjustment* (mass content is replaced by targeted supply), and *deindustrialization* (industrial copy production is replaced by individual low cost copying).

CAPITALIST COMMUNISM. TRADITIONAL AND NEW COMMUNICATION

The trend of *demassification* destroys the foundation of mass communication, it causes crises in media identity, citizen awareness, social relationships, and democracy. Dailies, later audiovisual mass communication channels had become important institutes for the functioning of a state. Mass communication performed the educational and critical functions, it nurtured the public space, and satisfied public needs (Habermas 1978: 53). The virtual digital space disorganizes public space.

S. Jodoin (2014: 51–58) compares traditional and new media in the following five aspects:

1. *Transparency*. Traditional media set out the level of transparency and present the content in portions. The new ones expand the limits of transparency, leak documents (*Wikileaks*);

however, the distribution of unverified information renders the processes unreliable and uncontrollable.

2. *Dissemination and sharing.* Traditional media prepare and distribute information, while the new ones provide access to the content of various nature.

3. *Freedom of information.* Traditional media activity is regulated by law, code of ethics, and professional standards. The new ones declare absolute freedom, which, as they put it, helps build a more humane and more just society. Any attempt to limit activity is perceived as an attack on freedom of speech.

4. *Autonomy.* Traditional media are characterised by hierarchical structure, subordination and role distribution. In case of the new ones, regulation is scarce, and individual self-expression is promoted.

5. *Influence.* In the centralized hierarchy of mass communication, the greatest influence comes from the owners of the means of information production and dissemination, whereas in the digital era anyone can have influence on others.

The following dangers arising from the new media are visible (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2001):

1. *Never-ending information cycle generates an infinite information flow.* It causes tension and stress to the consumer.

2. *Sources become more important than the interpreter.* The audience is searching for raw information and primary sources (documents, images, and testimonies).

3. *Anyone can spread anything.* The content creator does not need special education, licences, or permissions.

4. *Mistrust in the information disseminated arises.* There are no sufficient filters that would separate unreliable information out, neither are there criteria to evaluate it.

5. *The so-called click culture* leading to the surplus of shocking, sensational and superficial information.

The social (civic) media, which emerged at the clash of the 20th and the 21st centuries, satisfied the communicational expression of a part of society, encouraged *information volunteers* preparing content for the so-called *open publishing* websites. *Participatory (co-operation, network)* media demonstrate that informing society is not only a matter of professionals but also that of all the citizens. With the help of journalist volunteers, the USA website *The Huffington Post* has developed a *web journalism* model. A mere 50 professional journalists were assisted by over 6,000 collaborators (journalists, experts, retired and unemployed people). Another US Internet media, *Demand Media*, launched industrial information production (*content farms*). An optimised demand evaluation model was applied to make information content products (Rauline, 2010). An algorithm registers the topics most frequently searched for on web browsers (audience's needs) as well as keywords of greatest interest to advertisers (advertisers' needs). The goal is the balance between *what people look for* and *what the advertisers are ready to pay for* (Boudet 2009).

Hypertextuality, or link journalism, is an exclusive feature of content construction in the new media. The information content is combined of links to sources. They satisfy today's need for superficial information consumption. Although hypertextuality creates a possibility for vast choice, the abundance of information becomes physically impossible to deal with (Tremayne 2005: 28–29). Journalism professionals have also been affected by the web-driven syndrome of the present tense, of *here and now*; therefore, the course of time and chronology is eliminated from publications. The past is forgotten and the future is not considered. Caught up in a whirlwind of information, today's content creator resembles a squirrel in a wheel. This

is pretended activeness, movement for the sake of movement, an attempt to disguise panic and lack of discipline and selectivity. Similarly to many Internet users, a journalist is drowning in the marsh of social networks, imitating activity that is supposed to justify the superficiality of information prepared.

Another challenge for the digital era media is the audience's reluctance to pay for the content. B. Poulet (2009) refers to this paradox as a *capitalist communism*. Any restriction on access is perceived as an attack on freedom of information. It is not only industrial content production that is employed in order to achieve profitability but also *content marketing*, when advertising information is presented as a piece of a journalistic genre. A website receives percentage from sales for each click on an e-shop link in a book review; pre-paid key words are inserted into texts. A charge is applied to previously open access publications (*The Times*, *Wall Street Journal*) or a certain part of content (*freemium* – a combination of free of charge and charged content).

F. Braudel (1988) speaks about two levels of the new digital capitalism: the lower layer is the Internet users community (the web, consumption, data circulation), and the upper layer includes the Internet giants (the GAF4 four: *Google*, *Apple*, *Facebook*, *Amazon*) that collect data, analyse the state of the digital market, and take decisions. Content browsers have become participants of the advertising market that sell data regarding the Internet users' habits. The data becomes the most important digital space capital. A paradoxical transformation has taken place: content search engines have turned into client search tools. Each of us become an unpaid employee of this industry. J. Fuller (2010: 58) calls it *emotional marketing*, an organism that registers everything and manipulates the data (contacts, hobbies, actions).

BREATHING THROUGH GOOGLE GILLS. PARADOXES OF DIGITAL ERA

We are participants in an unpredictable process. The digital era raises both euphoria and horror at the same time. It is claimed that the new media, which dismantle communicational hierarchy and eliminate any restrictions, embody the true freedom of speech. It is assumed that means of mass media controlled by certain groups shape a homogeneous society with a uniform reasoning, whereas the new media educate individuals. The digital space is seen as a perfect place for participatory democracy and debates, creating an equal relationship between the sender and the receiver. According to J. Rosnay (2006), traditional media has been and still remains the main driver of social democratic processes, while the digital era, which replaces public debate with conversations between the like-minded, draws the end of democracy closer. The Internet generation does not need clashes of ideas, they only search for confirmation of their own opinions. Horizontal digital networks form closed groups that generate a *democracy of the like-minded* (a *pair society* – term by S. Tisseron (2001)). The network exists on the periphery of political life because it is too fast for the slow and inert mode of functioning of traditional political and public structures (bureaucratic decision making processes, regulations). The Internet fails to shape collective consciousness because the audience is divided according to the topics, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, age, social position, religion, and hobbies (Fogel, Patino 2013: 171).

Unprofessional content creators disseminating unverified information also jeopardize democracy (Kovach, Rosenstiel, 2001). In order to become an alternative to professional media, social networks eliminate competence distribution, dismantle the established relationship between the sender and the receiver, the content organizer and the consumer. Reading material that should be banned circulates filter-free on *Twitter* and there is nobody to protect

our mental health from it (Fogel, Patino 2013: 30). The major Internet players (*Google, Facebook*) are accused of parasitizing and spamming public space: they do not create anything themselves, they only serve as containers that others put trash into (Fogel, Patino 2013: 56). In the atmosphere of mistrust in information, rumours spread, manipulation and disinformation increase, the public dialogue breaks down.

The digital model of *everything to all*, pushing away the traditional media (*one content for all*) is referred to by M. Castells (1996) as *mass self-communication* or the new individualism, which causes worry due to social links falling apart. According to J. Baudrillard (1999), virtual technologies create a secondary reality by destroying the real one. The Japanese have coined a term *hikikomori* to describe Internet users, mainly teenagers, who spend time at home and communicate on social networks only. The digital changes conventional experiences, the perception of time and space vanishes, the time-less and space-less web is the only one that exists. As R. Debray puts it (2001), distances lose importance, the sense of duration and chronology is lost, a click with the mouse or a key as if demolishes Euclidean theory. T. Ericsen (2001) sees travelling in time (accelerating or suppressing it) and the individualization of information usage as the fundamental trends of our times. To his mind, new information conquers the previous one, a satisfied need immediately generates a new one, postponing anything becomes unbearable. Compared to the pace of the media, an individual's life seems unnaturally slow, and the philosophy of temporariness, promoted by the entertainment media, encourages consumption: changing products, heroes, and partners. Continuous information updates create the feeling of dissatisfaction, the consumer suffers from popping up data that contains no cause-and-effect relations. Since the consumer creates his narrative on various media, his identity becomes scattered, his full identity is never revealed, therefore, it cannot be fully known or understood (Kačergytė, Liubinienė 2015: 26). As T. Kačerauskas puts it, endlessness is the greatest limitation of global technologies (2014: 295).

Social skills change, since on the web emotions are expressed without any facial expressions, intonations, or gestures but through agreed signs only. The person browsing is compared to a content *DJ*, mixing information flows and generating clicks. Fragmented digital attention builds up the content from random elements. Unnatural communication is visible on social networks. One would never have as many friends in real life as they have on Facebook or Twitter. However, the relationships between the interlocutors are weak and fragmented, the lack of depth in the relationships is compensated through the abundance and intensity of contacts. *Desynchronization* and *delocalisation* destruct social space, and build the new *electronic sociability* (Compiègne 2011) or collective individualism – *audiovisualism*, when while being together you are actually lonely (LaFrance 2009).

Multidimensional screen integrates textuality, visuality, mass-effect, individuality, unidirectionality and interactivity, as if the powers and forms of expression of all the communication technologies were brought together to one place (Pečiulis 2012: 24–52). Tension is constantly felt online because a final result is never there (Ericson, 2001). Social networks have encouraged a completely new communicational behaviour. By textualizing images, *YouTube* invented a new concept of visuality and textuality; with *Twitter*, real time became the main element of communication; *Facebook* and *iPhone* encouraged the spread of new tools, software and apps. The Internet is frequently described as a certain biological process, which does not evolve according to a plan somebody designed. Its transformations are determined not only by technologies but rather by the users' needs and behaviour. Unpredictable spontaneous behaviour can be expected of the Internet, similar to the self-organizing system, Leviathan,

described by T. Hobbes (2010). The thought of the painter H. Matisse "I do not paint objects, I paint their relationships" (Aragon 1943) applies to links formed by the Internet. Similarly to the canvases of the great artist, the Internet does not create content but encourages links, activeness, and participation.

The Internet is a complete opposite of mass media because the Internet users' goal is not dissemination without a specific target but rather a wish to contact like-minded people. The author of the term *virtual reality*, J. Lanier, speaks of a newly evolved culture of commutative acting and reacting, which is the field of special social communication (2010: 20). The passive *homo mediaticus* becomes a hyperactive *homo numericus*. "I am connected, therefore, I live" is how the behaviour of an Internet user can be described. The present tense culture, the inner state of *here and now* requires being constantly connected. This affects an individual's experience, he is in a continuous state of surprise and communicational shock. Direct immediate link with content is comparable to breathing that sustains life. According to A. Baricco (2006: 93), an Internet user uses *Google gills* to breathe, rather than lungs. He is constantly short of time, each push of a key on a keyboard calls for surprises, the so-called *interruption* technologies draw into an ever different game: that of possibilities (*alea*), challenges (*agon*), feelings (*ilinx*), and roles (*mimicry*) (Caillois 1958).

As the speed of preparing, transmitting, and absorbing information increases, hunger for information is always felt. Since the perception of time and space vanished, nobody travels anywhere: the beginning and the end of everything is in the virtual Internet space (Rantanen 2009). According to Z. Bauman (2007), the digital era society reminds of a matrix of random logs on and off with endless possible combinations. Therefore, serious consequences caused by a never-ending staying online are diagnosed. *Partial attention* (it is split between many objects), *modified obsessive-compulsive disorder* (constantly checking email and the Internet), *hyperactive attention* (jumping from one object (source, content, storage) to another), *phantom vibration syndrome* (when it seems that one's phone is vibrating or ringing even if it is neither vibrating nor ringing, or they do not have it with them) (Fogel, Patino 2013: 34). Z. Smith sees the Internet user as Faustus who sacrifices his character, speech, and feelings to the digital space, and melts away in the entirety of data. It reminds of a transcendental action when body, intimacy, and fear vanish. The exposed *self* becomes the property of *everyone* (2010: 59).

Although, seemingly, the accessibility and mobility of the new technologies liberate a human being, it is, however, not true. L. Manovich (2001) reveals a paradoxical state: an individual who cannot stay disconnected for a single second is tied up and imprisoned. In the times of mobile technologies, one carries their prison along.

CONCLUSIONS

The most frequently mentioned characteristics of the digital era are *interactivity*, *momentariness*, *mass authorship*, and *declining physical spaces*. Open access allows one to easily use endless information with the help of hyperlinks. Distinctive features of the new communication are hybrid nature and convergence, which manifest themselves through the variety in forms of content.

In our opinion, the most important effects of the digital era are the following:

- New communicational behaviour. A passive *homo mediaticus* becomes an active *homo numericus*;
- A new type of social framework emerges, a *digital democracy*, which eliminates the difference between information professionals and amateurs, and between the information sender and receiver;

- The movement of information volunteers, *the civic media*, encourages the trend of media *demassification*, and destroys mass communication hierarchy. The dialogue takes place not at the scale of society but rather in small groups of like-minded people. This brings out the issues of citizen awareness, information reliability, freedom of speech and the functioning of a democratic society;
- The reluctance of the audience to pay for information causes the so-called *capitalist communism* effect. With profitability as a goal, content preparation costs are cut, and low-cost industrial content production is introduced;
- The new media change individual habits: while communicating in the virtual space, the perception of place and time is distorted, constant jumping from one object to another leads to split attention;
- Unable to deal with the entire information flow, an individual drowns in the ocean the content of questionable value.

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Skaitmeninė era: nuo masinių medijų link medijų masės

Santrauka

Gyvename skaitmeninėje eroje, kurią galima apibūdinti įvairiais aspektais: analoginių informacijos laikmenų skaitmeninimas, tinklo visuomenės susiformavimas, vertikaliojo masinės komunikacijos modelio keitimas horizontaliaisiais socialiniais tinklais, tradicinės žiniasklaidos įtakos mažėjimas. Straipsnyje analizuojamos svarbiausios skaitmeninio amžiaus charakteristikos – interaktyvumas, momentiškumas, hipertekstualumas, konvergencija. Aptariant socialinių tinklų fenomeną ir tradicinės žiniasklaidos krizę, atskleidžiamos aktualios informacinės erdvės problemos: informacinio turinio rengimo, sklaidos, ekonominių modelių, vartotojų elgsenos pokyčių. Atkreipiamas dėmesys į informacijos patikimumo, žodžio laisvės, socialumo ir individualumo prieštaras.

Raktažodžiai: skaitmeninė era, charakteristikos, masinė komunikacija, socialiniai tinklai, turinio rengimas ir sklaida, ekonominiai modeliai, informacijos sklaida, vartotojo elgsena