

New Media; News Media:

The Tension Between Pluralism & Commodification

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In the 1960s and 1970s, there was little systematic research on how media-fare is constructed and the dominant model of media effect was largely psychological. I made two basic assumptions when I started work on what turned out to be *Making News*. I think of these assumptions as merely logical.

They are:

- How information is gathered must have an impact on what is disseminated and,
- what is disseminated must have an impact on how people think about the world.

In the early 1970s, soon after Erving Goffman published *Frame Analysis*, a translation of Gregory Bateson's idea into the emerging world of phenomenological sociologies, those assumptions became more formal: Sociologists began to think of news and other media-fare in terms of frames that potentially guided and potentially limited possible interpretations of news and news stories. (I am using the word "news" to refer to the genre and "news stories" to refer to the tale about a specific series of occurrences.) As Mats

Ekstrom has pointed out, because I was trying to understand what the social world looked like for newswriters, I concentrated on trying to understand the construction of the categories that they used to discuss their activities. Thus, *Making News* uses data about processing specific stories to make sense of aspects of the genre news.

There are some issues that *Making News* pretended to address but really did not. These include the meaning of American news within a world-system of information-exchange. There is some discussion of freedom of the press as ideology and there is a vague awareness of issues of ownership, but I really do not address those matters very deeply in much of my work. When I did raise those matters in later essays, I did so in the context of the production of consciousness – a firm belief that Enzensberger's concept was trying to get at something deeper than how a person viewed a specific issue or even which issues people thought to be important (agenda-setting). I understand consciousness to concern not merely how an individual conceives of himself or herself – but what categories individuals invoke to explain who people are -- what categories are said to convey essence or soul.

C. Wright Mills seems to have had a version of this issue in mind when he wrote about sociology as the intersection of history and biography. As you recall, he asked “what kind of person” is dominant in a society and what kind is becoming dominant. Although Mills specifically mentions the transition from feudalism to capitalism, I think he meant “kind” to be more than a reference to social class (as in the “haute bourgeoisie” are becoming ever more dominant)

or to increasing rationalization within the context of evolving capitalisms (what George Ritzer speaks of as McDonaldization). For Mills also reminded us that World War II -- and more recently Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur -- revealed extraordinary human variation. As he put it, "The limits of human nature are frighteningly broad." From this point of view, the media, including the news media, are guiding people not merely to a conception of themselves and their surroundings, but to a concept of self and of what constitutes surroundings. The "new news media" are an escalation of tendencies already under debate in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, I think those matters are key to any discussion of news. I also believe that these matters involve what I am going to call a **double movement** – perhaps their own dialectical movement. By "double movement," I mean that on the one hand, the new news media open up more possibilities for locating information than ever existed. One might say that the international exchange of electronic transmissions – via both television and computerization – represent the **essence of pluralism**. As Burton Weisbrod notes, "[P]opulation migration and information flows through television and computers and are having the effect of magnifying diversity in country after country" (998:3n). In these media, especially on the internet, all sorts of information and knowledge coexist, are juxtaposed, are jumbled, fight one another, complement one another, and above all, are readily available to people who have enough money to gain access to them. On the other hand, the new news media – cable television, TIVO, the sale of programs to a home computer, newspapers distributed through personal computers, blogs, the kit

and caboodle – represent the **apotheosis of commodification**. I am not using the term “commodification” in its technical Marxist sense. Rather I mean: the subordination of public and private realms to the logic of capitalism. In other words, things (eg, friendship...) are valued for their commercial value. With commodification aspects of our lives that are culturally conditioned take on the mythology of being "natural." (web definition)

I also want to invoke a related idea: individuals' own self-conception, including the categories that they use to conceive of the (their) self are so oriented to the marketplace, that ideas of self and of the presentation of self have become fused: Self as consumer, self as object to be consumed.

When I speak of the media as the apotheosis of commodification, I mean to suggest not only the intensification of an on-going process, but also that we have reified the concept “commodification.” Commodification presents itself as a law of nature and is taken to be a law of nature. I cannot over-estimate the degree to which my students can place a monetary value on phenomenon. Everything they encounter is “worth it” or not and carries the message “buyer beware.” A specific course is or is not “worth it” -- after all they have paid tuition. A university policy about housing honors or ignores the amount of money a student has paid for an education, as well as the taxes paid by parents. Even some people are not “worth” (as opposed to “worthy of) their friendship.

The Essence of Pluralism: The news media present themselves as the essence of pluralism, because using the new media, one can find out almost anything. From the comfort of my home, I can learn about freedom of the press and also how to join the American Nazi Party. I can read a “blog” about the atmosphere at a particular athletic competition or practice typed by the sports writer at a local newspaper or a national one for that matter. I can also read the opinion that a “member” has written on a for-pay message board, such as scout.com. I can search until I find a news source that expresses my take on the political world – and so I can engage in a much finer sort of selective exposure than ever imagined by Leon Festinger. I can not only search for a version/vision with which I agree. I can search for one that is the virtual clone of mine.

This pluralism would seem to be ideal for revolutionaries and reformists who can attract and maintain the like-minded and those who would like to be like-minded. Decades ago the literature about social movements suggested that when movement-leaders appear on popular talk-shows, they may recruit members by enabling sympathizers to know whom they should contact and how they should do so. Ten years ago, Joshua Gamson suggests that this pluralism may also be ideal for groups trying to legitimate their identities. In Freaks Talk Back, a study of how personal issues and family problems are presented on daytime television talk-shows, Joshua Gamson argues that such shows normalize “the fringes.” As he puts it,

You know you are in trouble, when [the host of a particularly despicable show] seems like your best bet for being heard, understood, respected and protected. ...Becoming media visible, especially for our social identity, is rooted in a status previously understood to belong to the realm of “private life, and [so called] the question of who own public space. The issue of what can and cannot be spoken about and seen in public...is really the issue of who is and is not considered a legitimate member of ‘the public.

On the web, the fringes may not be seen as normalized; they may be normal – or at least appear to be, *seem* to be normal – to those who can use the web to locate themselves. Not only can one use the web to “converse” with others who are interested in the same topic as oneself; but one can also use it as self-affirmation; as self-discovery and so as purveyor of symbols from which to construct a self.

In Global Culture/Individual Identity, Gordon Matthews identifies this aspect of the new media as “the global supermarket.” Using ethnography, he portrays how in Japan, the United States, and Hong Kong, groups of individuals fashion identities (in part) out of other people’s symbols, including their languages.

When these symbols seem central to their sense of self, they may feel that they have more in common with members of a foreign country than with their own grandparents, members of another generation in their country. As Abrahamson (2004) writes, through the media people encounter and perhaps grow to admire what might once have been alien practices. Media-use enables people to pick and choose among products and among customs as products – wearing a New

York Yankees baseball cap and jeans, “suffering” for one’s art, using “foreign words.” It may even facilitate the ability of individuals to shift among identities (Abrahamson, 2004:127), adapting the self to the situation.

Abrahamson points out that having multiple identities is different from experiencing anomie. Anomie refers to normlessness; multiple identities entail the recognition of multiple norms. Thus the existence of the global supermarket appears to imply the existence of a point of identification – a home -- for every person who searches. It may also imply transformation -- that each person can find some sort of group (if only a temporary group with whom one occasionally communicates as in “old college friends”) -- much as a group can temporarily privatize a public space, such as a restaurant or coffee shop by meeting their every Wednesday for lunch (Lofland 1985). (Of course, others who lunch at this restaurant every Tuesday may think of it as “their space.”) This pluralistic view of what people glean from the media appears to entail fashioning and refashioning of both self and other.

Put somewhat differently, this interpretation of the web as an expression of pluralism means that to define oneself, one can search for one’s clone – people just like me – or one’s antithesis. Indeed, some articles on computer-use stress that surfing the net, one can search for the perfect expression of one’s views, attitudes, and beliefs. However, one can also seek something different – a better way of living or even a better way of being than the life one knows. (In this sense, the new media may involve a perpetual becoming or search for new ways rather than a celebration or even an affirmation of simply being.)

Robert Saunder's study (in *Global Media & Communication*) of the internet's paradoxical impact on ethnic Russians living in republics that were carved from the Soviet Union emphasizes the transformative potential of internet use. He finds that the internet acts as a dampening agent for both emergent Russian nationalism and backward looking Soviet nostalgia and instead tends to promote notion of difference across the Russian ethnic space...Cyber-Russians influenced by *the corporatist non-territorial structure* of the internet are slowly but steadily eschewing nationalist mythmaking and instead opting for personal economic and social advancement outside the confines of the nation (2006: 45, emphasis added).

Citing McLuhan, Saunders recalls that the print-media are essentially nationalist: they are bound to language. The new media, the media of the global supermarket, are not.

I also mean these observations about pluralism to apply to news. Use of the new media, especially the web, to locate political commentary may involve a search for the quintessence of selective exposure. However, it may also involve broadening one's horizons by learning what other's think. In times of crisis, I read the British newspapers since they are now accessible to me. I can get a better sense of what is happening around the world – how other nations feel about my country's involvement in wars – than I could possible glean by reading American news media. Yet, from another point of view, such use of the new media, including the new news media, is a celebration of commodification.

The Apotheosis of Commodification. When I think about the news media in terms of commodification, it seems absolutely appropriate that the subtitle of Matthews' book is "Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket." The term commodification also seems particularly apt in terms of the phrase Saunders used to discuss the internet use of the Russian ethnics in Tajikistan: "...because of the corporatist non-territorial structure..." Every day, I log onto either my office or home computer to read the local paper and *The New York Times*. As I have stated, sometimes I also check the British media. If the situation is truly dire – say after 9-11 – I even try to read French. I am searching not merely for a point of view, but for points of view. Through my actions, I am affirming the pluralism of the new media.

The websites that I check out are united by more than the use of languages I speak or read or pretend to speak or read. They carry advertisements. I have not read a content analysis of these websites, but it feels to me that every time I click from one story to another in my daily journey through *The New York Times*, I am switched to a full-screen ad. I must say, *The Times* is very nice about these intrusions. I may click upon a symbol to make that ad disappear, which is more than I can do to get rid of the commercials on television's nightly news.

The Times, more accurately its marketing department, clearly cares about my habits. The site refuses access if it cannot leave a cookie in my computer's cache. *The Times* is counting me and every other home or office computer at which it has deposited a cookie. It is selling the record of my passage through

its domain to its advertisers. I – or my office and home computers – are recognized in the circulation data that the marketing department uses to set its web-based advertising rates. Like it or not, I must participate in the *Times*' data –or I can not read the *Times*. (Somehow the *Hartford Courant* manages to show me ads without being as aggressive and insistent about depositing its cookies.)

Like it or not, I participate in a myriad of marketing campaigns, probably more than I know about. Weekly, amazon.com uses its analysis of my book purchases to e-mail me about movies “now showing locally” that I might want to view. When I sign onto amazon, it tells me which books it thinks I would like to read. I have a charge card for a department store and it contacts me with some regularity. Even when I sign onto eBay, I am hit by ads of sorts – news of a particularly terrific item whose auction is about to end. What’s worse, at the office, I am besieged by products I don’t want to purchase -- daily ads for medications designed to enhance a man’s experience of his sexuality, recommendations that I buy a copy of a Piaget watch. As I have been typing, the computer has announced a new e-mail – this message offering a sure way to control my weight. I am inundated by corporate intrusions. The websites that I regularly use chart my movements and use their cookies to sell my attention to still other advertisers. I am perpetually reminded of Todd Gitlin’s comment about television: It is in the business of selling the viewers’ eyeballs to advertisers, only now an even newer medium is simultaneously selling my attention and encouraging me to buy.

Continuities. There is an awesome continuity with the 1960s and 1970s. Then too, social scientists argued about pluralism versus commodification. Only then Americans cited different theorists: Paul Lazarsfeld versus Herbert Marcuse instead of Jeffrey Alexander versus Douglas Kellner.

Now, as then, young people organize to provide alternative media. In my state, young people had started alternative weeklies called the *Advocate*; the New Haven and the Hartford *Advocates* were bought by the *Hartford Courant*. The *Hartford Courant* was bought by the Chicago *Sun-Times*. Now, some of my graduate students are writing and working for the *Hartford Free Press*. (When they say Free Press, I think of the social science publishing house that is now part of Simon and Shuster.) These students tolerate my cynical references to how *Boston After Dark* became the *Boston Phoenix*, as well as a quote A. J. Liebing, “Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one,” which indicates the tenor of that time. (Not to speak of “People everywhere confuse what they read in newspapers with news.”)

I suspect that the extraordinarily spread of the new media has increased the commodification of “less-new” media. (I find it difficult to call television “old.”)

From one point of view, there has been an awesome decrease in the number of voices in the “old media.” The television station and the newspaper whose staffs I observed in the 1960s had been a relatively early example of a small conglomerate. The parent company had owned a morning newspaper, an afternoon newspaper, a television station, an FM and an AM radio station. One of those newspapers merged with the other. Since the 1970s, still more

newspapers have merger, folded, or been bought out by chains and large conglomerates. The chains are not shy about telling local newspapers what to report, how to report it, and how to write. In the United States, the omnipresence of such “new” distribution systems as cable and satellite television may have destroyed the quasi-monopoly of the three networks that had emerged from network-radio, but there are clearly new quasi-monopolies which now own those very networks and those networks are themselves bifurcated. (One can watch NBC or its cable counterpart MSNBC.) The conglomerates expand: GE bought NBC; Universal bought GE. For the most part, the conglomerates do not present radically different information. (I say for the most part, because it is clear that FOX news is indeed more conservative than the news as presented by CNN.) We all know this history. We all also know that the corporate media present a “coding problem.” By that I mean that the breadth of the categories one uses to code media content necessarily influences how much sameness and difference one will find. Are FOX News and CNN more like one another than either is like Aljazeera? Is it even fair to ask?

We all also know that the marketing practices of today were already present in the 1960s and 1970s. News programs had begun to experiment with news-readers joking on camera. When deciding whom to hire as an anchorperson, people from the marketing department brought tapes of potential employees to shopping centers where they corralled potential audiences to watch the tapes and express preferences. Non-news divisions informed those who read the

news on TV how to wear their hair, their make-up, their ties. I remember when one African-American woman was ordered to abandon her Afro haircut. Then, as now, whether a newsreader should sit or stand could be a very significant issue worthy of study. But these marketing questions have escalated.

From the other point of view, there is the awesome ability to travel anywhere via the net. It is easier to get information from other lands. Even with the limitations that the Chinese government has put on google, I feel confident that it is easier for a Chinese “digertari” [the digital version of literati] to find information than before the advent of the internet. Yet the information is commodified.

In *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*, Paul Starr analyzes the development of the American media-system to argue that the United States provided for checks and balances in governmental power, increasingly valued free speech (especially after the advent of national radio), but never came to grips with centralized media power. Starr points out that the United States has exported “not only its culture, but also its institutions. And the global media – not all of them American by any means, but structured along the commercial lines pioneered in the United States – [...were to] become a factor of power everywhere” (402).

It is perhaps here that one sees the answer to what the new media are doing – increasing individualization (pluralism) at the expense of the collectivity, encouraging even more commodification, including the commodification of both institutions and the self. But the media did not cause these phenomena. West

societies have put greater stress on individuals and individualization since the advent of capitalism. The new media have not caused, but they have participated in an ever greater division of labor, including within the media. Since the twentieth century, there has been more emphasis on sensuality – food, drink, indeed I have noticed – just plain fun. (I once was very nervous about a talk I was giving to 1000 people and the fellow who was to introduce me said not to worry. “It’ll be fun.”)

C. Wright Mills might ask, what kinds of people are coming to dominate this mass-mediated society? Marx Weber might still answer, “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.”