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From Mass to Social Media? Advancing Accounts of Social Change

Sonia Livingstone

Abstract

I suggest that *Social Media and Society* will be substantially focused on questions of social change. Thus, I urge a historical perspective that avoids the temptation to consolidate the vision of mass media as concentrated, passively consumed, and unidirectional in influence by contrast with today's supposedly more dispersed, participatory, globalized, peer-to-peer social media. I then observe that many diverse disciplines are interested in social media and express concern that while they have considerable expertise regarding the "social" and "society," they too-often appear content to black-box "media." This requires us to enter the fray to explain how the media part of the equation matters too. Since, I suggest, this matters whenever the material or symbolic dimensions of communication are important to or contested within the unfolding action, that is very often indeed. I then suggest some pressing questions to which I hope this journal will contribute. These concern (1) the wider ecology of communication within which, intriguingly, the dimensions that best characterize face-to-face communication are still used as the yardstick by which to judge social (and other) media; (2) the imperative to adopt a multi- and trans-cultural gaze as we grapple with (rather than presume we already know) the ethnographic diversity of social media "users" in all their complexity—including emerging social media literacy and its relation to social media legibility; and (3) larger questions of the theoretical framework by which to conceptualize power relations "at the interface"—of speakers and hearers, producers and audiences, or, today, affordances and users.

Keywords

social media, literacy, social change, mass media, media literacy, configuring communication, media ethnography

It is only a decade or two since scholars writing about "the media" meant the mass media (press, television, cinema)—as a quick glance along our bookshelves easily demonstrates. But even then, everyday references to "the media" tended to be too centralizing,[1] underplaying the many and intertwined forms of mediation that have long existed, including many written, printed, musical, and other material forms of communication operating horizontally as well as vertically.[2] Then, too, the significance of the accompanying adjective "mass" was also underplayed, taken to refer to one-to-many, top-down communication more than to the particular vision of a mass society that a mass audience—dependent on and vulnerable to powerful media—implies.[3] And in any case, this was not a conception of society to which historians would readily give credence.

I have begun by looking back at past misunderstandings because I hope *Social Media and Society* will avoid the temptation to consolidate this vision of "past" media as highly concentrated, passively consumed, or unidirectional in influence precisely in order to mark the change represented by today's supposedly more dispersed, participatory, globalized, peer-to-peer social media. Polarizations of the "then" and "now" kind, especially those that bracket history as "how things were before now," rarely enrich our understanding of social change. And it is the question of social change (supposed or actual) that I see as the primary rationale for this new and exciting journal, keen to examine whether, when, and how social media play a critical role in mediating the interests at stake in contemporary societies.

In retrospect, the 20th century fascination with mass media, while appropriate in many ways, seems oddly ahistorical—academic theories were often couched in universal terms and evidence was presented as if it were timeless. Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how particular was the vision that spawned the Western tradition of media and

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communication research. It conceived of mass media primarily within a national frame, in often respectful terms and as broadly democratizing (given the media's mass appeal, public claims, and low literacy barriers). The fact that the rise of broadcasting coincided with the (then-) confident expansion of the largely administrative social sciences[4] is not irrelevant. Interestingly, such a vision of the media's position in society has not characterized any period either before or since.

As we now rush to publish our findings before the specific platforms we've researched become obsolete, we reassure one another—don't write about platform X or Y (even though that is, in practice, what we have actually researched)—but instead write about the underlying problems and processes. Is this reassuring? Actually, it (rightly) makes our task all the more demanding, especially if we are to move beyond polarized claims of continuity versus transformation. It is not that we should become historians, valuable though their insights are, but rather my point is that expertise regarding media and communications must be brought into dialogue with multi-disciplinary analyses of social change.[5] We cannot be satisfied with the descriptive and essentially context-free task that Harold Lasswell set mass media researchers nearly 70 years ago with his media-centric injunction that we should study who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect (albeit now with some fresh thinking about who, what, channels, etc.).

At the same time, I am not satisfied with those in other disciplines who, as they (inevitably) get increasingly interested in social media, don't really unpack what is specific to the "media." After all, many lay claim to expertise regarding the "social" and "society," yet they appear content to black-box "media." Perhaps this is why we sometimes sound like technological determinists though we may not mean to, for we feel compelled to enter the fray to explain how the media part of the equation matters too. And since, I suggest, this matters whenever the material or symbolic dimensions of communication are important to or contested within the unfolding action—and that is becoming very often indeed.

Such thoughts lead me to propose some pressing questions to which I hope this journal will contribute.

First, research on social media has often explored whether and how the design and/or uses of social media are reconfiguring core dimensions of communication—identity, trust, publicity, accountability, authenticity, privacy, intimacy, participation, equality, and more. What is fascinating about this set of dimensions is that, in their optimal forms, they are widely seen as most characteristic of the oldest form of communication of all. So, why is face-to-face communication still prized and practiced in an age of social media? Or, has it also changed, remediated insofar as it now represents just one communicative choice among many? Indeed, are these core dimensions of communication themselves being reconfigured by digital networks in ways that matter? Even, are other dimensions of communication (persistence, share-ability, edit-ability, etc.) now making rival claims?

Second, my own research history demands that I point out that just as mass audiences were often, in the absence of direct empirical investigation, prejudicially regarded as homogeneous and passively accepting of media contents, today we must not presume (or judge) how people interpret, appropriate, or resist textual contents or technological affordances without the socio-culturally grounded study of people's activities in context. This invites a multi- and trans-cultural gaze as we grapple with the ethnographic diversity of social media "users" in all their complexity.[6] An ethnographic gaze may pose challenges, however, in relation to the radical trend in social media research to read the above core dimensions of communication (identity, trust, publicity etc.) less as properties of humans and more as properties of networks or data.

Also intriguing is that where oral and, more recently, audiovisual cultures have both had rather low literacy requirements, social media—like but also differently from print—have higher literacy requirements. So we need an account of social media literacy to update the established analysis of media literacy, and some new curricula to enrich, expand, and update the important tradition of media education. To understand social media literacy, we must also grasp social media legibility (or affordances, as emphasized in the foregoing points), for it is the complexities of the interface between the "social" and the "media" that lies at the heart of our inquiry.

I observe, finally, that many in media studies have, explicitly or not, theorized power dynamics at the interface (whether of speakers and hearers, texts and readers, producers and audiences, or, today, affordances and users[7]) in terms of the circuit of culture. But how are social media practices complicating the circuit of culture?[8] Or, if this model no longer suffices, how are these dynamics to be theorized? In other words, let us debate our competing theories as well as the emerging evidence and thorny normative commitments that motivate efforts to understand the ever-changing relation between social media and society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. See Couldry, N. (2009). Does "the media" have a future? *European Journal of Communication, 24*, 437–449.
2. For historical inspiration, read Darnton, R. (2000). An early information society: News and media in Eighteenth Century Paris. *American Historical Review, 105*(1), 1–35.
3. Here, I draw inspiration from Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Cambridge,

UK: Polity. Thompson argues that the key innovation of mass media was to eliminate reliance for communication on physical co-location, resulting in a vital break between performer and spectator or producer and audience, which, I suggest, society is now seeking to overcome through its absorption in social media.

4. For the classic distinction between administrative and critical social science, see Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1941). Remarks on administrative and critical communication research. *Studies in Philosophical and Social Sciences, 9*, 2–16.

5. For a rich exploration of these possibilities—including analyses of modernity centered on globalization, individualization, secularization, and commercialization, consider the essays collected in Lundby, K. (Ed.). (2014). *The handbook on mediatization of communication*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

6. I realize it is a lost cause, but as Leah Lievrouw and I have argued, the term "user" has nothing necessarily to do with communication and has no associated collective noun (cf. audience, public, even market) but can only be a singular individual or aggregate of individuals. Lievrouw, L., & Livingstone, S. (2009). Introduction. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *New media: SAGE benchmarks in communication* (pp. xxi–xl). London, UK: SAGE. Retrieved from http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27104/

7. Livingstone, S., & Das, R. (2013). The end of audiences? Theoretical echoes of reception amidst the uncertainties of use. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *Blackwell companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 104–121). Oxford, UK: Blackwell. Retrieved from http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/41837/

8. Where Richard Johnson "whizzed" the Mini-Metro car around the circuit in his classic paper, I invite my students to whizz a social networking site around it. Johnson, R. (1986). What is cultural studies anyway? *Social Text, 16*, 38–80.

Author Biography

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