

Faster than the speed of mind: is media change out of control?

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"Don't worry, this Twitter implant won't hurt a bit"

Is the rapid pace of media change outpacing the human brain? There have been a [stack of stories](#) recently suggesting that our synapses and even our civilisation can't cope with the endless and accelerating, exponential explosion of digital communications.

This is one of the central themes for a new series of debates that Polis is staging from June in partnership with [Channel 4](#) and [4iP](#). We feel that the debates about Old versus New Media are over. But there are still plenty of arguments to be had about whether the Internet makes any real difference to how we live our lives. And if it does, what are the potential hazards or benefits?

One of the pleasures of doing this project is that I get to talk to some very clever people who are either doing or thinking about cutting edge activity online.

Future Effects

One person who firmly believes that individuals and society really are being altered by the Internet is Swedish futurist [Anders Sandberg](#), and he is ruthlessly rationalist about measuring those effects.

Anders believes that we might be in an unprecedented historical place in terms of the way that new technologies are transforming our lives. It may be that we are getting more new media more rapidly than every before – perhaps faster than we can cope with and critically assess.

Twitter may be gone in a month or so or it may survive. We don't know, but either is possible. But where we used to have media generations who adopted mobiles and then adopted texting in consecutive waves we now have a range of social groups who develop at different speeds with different technologies. Some would call that splintering, others would call it diversity.

Concentrate please!

Why worry? Well, people like Anders think that the cognitive process is changing but we don't know exactly how. Concentration spans may become shorter as we graze on multi-media fare. But then look at some video gaming where you have to concentrate for longer and on more complex tasks which may actually be good for building concentration skills.

The reason that new media is created so well by humans is that we are so adaptive. And because we are so adaptive we learn to cope and exploit the new technologies to find enhanced ways of learning and behaving.

Institutional Inertia

But the societal institutions that make up our 'civilisation' are more subject to inertia than individuals and so are less adaptive. Our debate series will also look at how those bodies, from the news media to libraries and government, struggle to cope with the pace of media change.

Some institutions should not fear the digital reaper. Anders Sandberg thinks that the value of the British Museum, for example, lies in its amazing collection of unique objects. They won't change in a digital age. You could create a virtual British Museum but that would be additional to rather than replace the core essential value of its physical collection.



This is a digital space

Conventional libraries on the other hand may have to face up to the extinction of their previous book-based business model. The physical library could become irrelevant.

And how do we work out what is true in this new world? Sandberg had an interesting phrase about trust. He told me that people “trust certain media because it is entertaining” not because they have verified the data or confirmed objectively its truth. I

think there's something in this. Jon Stewart is trusted because we find his presentation of his character, humour and values to be attractive.

Relevance and trust

This is a complex idea that plays into my concept of 'relevance' with online journalism. We trust information if we can interact with it, if we can discover it through trusted links and referalls. This increasingly counts for much more than the given authority of a particular media brand.

In the end our ability to master the Internet will always lag a little way behind the introduction of new technologies, platforms, applications and networks. I think this is in the nature of digital web-based communications. But that does not mean that the benefits it brings are not worth the adventure of digital discovery. We hope this series of debates will help shape a debate about how we get those public service benefits online.

Email us at polis@lse.ac.uk if you want more information on this project

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