

DECONSTRUCTING MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION THEORIES: CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ADVENT OF THE NEW MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that in the advent of the new media, there is no more monopoly of information by the mainstream media and as a result, the theories of influence are deconstructed and have lost much of their grip of information content to the new media. Through the new media, everyone everywhere can access, package, edit, and disseminate news content and other information in a timely, unrestricted manner. The study relied on deconstruction theory focusing on how the new media has created a communication model that mass communication theories did not foresee by putting forward the assumption that the media audience is the recipient and the media the 'sole proprietor' of information content. Specific communication theories, especially those that explain source-to-audience communication model were selected for critical review of their tenets and understanding of communication process. In the article, answers to the following questions were sought: What are the basic media and mass communication theories? Has new media consolidated existing theories and curved its own narrative? Are there any emerging trends or models in the processes, systems, uses and effects of new media? And what is the future of new media? Therefore, the article sought to analyze how new media, both as a technology and as a cultural object, has deconstructed tenets of traditional media theories.

Key Words; Traditional Media, Traditional theories, New Media, Deconstruction

INTRODUCTION

Today, there are established theories of mass communication or mass media that have provided answers and theoretical background to the process of communication. The study of mass media and mass communication has been anchored on theories and models dating back to classical times (Berlo, 1960). However, the advent of the internet and new media has broken the norms of some of the highly upheld communication theories, and it is incumbent upon scholars to scrutinize the process anew. In communication process, theories were classified depending on the way communicative information was generated, conceptualized, and transmitted. Among the classifications, there are theories of influence; whose classification is based on their explanation of how mass communication influences the audience and the society at large. In these theories, the mass media is seen as the source of information and the audience or the society is seen as the end consumer. The theories conceptualize that the end user has less power and control of the content and that the process of collecting, processing and disseminating information is not only unavailable to them but also practically a 'no go zone'. In this article, traditional media and communication theories will be analyzed under the auspices of deconstruction theory, a postmodernist theory that has proved to support the new media with regard to the traditional theories of influence.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the objectives of this paper and answer the posed questions, the researchers reviewed the existing literature on communication and media theories and new media. The method was found suitable because first, the study of new media is relatively new even though it has attracted considerable attention among scholars since 1990s. There are various approaches to studying new media. Some scholars have studied new media as technologies; others have studied new media as socio-cultural paradigms yet others have studied it as content. A few research areas for new media and especially the internet suggested by earlier authors include; on its effect on audiences and the relationship between the internet use and social involvement (Dominick, 2005).

DECONSTRUCTIONIST FRAMEWORKS

Post-modernist theory of deconstruction was used to study the impact of new media on communication theories. This approach was examined through Karl Marx's position that technical innovations bring about new ways of meeting human needs and make it increasingly possible to satisfy their deepest wants and to develop and perfect their individual capacities. Marx has been criticized as both an optimist and a pessimist. Reflecting on Marx's idea, postmodernists have studied the operations and functions of new media both from a technology perspective and an information perspective. From a technological perspective, new media innovations present a totally new system of networking, inter-linkages interactions and connections that change the way businesses and communication operate. From an information perspective, new media innovations can be seen in form of how people generate, access, use and share information. Contemporary scholars like Liter and Friedman (2003) have suggested that new media portends some form of technological determinism whereby the effects were determined by technological advances rather than the social networks that led to their development.

All these discussions around new media are to be expected because of the social and economic phenomenon that new media has brought with it, redefining traditional media messages, channels and audiences, and replacing them with new processes of communication, which pose challenges to definitions of the elements of mass communication. It became increasingly apparent that it was not possible to separate the process of communication in the new media from technology because new media operates in a public sphere and through technologies.

ADVENT OF THE NEW MEDIA

The new media, also loosely referred to as 'alternative media' with reference to the mainstream media has reshaped news and information dissemination. New media, enabled by and operated through the internet, has made it easy and effective to disseminate news faster than the traditional mainstream media (Ndonye, 2013). The strategies and approaches of the new media are not in line with the traditional communications theories such as Stalagmite theories, which include cultivation theory and meaning theory; the agenda setting theory and the Magic

Bullet or Hypodermic Needle theories. New media, according to Manovich (2003) can be defined using eight propositions. The propositions are reproduced in the matrix below;

	Proposition	Meaning	Example
1	New media versus Cyberculture	The various social phenomenon associated with the internet and how they works	Blogs, gaming and other cultural objects and paradigms
2	New media as a computer technology and how it is used as a distribution platform	This means that new media are a form of cultural objects which use computer technology for distribution and exhibition	Websites
3	New media as digital data controlled software	Digital data that can be manipulated by software	Colour inversion, gray-scaling etc
4	New media as the mix between existing cultural conventions and conventions of software	'Old' representations of data of visual reality and human experience.	Software in film production that enhances computer animation.
5	new media is accompanied by aesthetics strategies	Number of appearances	Latest versions or editions of content, software, programs
6	Speed of execution of tasks using new media.	Speeding has made it possible for many new forms of media art	Interactive sessions, live streaming, etc
7	Aspect of encoding or what Manovich calls metamedia	manipulation of data and information	Search engines, profiling etc
8	New media as a parallel articulation of post WW 2 art and modern computing	Ideas can be created by both alogarithims and humans.	Combines computer and human to change an image by changing one parameter.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF NEW MEDIA

Mass communication theories have been difficult to conceptualize because human communication is heavily reliant on behavior. As Watzlawick (1967), human beings are always communicating even when a person is silent. Yet human behavior is in communication context is assumed to be unpredictable. The basic human communication model has suggested that

communication was merely a process of passing messages from sender to receiver. The extent to which new media affects models of processes of mass communication (Katz, 1990) is illustrated by Laswell's model below;

WHO>SAYS WHAT>TO WHOM>TO WHAT EFFECT

By dissecting 10 major communication and media theories which explain various aspects of both Laswell's model, the new media can be understood. The 10 theories as summarized below;

1. Technological determinism Theory which states that media and technology shapes how individuals and society think feel and act and that society operations change as we move from one technological age to another (Mcluhan 1962)
2. Media Dependency Theory: People who depend on media and how their needs are met (De Fleur 1976)
3. Spiral of Silence Theory; Why people often feel the need to conceal their opinions, preferences and views through media, especially in minority settings(Noelle Neumann 1984)
4. Diffusion of Innovation theory ; Communication has a strong influence on peoples' opinions through the media (Lazersfield, 1994)
5. Cultural determinism theory; That western nations dominate media around the world and hence impose their culture (Schiller, 1973)
6. Cultivation Theory ; Effects of television on society (Gerbner, 1976)
7. Agenda setting Theory : News media are always telling society what to think and more effectively what to think about (Shaw & McCombs 1973)
8. Functional Approach; Surveillance, correlation, transmission, entertainment and mobilization role of the media (Laswell,1960)
9. Human action Theory; People make choices with a purpose to their actions (Turow 1992; McQuail, 1887)

ARE NEW MEDIA CURVING A NEW NARRATIVE?

From the traditional mass media theories, the understanding is that the mediated experiences induce long term immeasurable effects on the society (Makinen & Kuira, 2008). The new media on the other hand is challenging such a monopoly of impact by deconstructing such a

narrative. Below is a critical assessment of some of the traditional theories, their assumptions and the way such assumptions are challenged in the wake of the new media.

STALAGMITE THEORIES

The long term effects of media content on the society are compared with stalagmite dripping up over time. This theorization gives birth to two stalagmite theories namely; cultivation theory and meaning theory.

Cultivation theory: cultivation theory tried to determine the influence of television on viewers' understanding of the environment they live in (Littlejohn, 2002). Gerbner realised that the dominance of television created a common view of the world and made all cultures to have a common thinking. Cultivation theory contends that media content over time imbue symbols, messages, images and meanings that dominate and are eventually absorbed by audience as truth or factual.

The ability to leverage a groupthink within all cultures was traditionally understandable because of the limited access to information, facts and truths that the society had. With the advent of the new media is globalization that has reduced the world into a single notebook where everyone everywhere can access facts, information and truths (Ndonye, 2013). This way, one can understand issues of proximity, immediacy and more pressing issues in the surrounding because the mainstream media is no longer the sole source of the information.

Moreover, the ability of media to give out content that could shape dominant meaning implies that content had to be consistent, focused and one sided. In the current world, the deconstruction process by the new media has overtaken this assumption. Media is no longer the only source of information, news and entertainment content. The society is getting a variety of world views, multicultural narratives and information from internet, social media and other platforms provided by the new media. The mainstream media is also being served with information by the new media and this has made it accept the fact that there are diverse ways of truth and facts. According to Ndonye (2013), all mainstream media have for example intensified reliance on twitter to generate, dispense and source news in a bid to stay afloat. This way, there is no single image, message and or meaning that can be said to dominate the world, which has become a global village, but with diverse cultures, religious beliefs, political affiliations and economic abilities all harmonized into a boiling pot.

Meaning theory: meaning theory has it that media experiences mould meaning by crafting issues to fit in a particular framework (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). In this case, the mainstream media takes social issues upon themselves and determine the meaning that the society should attach to its life experiences. However, although the society is highly mediated today, the advent of the new media has challenged this narrative (Ferguson & Perse, 2000). The society no longer depends on a monolithic and monopolist mainstream media to shape meanings of experiences as was celebrated by the traditional mass media and communication theories such as meaning theory (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1976). The social media for example has enabled citizen journalism; a practice where ordinary society members are in a position to gather, process and disseminate information, news and knowledge. Moreover, it has become a norm for the mainstream media to rely on the new media; which is the hub for young generation to find meaning of phenomena and experiences (Braina, 2001). The new media has enabled persons to communicate amongst themselves from everywhere, every time and therefore, the mainstream media gets information late enough to warrant much attention compared to when it had monopoly of accessing, processing, packaging and disseminating content.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

Agenda setting theory is anchored on the assumption that the effect of media is explained in the media's ability to direct the significance of events in the audience's mind (Sereno & Mortensen, 1970; CCMS-Infobase, 2003). This theory contends that the media is responsible for setting the agenda of discussion for the audience by ordering and organising their mind (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). The proponents of the theory, McCombs and Shaw argue that the agenda-setting function of the media brings about the correlation between the media and public ordering of priorities. The new media has not stopped to let the society continue to rely on the mainstream media to set their agenda. Today, the social media such as the FaceBook and the twitter are the trending media and have brought about a new information age and more social media tools are coming up each day with transformative promises (Eighmey & McCord, 1998). It is common in this age to have mainstream media get its agenda from the trending issues from the new media, especially the fast moving social media.

An example in Kenya is the case of lawyer Kethi Kilonzo (daughter to the late Makueni senator Mutula Kilonzo), concerning her refusal to vie for Makueni senatorial seat alongside her

step mother in 2013. Kethi just posted her decision not to vie for the seat on twitter. Having not spoken to the mainstream media, which was seeking for this information desperately, the mainstream media made the post on tweet part of their news. Another one is Kenya's secretary to cabinet Francis Kimemia's reaction when the Supreme Court registrar Gladys Shollei was sent on a compulsory leave by the judicial service commission. Kenyan mainstream media consciously or otherwise formalized twitter posts and are being disseminated as factual news and information content during prime time news. Reactions, in form of tweet posts, albeit through an alternative media, from influential public figures cannot be ignored and will always be treated as news by the mainstream media. There are numerous examples of cases where the society through the new media sets the agenda for the mainstream media and thus; deconstructing the traditional believe that the society is always on the receiving end or that the media is always the source of news content. International media like BBC, aljazeera and VOA have recently been involved in the scrabble for news, content and information from social media.

MAGIC BULLET THEORY

The magic bullet theory, also called Hypodermic needle theory in a different version is also at the fore to fashion a static society which helplessly waits to be injected with magic wand content or shot at by the mainstream media content. The first time when media influence was clearly articulated was after the First World War (Lazarsfeld & Stanton, 1949). The efforts that propagandists put through media before the war to some extent bore fruits and from then, media effects was at the spot with its magic bullet or hypodermic needle theories coming into existence (Barnlund, 1968). The theories agree that mass media has a powerful influence on the mass audience and is able to deliberately control people's behavior (McQuail, 1987). The deliberate control of the masses by the mainstream media has not held its grip with the advent of the new media.

The ability of the new media to facilitate communication processes amongst society members has made them active and critical of the information they get from the mainstream media (Braina, 2001). Therefore, the magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory assumed that the audience is like a statue waiting to be shot with information as a doctor does to a helpless patient or a gunman does to a fixed target. This has not been so because through the social media, they can allot themselves the role of censoring information given by the mainstream media as was in

the Second World War. This way, the new media has supposedly graduated from being an alternative media to being the watchdog for the traditional media. An example is the case of Kenya after the 2013 general election when the traditional media was effectively censored through the new media until they had to pay considerable attention on the war from the social media (Ndonye, 2013). The social forum was going against the narrative by the traditional media that there was wide acceptance of the election results by all Kenyans.

Therefore, the new media is an independent information source that requires no traditional theories for it to function. The new media is creative and flexible in its own rights because there are no gate keepers during the processing of information content. This way, it has curved its own approach even when it is referred to as alternative. It is only alternative not in the sense of complementing but providing a clear and easy way to pass information to a larger audience than the limited audience of the traditional media due to universal access.

This characteristic has therefore defied the traditional theories' assumptions and the society has more alternatives for information access. This alternative gives them power to survive without relying on the traditional media. This way, traditional media theories are surviving in a devolved information power world while they harbor assumptions of an anarchical source of information that no longer has that power. In fact, the said anarchy has lost its influence power and is humble enough to seek help and feeding from the new media; to which the influence has been devolved.

CONCLUSION

It has emerged that existing traditional media theories are inadequate in the advent of new media. The new media theorization started in the 1990s when the new digital media started defining the communication studies but has not yet yielded to significant results. The new media requires its own study as does the traditional media in its remediation roles. In order to investigate the theory being projected by the new media, we must understand and accept that the traditional media environments have been challenged not only by the technological innovations but also by ecological level that include the substance and the quality of their products such as information and news.

An American scholar Marshall McLuhan (2005) held that the evolution of electronic revolution in America in 1950s was so powerful that it rendered educators displaced persons

because it had them live in a different world that they never grew in. in this case, what McLuhan meant was that the new media had led to classrooms without walls because both traditional media and new media brought a simultaneous information structure to the society.

In this case, the only theory that the new media has inevitably forced is the theory of convergence for the survival of the mainstream traditional media. That the conventional media can no longer work without the new media is indisputable. There is the promise of interoperability among all forms of media that rely on digital code (Everett, 2003). This is where for example the television has to stream on YouTube, have internet forms and newspapers have to be online and digitized. These prophesy is not new as it was made by Bruce Owens in his 1999 book *The Internet Challenge to Television*. The author contended that the internet, the television, telephone, and the computers will all converge on the internet. This has evolved more quickly because of the common language codes that the new media has provided (Kittler, 1999). In this case, the new media has presented not one or two theories but has proposed a myriad of them that requires critical investigation by scholars.

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