THE CHANGING FUNCTION AND FORMS OF THE MEDIA'S PRESENCE IN MODERN SOCIETIES: A COMMENTARY

Marta Kołodziejska
University of Warsaw

In this commentary I would like to address a few issues emerging from the debate on Professor Hubert Knoblauch's Warsaw 2016 lecture and some of his earlier works discussing knowledge society, media, and communication culture from the theoretical perspective of communicative constructivism. The most recent developments in the media, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality are a signal that the notions of communication, medium and knowledge are changing to an unprecedented degree and thus require an in-depth theoretical reflection. Those notions will also be the focal point of this text. The question of what led Prof. Knoblauch to conclude that discussion on communication culture (see Knoblauch 2016a: 194) must involve an investigation of communication society, will be the point of departure in this commentary.

The rise of the Internet as a medium has brought on ontological and epistemological questions of "reality", "community", and "knowledge". This was reflected by the changing academic perspectives on mediatisation. One of the most popular definitions of this term, coined by Stig Hjarvard (2008: 113), referred to mediatisation as a process during which media exert increasingly more influence over a growing array of institutions and areas of social activity: communication, work, and religion being just three examples. Hjarvard argued that those institutions become more dependent on media broadcast, and so do the individuals who are their participants and/or beneficiaries. The biggest shortcoming of this concept is that it considers the media impact to be a form of external influence: according

to Hjarvard, institutions and individuals are merely confronted with a new reality and as a result appropriate certain modes of action. This perspective echoes the notion of media logic, which is an imposed scheme (or *modus operandi*), and whose form is determined by the media themselves. Even though media users are present in this concept, their role is predominantly reactive.

However, the development of the digital media, virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) has, for the most part, rendered this sender-recipient division obsolete. The Internet blurs the boundaries between senders and receivers, private and public, individual and collective (see Knoblauch 2008: 147), but it also, as will be argued below, challenges the concept of communication itself. This blurring of boundaries has had an impact on media research and concepts of mediatisation – and the theory of communicative constructivism plays a significant role in the process. By highlighting that communication "has the power to produce reality" (see below), researchers advocating communicative constructivism accentuated media use as the key feature of mediatisation (Krotz, Hepp 2013, Hepp, Hasebrink 2013). Thus, the latter is no longer conceptualized as a top-down process of imposing a certain logic onto the individuals; instead, it is the bottom-up use by individuals which is pointed to as the primary source of change. Friedrich Krotz and Andreas Hepp point to the function of media use and emphasise the relationships between individuals, groups, institutions and the media:

> It [mediatization – M.K.] is a long-term metaprocess of changing forms of communicative action, as communication in the course of mediatization relies more and more on media: people communicate about media and media content; they communicate in the presence of mediated messages; they communicate by media like letters, mobile phones or chat rooms; they communicate with media when reading newspapers, surfing the Internet or watching TV; and they communicate interactively with media if they play computer games, or make conversation with a robot or a GPS-system (Krotz and Hepp 2013: 138–139).

Following this perspective, mediatisation is conceived as a process during which individuals appropriate media technologies in everyday life, but also make media a topic of conversation and, on an increasingly large scale, actively converse with media in their everyday life. I will return to

this point later on: here I would like to stress that mediatisation in the digital era means not only that communication becomes intensified (Knoblauch 2016b: 195), but also that the relationships between the media and members of modern societies become more complex and manifold.

Taking this into account, two points made by Prof. Knoblauch in his 2016 lecture must be recapitulated:

1. First, Prof. Knoblauch states that: "This notion of relationality distinguishes itself from individualistic notions of action, knowledge and practice by not taking the relation between the subject and the world as its basis. Yet it also differs from most relationist theories in sociology in the sense that it does not consider relations as static but instead as processes. Relations are made up of actions and practices by which they are constituted. Moreover, as communicative constructivism adds, these processes are not just bivalent, i.e. relations only between one subject and another subject. They include an objectivation which allows for the incorporation of the material reality into the relation. Communicative action is the social action relating subjects to an objectivation" (2016a: 218).

2. Second, prof. Knoblauch argues that: "The notion of a communication society [...] hints at a change which affects all spheres of society. Communication, which used to be restricted to culture or the "media system", takes on a new role. It becomes productive in a material sense by enabling us to create things (as in 3D printing) which contribute to the dissolution of the distinction between the consumer and the producer. It transforms politics (into «post-democracy»), religion (into «popular religion») and even affects everyday life: social relations become mediated in a way which now makes it impossible to tell the difference between the «real» and the «virtual»" (2016a: 219–220).

The Internet offers modes of objectivations escaping their conventional perceptions: the body (as in Knoblauch 2014: 114–116, 2016b: 119–120) is a good example. The body is always present in communicative acts, explicitly (as in the act of pointing, researched by Prof. Knoblauch) or implicitly (during a phone conversation, for instance), but digital media can juxtapose or connect the two in novel constellations. To give one example of the latter: despite various innovations in online communication (vlogs, photo diaries etc.), its majority still remains text-based. Emoticons, which actually were first used in Computer-Mediated communication (CMC) in the '80s, are now widely used to signify the interlocutors' mood and atti-

tude, otherwise difficult to convey in textual exchanges. As textual equivalents to non-verbal cues, they should be considered objectivations, compensating for the lack of direct non-verbal contact between users.

Furthermore, if we look into the recent developments in VR, the presence of the body, albeit necessary in the first place, is pushed into the background: one can experience travels to imaginary or existing lands, or become part of an event or adventure regardless of age or physical abilities, without changing locations or interacting with other people. Similarly, two online game players must "be there" to use the keyboard and mouse, but what they see on the screen is an interaction of two avatars, and so if they engage in a fight during the game, neither player will sustain genuine injuries to their physical bodies (for more on the body in augmented reality and online games see Golub 2010, Giard,Guitton 2016). Therefore, with the advancement of new technologies, the body, being one means of objectivation, can be simultaneously present and re-presented, both as part of the communicative act and moved to its backstage, and yet the act itself can continue undisrupted. This changing function of the body and its move into the "back stage" of interaction (in Goffman's terms) must be considered in academic discussions on objectivations in digitally-mediated interaction.

The first concept quoted earlier also pointed to material objects as possible objectivations, such as a pointer or a sheet of paper. Considering, however, the developments mentioned above, I believe it is reasonable to add digital media technologies to the list. Such technologies are human inventions and they undergo regular monitoring by particular groups and institutions, but in some cases they are intentionally created in a way which makes them responsive, adaptive and interactional, and to a certain degree independent from their creators. Artificial Intelligence is a good example. In 2014, a chatterbot[1] called Eugene Goostman, developed in St. Petersburg in 2001 and simulating a 13-year old Ukrainian boy, has passed the Turing test for the first time in history: human judges mistakenly took the bot for a human in 33% of cases (30% is required to pass the test) (University of Reading 2014). Although the bot was developed and upgraded by a team of engineers, it was reacting to the judges' questions and statements, adapting to the task in hand. While the results of the test have been questioned by several observers and scientists, this case nevertheless indicates that interaction with modern technologies goes well beyond what used to be understood by this term. It also shows that digital technology creates

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[1] A chatterbot is a type of computer programme, which simulates human interaction.

the communicative environment on a deeper level than simply enabling end-users to interact. Modern websites are to a large degree customizable: each user can pick and choose what content he or she wishes to read, but his or her actions online are also widely monitored and gathered. This monitoring and data collection, however, goes well beyond personalised advertisements or content selection, as its other component is reciprocity. Algorithms programmed to respond to queries and requests are used on many websites where users may need immediate assistance: rather than waiting several hours for an email response, they can ask a virtual advisor or "help officer" any question they may have. Owners of mobile devices of one well-known brand can also use the services of a virtual personal assistant, which is a voice-activated programme answering questions, making recommendations (like finding a restaurant appropriate for a family celebration), and helping the user organise various online activities (like sending emails, making appointments, organising files etc.). This programme adapts to the language of the user and monitors his/her activities (such as searches, browsing history etc.) in order to provide personalised outcome. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the way technology is present in human interaction today undergoes profound transformations and, in consequence, should be regarded as an actor (or *actant*), i.e. "an entity that modifies another entity in a trial" (Latour, Portet 2004: 237).

This brings us to the second point and the notion of communication having the power to produce reality: the development of digital technologies "conditions" their users to appropriate a certain disposition toward communication. For instance, even though the communicative acts taking place within the online sphere are reciprocally-oriented, this mutuality is often delayed. Lags and breaches of transmission can occur; synchronous video chat can be continued textually, and one can wait for hours or days for an email or another player's move on a virtual chess board. Lack of synchronicity is by no means a novelty in communication. However, the digital media not only offer interchangeability of synchronous and asynchronous communication, but also "socialize" users to easily switch from immediate to delayed reciprocity. When we interact with a friend in a cafe, usually immediate reaction is expected: if no response can be registered after some time, the interlocutors are likely to assume that something in their exchange is disrupted (by a conflict, for instance). When talking to the same friend via online video phone, while such breaches may still be upsetting to the interlocutors, they are also expected and to some degree predictable; however, one form of communication can be relatively easily

replaced by another. The disrupted conversation can continue via email, chat, or another video call, or can be paused and resumed after a few hours. Internet users are usually accustomed to such breaches and switching between various forms of communication within one conversation.

What is related to this delay is the role of observers ("lurkers", White 2001) who participate in almost all non-private exchanges. Those are individuals who do not contribute to online interaction, but benefit from it as passive recipients. According to some studies, lurkers may count up to 90% of users, or as claimed by others there are from 10 to 100 readers for every active participant (White 2001). On the one hand, people engaging in online exchanges may be aware that their conversations are being followed by an indeterminable number of observers, but on the other, the roles of active and passive participant can be easily switched: a lurker may end his or her silence at any given moment. The division between senders and receivers is blurred, and so is the one between participants and onlookers, which adds to the reformulation of what "public" and "private" mean.

Modern digital media create communicative environments also by influencing how individuals acquire information and what counts as valid or important: the joking expression that "The best place to hide a dead body is page 2 of Google search results" actually reflects the process of how Internet users search for information and how the notion of relevance is altered by search engines. Knowledge society, usually associated with scientifically approved knowledge (Knoblauch 2012: 15), through digital media can turn the latter into a societal product (Knoblauch 2016b: 196). Furthermore, through the intensification of communication, information "becomes" knowledge (Knoblauch 2016b: 196), and as such is also conceived as a product. The aforementioned robots collecting data of user activity for marketing purposes are a good example of this process. What we type in search engines and what we share with friends through social media can be bought and sold to external companies, often without our awareness and consent.

With all that being said, it is then reasonable to assume that with the increase of online communication, it is not only communication itself which becomes intensified (both in terms of reach and time): the function and meaning of reciprocity and interaction undergoes a deep transformation as well.

When analysing media societies, Prof. Knoblauch argues that:

> Modern media use is strongly individualized and communicative actions online are unprecedently subjectivating. Users operate within a particular network context, and within it they also construct their identities and communities (Knoblauch 2016b: 196).

While the individualization of media use is beyond doubt, despite this subjectivation, online communities and identities remain relational. However, it must be added that in the digital context relationality is based on multimodal and networked exchanges between users who produce information. Howard Rheingold in his classic book *Virtual Community* has stated that:

> The community-building power comes from the living database that the participants create and use together informally as they help each other solve problems, one to one and many to many (Rheingold 1993: 249).

This "living database" is a collective effort, based on a relation between users who in most cases do not know each other outside of the Web. They engage in online interactions, pursuing their own agendas, but at the same time they offer each other help, advice and support. Their connections are based exclusively on communication, which is also the primary purpose of such emergent groups. Therefore, Gerard Delanty, following Dewey, has called modern virtual communities "communication communities" (Delanty 2003). Their power lies in the "construction of reality" with the use of communication technologies which transcend time and space, thus overcoming several barriers which could otherwise deter individuals from interacting or would make such interactions impossible. As was mentioned earlier, those communities also include non-human actors and an audience of lurkers.

To summarise, it is justified to claim that the transformations of the functions and meaning of communication continue and that they will – to an increasingly large degree – involve non-human actors, such as artificial neuron networks and robots. The famous quote by Marshall McLuhan that "The medium is the message" (McLuhan 2003: 25) will most probably need to be rephrased as "The medium is an actor". However, by emphasizing the function of machines in CMC, we must also take into account that all actors in this interaction network influence one another.

The aforementioned transformations will have to be reflected by adequate concepts of communication, and communicative constructivism may be a productive referential frame. If we look at mediatisation from the media use perspective, we can also investigate the multi-layered global networks of actors whose direct and indirect exchanges will influence the function of media in modern societies. The rapid development of digital media technologies will also require more questions to be posed and answered: what does mediatized communicating "do"? Who and what participates when human actors exchange knowledge? What is the function of information and how is the latter addressed and constructed by all communicating actors? If machines play an active part in producing, disseminating and processing information, what will in fact constitute knowledge in future societies? These are just a few questions which will need answering, and which I believe will be vital in understanding the notions of communication, knowledge, and perhaps also truth.

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