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Media of Dissemination and the Differentiation of Social Relationships

1. Ubiquitous communication and media communication

Ubiquitous communication is an operative fiction of modernity. It has been nourished by the emergence and expansion of tele-media, such as print, radio, television, satellite and the internet. Not only long-distance communication has grown with the development of media technology. Short-distance communication, too, has increasingly come to be defined by such communication technology.

It is not enough to simply state the fundamentally mediated nature of all communication. In addition, we must follow the traces that technological media, media of dissemination in the terms of Niklas Luhmann (1995, p.161), are leaving on communicative acts, even when those are not acts of media communication, that is, of communication via media of dissemination. Such traces left by media of dissemination can be found on any act of communication between persons, as well as between persons and objects.

When writing was introduced, spoken communication changed, as many studies have shown. With the invention of the printing press and the spread of printed publications, writing changed. With such observations in mind, we must consider now, at the start of the 21st century, how human communication changed once again in the course of the spread of media of dissemination – radio, telephone, television, computer – in the 19th and 20th century. Some researchers have suggested drawing a rigid boundary between “data exchange” on the one hand and human communication, defined as an “expressive act”, on the other. This appears to me to over-simplify a complex interaction of media communication and human communication. Media communication does not take place outside human communication. Both modes of communication are living off one another, one being a parasite of the other. Media communication feeds off communication between persons, and vice versa. Human communication is thus not exclusively defined as an act of communication taking place between persons, and media communication is not exclusively defined through the technological qualities of the media. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency to define communication as a relation between persons, and some people up until now have defended this definition vehemently. I suggest that this may be understood as a reaction to the increasing differentiation of media of dissemination.

A brief glance at historical parallels may support this hypothesis: Ever since the late 18th century, that is, with the expansion of printed publications, theorists of culture and language in particular have re-discovered the nature of human communication. In the face of the rapid expansion of media communication, the nature of human communication is defined as communication between persons. On the basis of this definition, media communication came to be seen as a factor of increasing alienation of human beings from one another and from themselves. The

increasing consumption of printed materials has been observed as a process of alienation, and now the use of youtube or facebook is viewed in the same way. Up until now, this perspective has characterized both public discourses about media and media theories.

Such a perspective, however, blocks our vision of the fundamental changes that processes of communication have undergone in the course of the spread of media of dissemination. An important one among those changes has been that the construction of social relations no longer occurs exclusively between persons. I would like to briefly discuss this issue through the example of people addressing the media.

In German media studies, an interesting debate on the problem of people addressing media has been going on for a couple of years now. The debate was first stimulated by findings in IT, but the phenomenon at issue is not confined to the use of computers and the internet. Among other things, researchers have discussed the question of the kinds of addresses media – not only Web 2.0, but also radio and television – afford their users, and, conversely, how the media themselves have been addressed by their users. In other words, at the centre of the debate have been modes of addressing both the user and the media. The double movement is crucial here. On the one hand, a person, institution or object is addressed by the users, and is thus drawn into the world of those users. On the other hand, the phenomenon of users addressing the media indicates that the media allow for, and even facilitate processes of addressing them (as well as others). That is, the media themselves provide the conditions of their own addressability, and thus of their own inclusion into human society. This double movement of users addressing media and one another, and of media providing the conditions for users and themselves being addressable, has been conducted through different procedures in the course of history.

I will limit my considerations to a few remarks concerning media of dissemination. Their procedure of addressing users is generally described in terms of access. Media address their users by giving them access to the use of the medium. The principle of access to media of dissemination is: one to many. That is, only half of the double movement is taken into account here: Media address their audience, their users. However, the second part of the double movement has been present almost from the beginning of the spread of media of dissemination, although it has not been given any attention for a long time. For the user, too, can address the media, that is, provide the media with an address. The form that this process takes depends on the infrastructure available, both that provided by the media and the postal one. At first, there were letters and postcards to the editor. Later, users addressed their media through phone calls. Now, we can do so through Text messages, on twitter, blogs, etc.

Tracing this development from letters to the editors to Web 2.0, and thus to discern and describe the different processes of addressing the media, is among the necessary projects in the research of media history that will be necessary for gaining an insight into the genealogy of current developments. Such research will help us to identify continuities and discontinuities in the communicative practices of humans and of the media more precisely.

In contrast to the definition of human communication as a relation that can emerge exclusively between persons, the phenomenon of users addressing their media shows that the construction of relations is no longer bound to persons alone. For when media are addressed, then there may be a person or an institution being addressed, but the addressee is not the person or the institution alone. My hypothesis is: The modes of communication that were developed through media of

communication are among the pre-adaptive advances of the modes of communication, relationality and sociality that are characteristic of a “post-social” society.

Let me add some remarks concerning the notion of a “post-social” society. My use of the term refers to the work of Karin Knorr Cetina (1997). Her key hypothesis is that in a knowledge society, relationships are forged not only between persons, but also between persons and objects of knowledge. What are objects of knowledge? In contrast to commodities and instruments, an object of knowledge is defined by its “changing, unfolding character”, and by “its non-identity with itself” (ibid., p.14).

According to Knorr Cetina, knowledge societies are characterized by the increasing importance of relationships between persons and objects of knowledge. She deduces from that that this kind of society has to be defined, not only as knowledge society, but also as “post-social” society. The term is somewhat misleading. What defines “post-social” societies is the importance of relationships between persons and objects of knowledge.

Knorr Cetina takes the relationships that emerge between humans and objects of knowledge as evidence for the fact that processes of individualisation can no longer be described in terms of alienation. She suggests, instead, that we investigate these new forms of relationships for the effects that they have on the sociality of a society.

According to Knorr Cetina, for post-social societies, the “interstitchings of knowledge cultures and social structures” (ibid., p.8) are crucial for the constitution of sociality. We increasingly orient ourselves through objects. This orientation through objects becomes a source of identity as well as of “relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and of social integration” (ibid., p.9). On the side of the subjects, these relations are characterized by a libidinal “structure of desire” directed at the object. On the side of the object, they are defined by “structures of absence”, insofar as objects of knowledge are defined by something beyond themselves, not present. In this way, objects of knowledge project desire further, creating chains of desire far beyond themselves.

If processes of addressing the media are analysed from this perspective, it turns out that both the mass media’s mode of addressing users “one to many” and users’ various modes of addressing the media are steps towards a relationship between an object of knowledge (the media) and a person (the user). We must investigate in more detail in how far users develop strategies of making the media appear, first as a “quasi-person”, then as an institution, and finally as an object of knowledge defined by its “changing, unfolding character”, about which he wants to find out more by developing a relationship with it.

These historically different modes of addressing the media are among the preconditions for the development of object-centred modes of relationships, which define communication on the internet and mobile communication.

The phenomenon of users addressing the media provides us with an example for showing in how far modes of communication that have been practiced through the use of media of dissemination function as pre-adaptive advances of object-centred relationships. Below, I will discuss two different pre-adaptive advances that have helped build the foundations for the currently observable differentiation of social relations.

2. Social relations and media communication

What kinds of social relations become possible, and have been actualized, through the development of media communication? As others have argued before me, new forms of social relations have emerged and developed along with the development of media communication since the late 18th century. These are not defined by spatiotemporal co-presence. One form of social relations that has been important for the 19th and early 20th century in particular is that of the nation as an “imagined community”, as described by Anderson (1983). Media create the conditions of possibility of the systems of nations, which was culturally dominant at that time.

Two key points are important about the historical development of nationalism, I think, for understanding the relation between social relations and media communications. Firstly, media communication channels the processes of (national) inclusion and exclusion. Media communication shapes the nation as an “imagined community”, both internally and externally, that is, in a process that involves both inclusion and exclusion. The second point is that media communication dissolves the link between “community” and spatiotemporal co-presence, both in practice and in the social sciences. Media communication and the “imagined community” that is constituted through medial forms of communication transform the topography as well as the epistemology of social relations. They are thus a part of the genealogy of the differentiation of social relations that we can observe at the moment.

In the second half of the 20th century, the cultural system of nationalism loses some of its dominance, at least in Europe. At the same time, “community” channelled through media communication becomes increasingly important. My hypothesis is that the decreasing significance of nationalism as a cultural system and the increasing significance of other communities that are internally and externally constituted through media communication are two sides of the same coin. I have come to take this position primarily on the background of my specifically German experiences, and observation and research on media communication and society in Germany. However, research in other contexts shows that this hypothesis may prove to hold at a global level, as well. I suggest, in a nutshell, that in the second half of the century, a new social system replaces nationalism as the dominant one. This system is characterized by processes, and by ideas of cultural and social inclusion and exclusion that are achieved, though never perfectly or definitely, through media communication. The figure of public broadcasting sums up this new idea of inclusion and exclusion.

Niklas Luhmann (2000) pursues a similar hypothesis when he describes the operative fiction of a universally shared reality as one important effect of media communication in the second half of the 20th century. Unlike the “imagined community” of the nation, this new “imagined community” is no longer defined through a cultural system that is grounded in consensus, at least to some extent. Instead, it is defined by the imagination of a shared sphere of experience generated by media communication. Appadurai’s (2003) notion of media-scape, as an increasingly dominant experience-scape, points in the same direction. Processes of inclusion and exclusion work through the idea of such a shared sphere of experience. Non-participation in media communication leads to exclusion or self-exclusion, respectively. (The Chinese government has made a concerted effort of blocking websites of the Uighur community both in Xinjiang and in exile – the motivations and effects of this attempted medial exclusion would offer an interesting case study of medial communities at the interstice of “old” nationalism and “new” medially constituted spheres of experience and, one may add, power.)

Along with these processes comes a fundamental re-conceptualization of social relations. The imagined community of the 19th century exists independently of spatiotemporal co-presence – a significant rupture of the constitution of social relations at the time. The late 20th century communities constituted through media communication, in turn, exist independently of the idea of a human collective. In other words, community – or social relation in general - is no longer defined in terms of relation between persons alone. Instead, the crucial point is a fiction, or imagination, of community generated through media communication.

3. Media and social relations in postsocial societies

As I have argued, already the transformation of media use and the social relations constituted through it in the course of the 20th century show that sociality cannot be defined in terms of human relationships alone. In the face of a development of ‘intelligent environments’ in the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly obvious that not processes of knowledge as such, but rather the “interstitchings of knowledge cultures and social structures” (ibid., p.8) are crucial for the constitution of sociality. Increasingly, we orient ourselves through objects. This orientation through objects becomes a source of identity as well as of “relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and of social integration” (ibid., p.9).

Building on these ideas, I argue that practices of media communication constitute that sort of social relation to objects that Knorr-Cetina describes. We may observe such object-centred relations, for instance, in the use of mobile phones, which is characterized by conceptual switching between object and subject at several levels. Another instance are experiments and projects of ‘artificial life’, such as the use of robots in the care for the elderly and in hospitals. There are many fields, in fact, in which we can observe how non-human objects and human subjects co-constitute spheres of experience, or lived worlds, in the postsocial knowledge society.

With this notion of co-constitution, I intend to modify Knorr-Cetina’s suggestion that objects alone are the “risk winners of human relationship risks and failures” (ibid., p.23). According to her, this shift in the balance of winners and losers is characteristic of the postsocial knowledge society. But in my opinion, focusing too much on winners and losers forecloses many other possible routes of inquiry into the co-constitution of sociality by subjects and objects that are independent of the question of their relative importance.

I would like to make one final remark, to the purpose of excluding a possible misunderstanding. The term “sociality with objects” does not imply that social relations between persons are no longer relevant in our society. Rather, this term aims to draw attention to the fact that the risks of interpersonal relations that we are experiencing may not be adequately described through the notion of alienation alone. The focus on alienation – or a lack of connections to others – limits our vision. It conceals the broad range of possibilities of social relations that the currently existing infrastructure of media technology allows for. Against the narrow vision conditioned by our attention to alienation, the analysis of object-centred relationships may sharpen our sense for the transformation of possibilities, past and future, that the processes and ideas of ubiquitous communication have provided since the onset of modernity. The range of possibilities can be expected to increase further as our current society develops further.

Quoted Literature

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