Topic 6. Introduction to New Media

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6.1.   What is New Media? The vocabulary of New Media

New Media refers to the latest technologies that have emerged in recent years, and to the influence of them in our culture and behaviour. Some of these technologies have to do with communication, broadcasting, journalism, computers, digitalization, the internet... New Media is fundamental to understand the new processes of communication, and it applies to all forms of means of communications, to the extent that some people argue that the history of Cinema can be divided into to: before and after the arrival of New Media. The following paragraphs present some of the most important terms in the world of New Media.

6.1.1. ANALOG VS DIGITAL. To some extent, the distinction between analog and digital culture represents the huge step between Media and New Media. Our new culture, which is digital, has replaced the processes of analog culture, and this can be perceived in many aspects, including the way we write and type, the ways in which we consume television and cinema, the new formats to save and reproduce media (CDs, DVDs, Bluerays, Torrent...).

6.1.2 Cyberculture: This term refers to the collection of cultures and cultural products that are a result of the new possibilities offered by the Internet. Cyberculture includes the stories told about these cultures, and the reproduction of them.

6.1.3 Virtual reality (VR): A reality that is only based in the computer and computer-based systems (for instance, tablet), which provides a simulation of real-life experiences.

6.1.4 Virtual community: a term commonly used to refer to the groups of people who exchange cultures through computer networks, newsgroups, and Web-based programs. They might not ever meet face-to-face. Generally these people meet over the long-term, on a regular basis, and share their ideas about a variety of subjects, depending upon their special interest. The discussions could relate to hobbies, music, health, self help issues, and professional and scholarly activities.

6.1.5 Hypermedia: A nonlinear way of communicating and presenting information that allows users to access related works, sounds, texts or images from a single computer screen. For example, a user reading an encyclopaedia entry on jazz could also hear excerpts from recordings, read biographies of jazz artists, and view photos of them...

6.1.6. Interactivity: Reciprocal process of information exchange between two or more "players" in communication and cultural exchange, or more specifically learning. "Players" can be pupils, facilitators, peers but also automated learner resources, like databases and other devices. For some thinkers, interactivity is the key concept to understand the importance of New Media (for more on this, see Topic 1 of this course).

6.1.7. Wiki.
A collaboratively edited online page. Wikipedia is the most famous example, but there are many others and it is a phenomenon which grows daily. Wikis are frequently used to allow people to write a document together, or to share reference material that lets colleagues or even members of the public contribute content.

6.1.8. Blog
Originally short for "weblog," a blog is just a web page that contains entries in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entry on top. But blogging has taken off because the explosion in blogging software and services -- such as Blogger, TypePad and WordPress -- has turned blogging into one of the easiest ways for people to maintain a constantly updated web presence. In addition to the classic text blog, we now have photo blogs (consisting of uploaded photos), audio blogs (a.k.a. "podcasts") and video blogs (which consist of regularly uploaded video files).

6.1.9. Blogroll
A list of recommended sites that appears in the sidebar of a blog. These are typically sites that are either on similar topics, sites that the blogger reads regularly, or sites that belong to the blogger's acquaintances. The term "blogroll" also refers to the concept of political logrolling (when legislators promise to vote for one another's pet bills) -- which is not unlike bloggers' habit of reciprocating links by posting links to blogs that link back to their own blogs.

6.1.10. Mashup
A web service that combines several tools to create a whole new service. An example is ChicagoCrime, which merges Google Maps with the Chicago police department's crime tracking web site to offer a map of crime in different parts of Chicago. The new Apps for Smart Phones are the ultimate (so far) expression of mashups.

6.1.11. Podcast
An audio blog. It is a perfect example of how the New Media is actually refiguring previous forms of communication. Podcasts are no more than new ways to present radio shows, and, in fact, most radio stations operate on the internet nowadays.

6.2. New Media in our lives

New Media has altered the way we socialize, study, learn, teach, consume, think... and the list could be endless. It is difficult to know if previous changes in media technology shaped society as much as New Media has. For instance, one may wonder if the arrival of the printing press changed the world as much as the Internet has, relatively speaking. The same questions can be applied to the arrival of photography, cinema, radio... The following lines present four aspects of our culture which have been modified after the arrival of the New Media.

6.2.1 THE NEW LANGUAGE. Language is constantly changing. New words and expressions come, as other words disappear. Of course, this is part of the very essence of language, and the arrival of New Media has not modified language more than other events in history (say invasions and colonization). Having said that, it is easy to observe how each novel tendendy in New Media requires its own vocabulary and modes of expression, which are easily assimilated by the populations. We are now used to expressions such as "Google me" or "whassup". The use of acronyms is a very characteristic feature of the language of New Media: SMS, PC, CCTV, p2p, HD video... and many others, are words we are now familiar with.

6.2.3 THE NEW VISUAL CULTURE. Youtube, Vimeo, Torrent, Emule, Ares, Google Video Search... these are just some of the terms that most people are familiar with, nowadays. They all refer to new ways of consuming videos, all kinds of videos, form all nationalities, genres, times...
This new visual culture has shaped consumer habits. One of the biggest changes has to do with immediacy: we can now see our favourite tv show wherever in the world we are. Gone are the times when one had to wait months or even years to see the latest season of one's favourite show.
Another aspect of this new visual culture, some people may argue, is the lack of demand of visual quality. We now have the highest video quality, with the HD (High Definition) technology, but, paradoxically, more and more spectators prefer to see poorer formats, privileging other aspects such as immediacy. For instance, many people are happy to download (sometimes illegally) their favourite show's latest episode, rather than waiting a few days to see it on TV.

6.2.4 A NEW SENSITIVITY? Theorists such as Derrida have argued that the impact of New Media can be perceived in new expressions for the modern sensitivity. As we saw in previous topics, Adorno argued that after Auswitzch, we would never look at the world the same way. There are many modern examples of dramatic events that have been mediatised (or, rather, new-mediatised) in such a way that they have had a huge impact in our ways of assimilating death and violence. The events of 09/11 in New York are possibly the most relevant example of this, especially in the Western World.

6.2.5 SOCIAL USES OF THE NEW MEDIA. The expressions of New Media have taken over our social habits. Just a few years ago, no one could have predicte the impact of social networks in our daily lives, insomuch as nowadays few people venture guessing their impact in our most imminent future. Some sociologists believe that social networks are potentially the centre or for all or most other future contents. They foresee that our learning skills, sexual and social relations, family bounds, etc, will highly rely on social networks. Likewise, they foresee that traditional ways of transmissions will depend on that too. For instance, teaching could be done via Facebook, even though today this may seem extreme.

6.3 The theory of New Media

The arrival of New Media has required the succession of innovative and fresh theories, to explain the ever-changing phenomena of the contemporary mediatised world. Some people argue that many of these theories are obsolete before they are even published. This is symptomatic of the urgency of the contemporary world in general, and New Media in particular. In this section, we will look at to very meaningful extracts from two relevant thinkers, with a brief explanation of them:

6.3.1. Andrew Shapiro: "the emergence of new, digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources."

Shapiro introduces a Marxist element in the analysis of New Media. For him, the presence of New Media in all levels of our societies have introduced a new paradigm: it has reshaped the map of who is in control of the information, and the ways to distribute it.

6.3.2. Manuel Castells: "Technology does not determine society. Nor does society script the course of technological change, since many factors, including individual inventiveness and entrepreneurialism, intervene in the process of scientific discovery, technical innovation and social applications, so the final outcome depends on a complex pattern of interaction. Indeed the dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology is society and society cannot be understood without its technological tools." (1996: 5).

Castells analyses the relationship between society, media and technology. He remarks the strong connection that determines the result of technology processes and their effects in contemporary societies which, for him, cannot be understood out of the context of the advances in media and technology.