MM2 – New Media

Introduction

New media is a dynamic and evolving field that significantly impacts our daily lives. The term "new media" refers to types of media that utilize digital technology and the internet. This definition includes social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (or X), Instagram, and Snapchat, which continuously emerge, evolve, and sometimes disappear.

Additionally, new media encompasses streaming services for music, movies, and TV shows. Examples include ITVX, BBC iPlayer, Netflix, Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Prime. The transition to digital satellite and smart TVs has also contributed to the proliferation of new media, with modern televisions offering numerous free digital channels and advanced features such as the Sky Glass TV's ability to support interactive activities like yoga.

Online computer games, particularly those requiring internet connectivity, such as Xbox and PS5 multiplayer games, are considered new media. This category also includes PC-based gaming and apps for mobile phones and tablets. The app ecosystem has expanded to cover various services, including health, education, cooking, and communication. Interactive TV features, such as the BBC's red button and Netflix's choose-your-own-adventure shows, further exemplify the scope of new media.

The history of new media can be traced back to the 1940s with the invention of the transistor, which facilitated data transfer between devices and underpinned digital technology. Notably, actress Hedy Lamarr's invention of frequency-hopping transistors in the 1940s laid the groundwork for Wi-Fi. Significant milestones in the evolution of new media include the first email sent in the 1970s (though not commercially available), the invention of the internet by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, and the commercial availability of the internet in 1992 with dial-up connections.

Bluetooth technology emerged in 1999, followed by broadband in 2000. The early 2000s saw the rise of social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. The first iPhone was introduced in 2007, marking a significant advancement in new media. Bitcoin's introduction in 2011 and the continuous release of new technologies since 2016 have further expanded the landscape of new media.

Characteristics of New Media

Sociologists and other scholars studying the phenomenon of new media have identified several characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of media and technology. These characteristics help us understand what qualifies as new media.

1. **Digitization**: This refers to the transition from analogue to digital data transfer. Digitization has transformed the way information is stored and transmitted. Digital information, regardless of its format, is encoded in binary code (ones and zeros). This binary format underpins all digital media and technology.

2. **Technological Convergence**: This term describes the merging of different types of information into a single delivery system. Text, photographs, films, videos, voices, and music can all be accessed through one device, whether it be a smart TV, laptop, tablet, smartphone, or even a smartwatch. Boyle (2005) notes that digitization allows information to be delivered across various media platforms that were once separate and unconnected. For instance, it is now possible to watch television shows or films on your phone, use GPS and maps on your phone, and listen to or download music on your watch, phone, or tablet. Essentially, multiple media formats can now be accessed through a single device.

3. **Economic Convergence**: This occurs when media and telecommunication industries, which once specialized in specific types of media, begin to expand into multiple areas. A prime example is Virgin. Beyond offering Virgin TV, the company also provides Virgin Phones and Virgin Internet, alongside its numerous other ventures. This expansion illustrates how companies diversify their services within the media landscape. Economic convergence has also led to the formation of alliances between companies to facilitate digitization. It has dissolved the boundaries between different media sectors, allowing for the cross-fertilization of ideas and resources. Boyle notes that this convergence has produced new forms of multimedia delivery systems, blending various types of media into unified platforms. For instance, streaming services now offer interactive features, such as live sports where viewers can choose their preferred camera angles. This blending of services exemplifies how economic convergence enables a richer, more versatile media experience.

4. **Cultural Convergence**: A concept introduced by Jenkins, cultural convergence refers to the way new media alters interactions within society. For example, new media has transformed consumerism. We no longer need to visit physical stores to make purchases; instead, we can shop using our phones, computers, or even smart assistants like Alexa. One can now add items to a shopping list via Alexa and place orders online, eliminating the need for a physical shopping trip. Additionally, new media has revolutionized interpersonal communication. According to a 2014 Ofcom report, Facebook was the default social networking site for 96% of UK adults. Although Facebook's popularity has waned due to various issues, digital communication remains predominant. Many people now prefer digital interactions over face-to-face conversations. Personally, I use WhatsApp or Twitter as my primary means of communication, favoring these platforms over in-person interactions.

5. **Interactivity**: New media enables users to interact with content in real time through clicks, dropdown menus, and interactive movies where viewers select what happens next. For example, one can download a book to a Kindle or an e-reader in seconds, showcasing how we can now engage more readily with the media we consume.

Interactivity also extends to the producers of media. Authors and actors on social media interact with their audiences, allowing for direct communication and engagement. Some TV shows incorporate live streams of Twitter comments, enabling real-time viewer participation. This interactive capability fundamentally changes the relationship between consumers and content creators.

6. **Choice**: Jenkins emphasizes that modern media audiences can access a variety of media forms using a single device for entertainment, information, social relationships, and services. Compared to the early 1990s, new media audiences have far more choices regarding how they access their media. For instance, I prefer streaming services over traditional television because they are free from adverts. Boyle notes that society's use of television has evolved from a supply-led system, where viewers watched whatever was broadcast, to a demand-led system. Services like Sky Plus allow viewers to choose when to watch programs, freeing them from the constraints of television schedules. While live TV still exists, viewers can now watch shows on catch-up or record them for later viewing. This flexibility also resolves scheduling conflicts, enabling viewers to watch one show while recording another airing simultaneously on a different channel.

7. **Participatory Culture**: New media allows audiences to move beyond being passive receivers of entertainment and information. Instead, they often collaborate with media and other users by creating and sharing their own content. Examples include YouTube, Facebook, TED Talks, and sharing music files. Users also contribute by writing reviews on consumer sites or creating review videos on YouTube for films, television shows, and new games. Platforms like Twitch allow users to live stream themselves playing games, while forums like Reddit and social media sites like Twitter facilitate the sharing of opinions. Jenkins argues that the convergence of interactivity and media has produced this participatory culture, where the roles of producers and consumers are no longer distinct. Instead, they are intertwined and interconnected, leading to new rules and expectations regarding media offerings. This shift has given rise to a dynamic media environment where users actively engage in the creation and dissemination of content, shaping the media landscape in unprecedented ways.

8. **Collective Intelligence**: Jenkins introduces this term as an outcome of participatory culture. He explains that "none of us can know everything, each of us knows something, and we can put all the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills." New media enables this collective problem-solving and knowledge-sharing. Jenkins argues that new media users challenge traditional and official perspectives, aligning with postmodernist ideas about the breakdown of meta-narratives. He claims that new media content serves as an alternative, user-led source of information, often critical of official and traditional forms of information. This means that information sharing is no

longer a top-down process but rather a collective one. New media empowers users to collaboratively create and disseminate knowledge, transforming how we understand and engage with information.

Users of New Media

Although the data is somewhat outdated, it provides valuable insights into the changes in media usage from 2005 to 2015. This information comes from Ofcom, which conducted surveys in 2005 and again in 2015 to track changes in media consumption. As a government body, Ofcom provides reliable and official statistics.

Between 2005 and 2015, adult internet usage increased by 30%. By 2015, 69% of people accessed the internet via a smart device such as a phone or a watch. The average hours of internet use per week doubled to 20 hours. This figure likely increased further, especially during COVID-19, when online learning and remote work became prevalent.

Texting emerged as the preferred form of social contact during this period. Today, instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, Twitter DMs, and others have become more popular, continuing the trend of digital over face-to-face communication. Additionally, seven out of ten people had at least one social media profile by 2015. While Facebook was likely the most common at that time, users have since diversified to platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and even the newly rebranded Twitter (X).

People also began creating their own TV schedules, a trend that has only increased since 2015. Traditional TV guides are less common as viewers prefer catch-up services and recording shows for later viewing. Furthermore, the consumption of short-form, user-generated content platforms increased by 68%. This includes platforms like YouTube, TED Talks, Instagram, and TikTok. The preference for shorter videos has grown, catering to modern attention spans, despite the irony of delivering this information in a long lecture format.

Generational Divide

When discussing the generational divide in new media usage, Boyle notes that new media is often associated with younger people. Sociologists suggest a significant generational divide exists between younger and older generations in their use of new media. For instance, an Ofcom study found that 12 to 15-year-olds are more likely than adults to engage in cross-media multitasking. This includes activities like texting friends while browsing multiple websites, having several browser tabs open, watching TV while doing homework, streaming music while playing games, and conversing with people within those games. The survey indicates that as people age, this type of multitasking declines. Older groups, while still engaging in online activities, tend to focus on one task at a time.

Boyle argues that the media experience for young people in the UK in 2015 is remarkably different from previous generations. This generation has grown up with digital media. For example, in the 1990s, my school had just one computer with internet access, and mobile phones were a luxury. Most people lacked access to digital technology. Today, nearly every student has a smartphone.

New media, such as the internet and social networking sites, are now considered essential due to their immediacy and accessibility. The way young people access and seek entertainment is vastly different from previous generations. In the past, families would consult TV guides and negotiate viewing schedules. Now, individuals can watch what they want on personal devices without impacting others in the household.

Older generations often feel anxious about how young people use media. There are frequent calls for bans on mobile phones in schools and careful regulation of young people's access to technology. These new anxieties amplify traditional concerns about issues like pornography, terrorist propaganda, bullying, and grooming, which have become more prominent with new media.

Class Divide

The class divide in access to new media, which became particularly evident during COVID-19, remains a significant issue. Ofcom surveys indicate that while this divide has narrowed in recent years, it still persists. Working-class families may have access to new media, but often on a familial level rather than individually. This means that instead of each household member having their own devices, there might be one or two devices shared among everyone. In contrast, those in more affluent socio-economic groups tend to have individualized access, with each person possessing a tablet, phone, watch, or multiple devices.

During COVID-19, the digital divide became starkly apparent. Households with multiple children often struggled to share devices for online learning while parents also needed these devices for remote work. Phelps (2011) noted that despite the narrowing class divide, a digital underclass has emerged. This underclass is characterized by higher unemployment, lower educational levels, and lower digital skills. Evidence suggests that this group has increased its internet use at a much slower rate than others and often relies on public service access rather than private internet connections. Members of this digital underclass who do have internet access often rate their skills as poorer compared to those from more educated backgrounds.

Therefore, when it comes to new media, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be less skilled users. This disparity highlights the ongoing issue of digital inequality and the need for more inclusive access to digital technologies and skills development.

Gender Divide

Lee and Kirkup found significant differences between men and women in their use of media technology. Men were more likely than women to use email, participate in chat rooms, and play computer games such as those on Xbox. In 2015, Ofcom reported that men accessed the internet more frequently, with men averaging 23 hours per week compared to 17 hours for women. Additionally, while 67% of women accessed social media, this figure was slightly higher for men at 60%.

The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) conducted research in 2014, suggesting that women now account for 52% of digital game players. However, women tend to play solo games, like mobile games (e.g., FarmVille), while men prefer more interactive games on platforms like

Xbox, PlayStation, and the Wii. The IAB survey found that mobile puzzle games such as Candy Crush and Angry Birds were particularly appealing to women because they were free, intuitive, accessible, and didn't require extensive time to learn.

Olson (2008) observed that boys were more likely to play violent video games to express fantasies of power and glory and to master exciting, realistic environments. This behavior could be linked to the crisis of masculinity, where traditional expressions of masculinity through work or education are less available. Hartman and Klimmt (2006) found that women gamers generally disliked violent video content and preferred games with more social interaction. Voida (2007) noted that female gamers typically played between five and ten hours a week, while men played significantly more.

Therefore, the gender divide in new media usage is not so much about access as it is about the different ways men and women use and engage with media.

Global Divide

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has highlighted a substantial digital divide between developing and developed nations, with the least developed countries lagging in access to new media. According to the World Bank in 2012, approximately three-quarters of the world's population had access to a mobile phone, with 6 billion mobile phones in use worldwide. Impressively, nearly 5 billion of these mobile phones were in developing countries, and mobile phone use has spread rapidly in Africa.

In 2014, the GSM Association estimated that 72% of Africans used mobile phones, but this statistic can be misleading. While 72% of Africans may have a mobile phone, not all are smartphones. Only 18% of that 72% were smartphones, and significant regional disparities exist in mobile phone access. For example, in Eritrea, only 5% of the population has mobile phones. This creates a false impression of a global digital revolution, as the digital divide remains pronounced in many areas.

Debates on the Impact of New Media

Curran and Seaton identified two primary perspectives in the debate on new media: the Neophiliacs, who are optimistic about the role of new media, and the cultural pessimists, who take a more negative view.

Neophiliac Perspective

Neophiliacs view new media and digitization as beneficial to society, offering several reasons for their optimism:

1. **Increased Consumer Choice**: Neophiliacs argue that the convergence and interactivity that characterize new media have greatly expanded consumer choices. There are now hundreds of entertainment channels, news channels, movie channels, music streaming services, and user-generated content sites. Consumers can select their preferred type of media and the format in which they receive it, such as vinyl, cassette,

CD, digital download, or streaming through various devices like phones, computers, and smart assistants. This increase in competition forces media producers to improve their offerings to attract consumers.

2. **E-commerce Revolution**: The internet has created a new form of commerce known as e-commerce, with retailers like Amazon, eBay, Etsy, and Teemu operating exclusively online. This shift has increased consumer choice, lowered prices, and allowed consumers to compare prices easily through comparison websites like Compare the Market. While e-commerce has led to the decline of traditional high street retailers, it has empowered consumers by giving them more control over their purchases.

3. **Revitalization of Democracy**: Neophiliacs argue that new media has revitalized democracy by providing more opportunities for people to acquire education and information, thus enabling greater participation in the democratic process. Politicians are now more accountable to the public due to the immediacy and transparency of new media. The internet allows individuals to access a wide range of information and viewpoints, reducing their reliance on traditional media outlets. Seaton notes that internet technology enables many-to-many communication, which has transformed political activism and participation, empowering individuals and challenging established centers of power.

4. **Political Activism**: The internet has facilitated the rise of movements like Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and He for She, which originated from online platforms. These movements demonstrate how individuals can use new media to mobilize support, monitor illegal and immoral activities, and coordinate protests. Groups like Anonymous have used the internet to disrupt government websites and challenge powerful elites, showcasing the potential of new media for political activism.

5. **Access to Information**: Neophiliacs believe that new media provides access to a vast amount of information, making people more informed. However, they also acknowledge potential downsides, such as choice apathy, where the abundance of options can overwhelm consumers, and the spread of disinformation, which can confuse and mislead the public.

Cultural Pessimists

Cultural pessimists argue that the benefits of the new media revolution are often exaggerated. They believe that the optimistic views of Neophiliacs overlook significant drawbacks. Let's explore the key points raised by cultural pessimists.

1. **New Media is Not So New**: Cornford and Robins argue that old technologies, such as television and telephone landlines, are still integral to new media. The existence and functionality of new media rely on these older technologies. For instance, even broadband internet, which provides Wi-Fi, often requires a phone line to reach the router. They also suggest that interactivity is not a new phenomenon, as people have always engaged with media through letters to newspapers and calls to radio and TV shows. The only difference now is the speed of interaction. For example, live television competitions now conclude within the same week, whereas previously winners might have been announced a week later. A notable instance of real-time information sharing is the live broadcast of the 9/11 attacks. While the live element was novel, the global dissemination of information was not unprecedented.

2. **Validity of Information**: Cultural pessimists argue that the abundance of information does not guarantee its accuracy. The internet is flooded with misinformation, requiring users to cross-check facts diligently. The frequent false reports of celebrity deaths highlight the ease with which misinformation can spread.

3. **Threat to Democracy**: Contrary to Neophiliacs, cultural pessimists believe new media threatens democracy. Cornford and Robins argue that the idea of new media fostering democratic communication is misleading. Media corporations have monopolized key strategic links within the media through tactics like alliances, mergers, takeovers, and licensing deals. This concentration of power limits the supposed freedom of speech.

4. **Lack of Regulation**: Cultural pessimists highlight the need for regulation in new media, particularly the internet. The absence of regulation allows harmful content to be uploaded freely, including videos of executions and sites dedicated to revenge porn. They argue that some form of oversight is necessary to prevent the spread of such content.

5. **Cyborg Users**: Turkle suggests that we have become "cyborg users," deeply connected to the internet and our devices, leading to a life lived predominantly online. This phenomenon is evident in the subculture of hikikomori in Japan, where individuals live entirely online, working, socializing, and shopping from their rooms. They are connected 24/7, a lifestyle that some in other parts of the world also increasingly adopt. Turkle notes that people now value online connections, counting followers and friends on social media rather than real-world interactions.

6. **Virtual Communication Among Children**: Livingston conducted a similar analysis to Turkle and found that children today communicate more virtually than with their own families. Parents often text or message their children to call them for meals, reflecting a shift from direct verbal communication to digital interaction.

New Media as Chaos

King (2008) is particularly critical of aspects of new media, especially the internet, claiming it fosters chaos and lacks a moral code. He argues that the internet is a space where truth is selective, largely due to a lack of regulation. King identifies four key areas of criticism regarding new media:

1. **Social Networking Sites**: King criticizes platforms like Facebook for not contributing to the democratic process. Instead, he sees them as vehicles for narcissistic self-broadcasting. People often present idealized versions of their lives, such as Instagram influencers who meticulously stage photos to appear effortlessly perfect.

2. **User-Generated Sites**: Sites like Wikipedia and YouTube are criticized for being open to abuse and bias, making them unreliable sources of information. King argues that this environment has fostered a generation of "cut-and-paste plagiarists" and intellectual thieves, who rely on pre-existing content rather than developing their own understanding. This issue is exacerbated by the rise of AI tools like ChatGPT, which can further undermine originality and critical thinking.

3. **Unfiltered Output**: Platforms like Twitter and personal blogs often feature unchecked, uninformed opinions, lies, and trolling rather than expert analysis and informed discourse. King contends that this environment encourages people to mistake opinions for facts, diminishing the quality of public debate and expertise.

4. **Cultural Illiteracy**: King argues that the internet contributes to cultural illiteracy by providing easy access to information, which diminishes young people's engagement with deep research and critical thinking. This, he claims, leads to shorter attention spans and poorer problem-solving skills because everything is readily available without the need for effortful understanding.