

Innovations in Media Communication Space

by Yoshihiro Oto

Recently, the term “digitization” has become a buzzword throughout the mass media. The word symbolizes recent developments in electronic communications technology, the force that has set the stage for a new and different relationship to emerge between media providers and their audience. Digital broadcasting will not only dramatically increase the number of available channels and improve graphic quality and resolution of broadcast programs; it will also enable a huge variety of media services, including two-way communications capability. These developments are capable of satisfying the desire of media users for positive participation, and they will inevitably break down the existing fixed relationship between broadcasters and listeners/viewers and the relationship between providers and audience.

On the communications front, the expansion of transmission capacity and the advancement of communication networks are effecting a major transformation. Besides the traditional

“one-to-one” communications media (such as telephones), which provide a connection only to a specified individual, “one-to-many” communications media, which can target unspecified numbers, has become possible. The most consummate example of this is the emergence of the Internet.

This transformation incorporates the possibility of a new order, not only within the institutional and industrial framework of the media, but also beyond that space. Will this new order successfully lead us to an alternative media communication space that is open to everyone?

THE CENTURY OF THE MEDIA AND THE MASSES

The 20th century has been called “the century of the media.” Indeed, the media has developed dramatically over the past 100 years. Walter J. Ong, an American linguist, has written that all forms of media that employ means of communication other than printed letters—telephones, motion pictures, radio,

television—have arrived and been propagated since the latter half of the 19th century. The emergence of nonliterary media brought about a completely different media culture from the existing one, which was expressed by letters (and supported by literacy). Ong argues that one characteristic of 20th century culture is the revival of the culture of “orality.” The emergence and propagation of a nonliterary media has induced the return of the culture of “orality” that had been in existence before the invention of letters. As Ong proposes, a clearly different media culture, which is completely unlike the culture exclusively dependent on letters, has apparently been formed in the spheres of the media communication in the 20th century.

Marshall McLuhan says that the media emerged and developed as an extension of our five senses, and that it has been functioning as equipment for expanding our communications space. In this context, the “orality” style media of the 20th century has actually provided us with a media communications space of a kind that the existing culture of literacy failed to provide; that is the real reason why it has won majority support. We should pay special attention to the fact that these types of media, unlike the literally expressed media, have enabled many to participate in the media communications process relatively easily, without extensive training for acquiring literacy, and have therefore allowed the participation of people at the end-user level.

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The 20th century has also been called “the century of the masses.” Support for this moniker lies in the belief by many that large masses of people have been at the center of the limelight as the bearers of the modern state;

the rise of average income levels has also contributed to this view. The desire of the masses to gain knowledge has intensified, especially regarding information that could shed light on how society operates.

In any democratic system, the media is inevitably part of the power structure. If an opportunity for political choice (suffrage) is institutionally granted to the nation (the masses), the ability to influence the media system will provide those attempting to obtain and maintain political power with an extremely advantageous position. Further, as Benedict Anderson argued in his highly influential book *Imagined Communities*, the media can play an extremely important role as a machine to unify the nation in a modern state. The history of modern journalism has been a battle against the establishment fought mainly by newspapers and publishers to secure the “freedom of the press.” In contrast, the media of orality that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century was easily built into the framework of the state policy, perhaps because it was a new media.

So far, media managers have been recognized as players assigned an important part in the power structure. This is especially true of those mass media managers who provided space by advocating “impartiality,” “neutrality,” and “objective reporting.” In reality, however, being part of the contemporary power structure has instilled an inherent limitation: the media has difficulties expressing positions that are not supportive of the power structure and the order of which it became part.

Moreover, classical sociology of masses maintains that readers/viewers/listeners are the “masses” who are targets to be inspired and educated in the mass communication

process. The stance of the media here is largely a self-conceit of being the leader to ring an alarm bell to alert the general public.

According to the "theory of social responsibility" of mass media, which was debated early in the 20th century, the social responsibility of mass media is to actively pursue freedom of speech. In other words, the aim of mass media is to substitute the people's "right to know"; therefore the rules and discipline of the media in this context should be subjected to closer scrutiny.

However, the media managers are no more than one aggregate player in the power structure, a player that has garnered enormous power along with the development of information communications technology in the 20th century. Media managers are naturally forced to make choices within the context of their own position in the structure.

THE MATURATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA CRITICISM

In the latter half of the 20th century, the monitoring of journalistic activities by "civil society" became an issue, especially in developed nations. In critical movements of journalism—the classical argument of journalism being the champion against established power—it secured a reasonable amount of support. However, as the presence of the media grew larger, exemplified in the explosive propagation of television broadcasting, concerns over the influence of media activities were raised, and those voicing the dangers of blind trust in journalistic activities became louder.

Along with the maturation of media users, a transformation in awareness levels occurred,

and a new media has arrived by way of the advanced electronic communications technology. The social function of the media used to be the generation of a unified awareness for the images of a single state or single society. However, as seen in the variety of broadcasting services available of late, the media has begun to focus on the existence of different ethnicities sharing a society, and is shedding

light on the variations of society in which all the members are closely entwined. Further, those who

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used to be resigned to the position of mere media service receivers are now easily capable of becoming information transmitters through media such as the Internet. Almost anyone can be a "media publisher" for very little cost, and the worldwide forum to express opinions has become accessible to everyone.

Whether one takes advantage of this freedom of speech is up to each individual, but everyone has to be careful not to waste the opportunity by merely expressing self-satisfaction. The Public Access Channel in the United States has been institutionalized to make "regional voices" audible, and has secured venues to express "residential voices." The emergence of channels like this and the Internet has secured easy access to the media for the general public and enabled individuals to be senders in the media system. These developments are surely great steps forward, particularly in light of the attempt to renew the long-standing relationship between the media and media users. The emergence of these media communication processes may trigger the chain of questioning of the state of the media, and eventually lead to the emphasis placed on the identity of individuals active in the existing media management.

INTERNET SPACE:
POSSIBILITIES AND FUTURE TASKS

The emergence of "media publishers" among the general citizenry may stimulate professional "media publishers" in the existing mass media, and it may even provide retraining opportunities for the professionals. Naturally, when that occurs, what comes to be questioned is their position as incumbents as media publishers and the true manner of the transformation of the current media communication process.

One can easily argue that the arrival of the Internet has secured a venue to express individual opinions. However, such a media communication process, in which professionals and amateurs participate side by side, is similar to an open marathon race. Inherent in the process is the danger of developing a mediocre and uniform communications system. Moreover, the borderless nature of the Internet presents unrivaled opportunities for economic activity; an enormous worldwide market has formed in this century. We need not mention the examples of Amazon.com or the tech-heavy NASDAQ to describe the levels

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of enthusiasm expressed by the economic sector concerning the Internet.

The new media communications process is about to be materialized by recently developed electronic communications technologies. To utilize this new media as a tool to secure an equal society in its original definition, we need to review the power relationship inherent in the existing media communications system. We then need to nurture the development of an alternative media communications system. These tasks will have to be carried out by all citizens, including the professional "media publishers."

Therefore the next agenda to be tackled is: How can we develop a system, a new communications space, to improve the quality of this new venue for speech?

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