

Interactivity in new media theory

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Much has been made of 'Interactivity' in New Media Theory. What are some of the problems with the concept of 'interactivity' as used in relation to new media theory? Interactivity has had a long standing presence in the study of media. In its original form interaction in society was on a face-to-face level. With the advancement of communication technologies, whole new forms of interactions have been created thus altering the structure of societies and the way they are analysed in the context of new media. This essay will endeavour to assess the interactivity of the first media age and then establish its position within the second media age addressing the difficulties that have arisen in this context. To begin with, an interpretation of new media and the reason for the shift of paradigm is necessary. Broadcast media which generally confined itself to broadcast dynamics and mass media production had its heyday during the era where media provided 'one way, centralized communication.' (Holmes, 2006, p. 9) During the first media age the ability for a person or a television program to defy space and possibly time by reaching the masses was seen as a great leap in communication technologies, and still is. However this form of mass media was homogenized and fragmented, creating inequality. This is in contrast to the second media age which is based on interactivity, 'participants are seen to retain their individuality.' (Holmes, 2006, p. 10) 'Where conventional media allows media consumers agency in the way they receive and interpret media messages, digital technologies enable reciprocal, two way communication, with a very fast feedback that promises to change asymmetrical power relation of mass communication' (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008, p. 113) New media is essentially media communication based

upon digital technology and access to the internet. (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 2007, 44) It has added another realm to production consumption and personalisation for the audience. People no longer have to ‘gather around an object at some pre-determined time’ to gain information. (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 2007, p. 44) As a result of the ‘rise of the Internet culture and the concomitant demise of broadcast or media culture’ the establishment of the Second Media Age began. (Holmes, 2006 p. 7) A significant distinction to be made between the first and the second media ages is that of digital and analogue media. Analogue media, of the broadcast era, encompasses books, photographs, magazines and or information that can be further converted into a signal that can be broadcast to many recipients. Digitisation on the other hand has revolutionised the ways information is mediated, produced distributed and consumed. (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008, p. 112) In Thompson’s Rise of Mediated Integration (1995) he states that the result of the ‘development of communication media creates new forms of action and interaction and new kinds of social relationships,’ instead of replacing or adapting the old. (Thompson, 1995. p81-82) Rather than examining technologies in terms of how close or distant their techniques of communication are from face-to-face interaction he argues that each has their own qualities and characteristics of action and interaction. The main issue with interactivity in the new media age is related to reciprocity. Holmes categorizes this in two ways. Firstly, the idea of reciprocity without interaction in the broadcast media. (Holmes, 2006, p. 144) Traditionally the one-way communication method of broadcast media would assume that reciprocity would be minimal if not non-existent.

Although the monological character of the broadcast media typically renders it part of the first media age, there is a new element of its interactivity that in some respects brings it into the second media age. This is the fact that broadcast media is now layered with the ability for the audience to give instantaneous email feedback as well as the existence of online forums, classic forms of interactivity in the new media age. The hybrid character of this mediation allows us to analyse some deeper issues of interaction. As the second media age approached at a fast pace, many traditional media forms such as newspapers, television broadcast and radio stations felt the pressure of being superceded. Naturally the response was to integrate digital media into the traditional media repertoire of communication. As most of the major media outlets today are vertically integrated this was likely to have been a logical and uncomplicated step. However, the interactive effectiveness of the integration of technologies may not be as successful or effective as they could be or should be. Herein lies the problem. The concept of public journalism came as a result of criticism of the lack of communication between the journalists and their audience. Publisher, David Lawrence appealed to his colleagues: ' We ought to listen more often and much better, to readers.' (Schultz, 2000, p. 209) Interactive opportunities provided by the internet were in turn what addressed these criticisms in the form of online polls, the availability of ' email to the editor' and online forums. This gave the audience the opportunity to treat broadcast media as a far more interactive tool, being able to give a delayed yet existent response to the specific journalist or program they wish to contact. However, taking Rafaeli's interpretation of interactivity, where its effectivity is demonstrated by the

relatedness of the later message to the earlier message these methods of broadcast interaction often fall short. Taking journalist- reader communication as the first example, Schultz presents convincing evidence that although these opportunities are available to the audience there is the possibility that feedback is used in a merely strategic PR fashion. (Schultz, 2000, p. 212) This is exemplified by the NBC's move to invite its viewers to send opinion emails about one of their segments, to which they received 3000 emails and ' had not looked at the mail and had no plans to do so.' (Schultz, 2000, p. 212) Hence, demonstrating a false enthusiasm to be a part of the online movement and then not reciprocating the interaction at all. Although this is not true of all journalists, as many do appreciate online communication with their readers, lack of time and economic gain by this extra work, makes the ability and likelihood for reciprocal interaction between producers and the audience not remarkably common. In addition, online forums have become a popular mode of expression of opinion, unfortunately a similar line of reasoning from above prevents much interaction or even attention from journalists thus the communication generally only occurs between readers. At best, the special online staff that produces the Web sites will take notice of what readers discuss online. (Schultz, 2000, p. 214) However, still a form of interaction, these forums can be considered relatively civilized outlets for venting.(Schultz, 2000, p. 215) The question of whether the forums produced Rafaeli's ' related feedback' between viewers was also quite positive, with 78 percent of New York Times forum participants having received at least one email that referred to a posting they had made. (Schultz, 2000, p. 216) Thus in terms of interactive

broadcast this result would appear one of the most positive, as vivid, heated and reciprocal interaction is taking place through this hybrid of media. However an area that is slightly problematic in this study is the calibre of forum users. Although from the outset it would seem that forums are a democratic arena in which anyone from anywhere can have their say, more often than not it is 'hard core' individuals that dominate these sites. Often these excessive forum users 'threaten the participatory opportunities of the others, regardless of how sensible their contributions might be.' (Schultz, 2000, p. 215) Thus, the initial ideology of internet discussion groups balancing the 'power and biases of the traditional mass media' may be narrowed somewhat as the groups become more concentrated with regular, relentless users. (Schultz, 2000, p. 207) In addition Schultz argues that 'the greater the number of communicators, the less time everyone has to listen to others; the smaller the size of interacting groups, the smaller their significance for society as a whole.' (Schultz, 2000, p. 207) The second arm of Holmes' study of interactivity is interaction without reciprocity. This is exemplified by any form of interaction between strangers at a distance, as in much of the communication on the internet. (Holmes, 2006, p. 149) Although undeniably the sheer volume of users on the internet leads to vast amounts of interaction, it is the low level of recognition and identification between users that leads to lack of the reciprocity that Holmes is concerned with. Take Multi-user dungeons (MUD's) for example. These are computer games that can emulate reality, or facets thereof. In one such MUD called Second Life, players invent every aspect of their virtual character from physical appearance to personality and environment. They can live/play in this virtual

parallel world whenever they want for as long as they want, often creating closer relationships with other avatars than the relationships they have in RL (real life). However, avatars are not accountable or responsible to each other except insofar as they apply pre-given norms from the offline world.

(Holmes, 2006, p. 150) Thus the reciprocity of their interaction is not based on the identification required to render the communication mutual, as the consequences of their actions and their responsibilities in their 'second life' can be switched off at the touch of a button. In conclusion, interactivity in the New Media age has its shortcomings which are rooted in the reciprocity of interaction. The internet is the core source of this interactivity, however when there are so many participants and so many variables to these interactions such as anonymity and responsiveness one can question whether interactivity is really genuine. In addition as a result of the hybridisation of media forms, the concept of interactivity has become more complex and entwined in the new areas of communication. Bibliography

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