Cultural Dimensions of New Media

Dobrinka PEICHEVA, Assoc. prof. dr.
South-West University Bulgaria

Introduction

It is well known that the entire history of culture is a history of the restructuring of communications and its cultural consequences. These restructurings are indicators of the recognition or acceptance of concrete media, and have even served as labels of whole epochs: the age of traditional written culture, the age ?f electronic culture, etc. With the appearance of internet and mobile phones as tiptcal new media (Mansell, 2007) , a new cultural dimension has been opened, connected with mobility.

The attitude towards these two new media has evolved in different ways for different countries over time, but this evolution has very similar characteristics. (Kenichi, 2006; Hyo, Gwang, Park & Rice, 2007; Cooper, 2007; Dimmick, Kline & Stafford, 2000; Humphreys, 2005; Jia, Weber, 2007; Katz, Sugiyama, 2006; Molyneaux , O'Donnell, Gibson & Singer, 2008)

Today people associate the mobile phone and the internet with many utilitarian applications, but also perceive them in their connection with traditional and other new media.

Some of the questionnaire items in our surveys represented hypothesis to be tested. The most important of these were:

Are internet and particularly mobile phones restructuring the communication space and, if so, what are the preconditions for this? Is there an internal restructuring of interpersonal communication from the face-to-face type towards the electronically mediated type? Are the internet and mobile telephones forming a new mobile-determined media culture? Are they contributing to separate individuals' becoming independent media?

As a result of the study, the general findings with regard to the internet and the mobile telephone are:

- ways of structuring and restructuring of communications;
- the new cultural forms of interpersonal communication contacts;
- a new structuring of written communication culture;
- a new mobile-determined culture;
- the transformation of individual participation from passive into active;
- real participation of individuals in cultural life;
- the possibility for turning the separate individuals into independent media;
- completing the framework of the medializtion (mediatization) of society.

Structuring and restructuring of communications – cultural changes and consequences

In the last ten years, so many media innovations have caused and are causing permanent changes in the nature and ways of communicating and in the structure of communications. Communicating has become increasingly linked with media and this link is growing in multi-layer complexity. Traditional interpersonal communication in its direct form, face to face, or indirect form, through stationary telephone or the classical letter, is occupying a shrinking perimeter in the general structure of communications in terms of volume and form. Many of the valid reasons for seeking live contact are being reduced by the opportunities electronic communications offer.

But besides decreasing face to face communications, changes are taking place in media-based communications as well. These changes are connected with internal restructuring of the kinds of communication in the traditional media – telephones in their traditional and non-traditional variants are entering the old media to ensure interactiveness. The latter is gaining a growing place in the traditional radios.

Changes are connected also with the changing ratio between traditional and non-traditional media: the non-traditional ones are gradually increasing in share. In yet another aspect, changes are connected with the restructured ratio between the new media: the importance of the stationary or laptop computer as a center of internet use is decreasing while the use of mobile phones for this purpose is growing, and these have become yet another centering point. Moreover, mobile phones have proven to be a new meta-media unit that combines the computer, internet and its applications with the video camera and photo camera. Changes have been accompanied by a flowing of traditional into non-traditional media. Often traditional media are situated in the non-traditional ones in their on-line variant or in new independent e-editions (Nightingale, 2007). We also see some non-traditional media flowing into other non-traditional ones. This refers to the capacity for connecting a mobile telephone with a computer and internet at home; this refers also to the "mobility" of internet from the computer to the mobile telephone, to the digital camera, etc. We also see a non-traditional media becoming in-built in different

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"foundations", which imply mutual complementarity and substitution.

In fact, what is happening as a result of the constant changes and restructuring of communications through media, is the simultaneous universalization and de-identification (Lash, 2004) of the new media, as well as their near ubiquity and capacity for mutual substitution.

The "emancipation" of the separate new media is becoming increasingly difficult and irrelevant, but the media-determined communications are the new landscape of reality.

- the new cultural forms of interpersonal communication contacts.

In fact the binding of social intercourse with the media is a growing trend at the interpersonal level as well. Internet has greatly contributed to the revival of written interpersonal communication, as have likewise SMS contacts over mobile phones. The written internet form of communication is becoming the preferred one between persons and groups; perhaps this is because until recently there were technical limitations on voice communication through internet, or perhaps it is due to the speed it provides. A classical illustration of this is the anecdote about two spouses talking to one another over the Internet from two separate rooms of their home. Chat, e-mail, and skype have re-positioned the role of traditional technical means (telephone, fax, facsimile) and, in many cases, of live personal contact, moving these from their primary position to a secondary one; they have contributed to the combining of these roles according to the circumstances, and to making them mutually substitutive.

Our surveys among internet and mobile telephone users have shown that communication by e-mail and SMS has revived written communication and sent it to a peak of popularity, and so has chat. On the other hand, owing to its resources for sending and receiving attached electronic materials together with the letter (greeting cards, articles, magazines, books), whereby the traditional letter is being combined with parcel posting, this new culture will continue to grow even when the current technical limitations on good quality e-telephone communications through internet will have been overcome and when conversing over stationary and mobile telephones will have become more affordable. There is not practically any person with internet address who doesn't check his/her e-mail several times a day; and we must admit this form of communication and exchange of materials is gradually becoming predominant in professional relations.

The latest surveys of the European Commission concerning the media and communications also indicate an increase of telephone conversations through the internet. Bulgaria is among the highest ranking EU countries, with 59%, on the scale of telephone contacts through internet.(3) Given that mobile phones have an in-built internet and therefore can be used for a different type of telephone conversation, it is becoming questionable whether their initial use will continue to be their primary one. In other words, traditional forms of interpersonal communication are giving way more and more to change in the nature and way of communication brought about by non-traditional media innovations, which are reflected in many new interpersonal modifications.

Utility and rationalization lie at the basis of these remarkable transformations and modifications of changes in the nature and mode of communicating, but their projective explications provoke a research perspective focused on the media themselves. The surveys indicate that, with the growing use of mobile communication means and of tariff plans of mobile operators, there is an emerging trend of intense communication through mobile means. At times communication goes on merely for the sake of exhausting the tariff plan. This tariff-determined situation in the intense mobile communication between people is part of the increase in the dynamics of interpersonal mediatized communications. Interpersonal communications between friends and relatives are increasing but the electronic mode of conducting them is also growing in share Non-traditional media determined and set the modifications of interpersonal communication on the highest of pedestals. Interpersonal communication is evolving from less mediated to increasingly mediated

Mobile-determined communication is starting to predominate over direct face-to-face contacts. It generates a trend of restructuring of direct and mediatized interpersonal communication in favour of the mediatized ones.

The new cultural and behaviour transformations in interpersonal communication are trends caused by the mobility and ubiquity of the new communication means.

However, on the basis of the findings of this survey, it is not possible to say categorically whether face-to-face interpersonal communications are decreasing considerably while mobile-determined communications are growing at their expense. To ascertain this, a much more complicated research procedure would be necessary; I hope to apply such a procedure in future research. But it is a fact that there is an observable trend of increasingly frequent substitution of live meetings by electronic contact. The hypothesis has yet to be proven that there is an internal restructuring of interpersonal communications and a decrease of direct contacts.

- a new structuring of written communication culture

The surveys data indicate there is a new situation of structuring of written communication, with a growing share of electronic letters and a decrease to a minimum of traditional letter-writing and stationary-telephone calls. There is an increased restructuring and concentration of writing in the mobile media in terms of: firstly, the number of acts of communication per unit of time; secondly, change of mediatization technique; and thirdly, materialization. The new capacity for written communication through mobile media ultimately represents a new revival of the letter, though in a greatly modified form. The modifications and varieties of written communication through text messaging, e-mails, chat, etc., have given rise to a new written culture that has a youthful character; the new kind of written communication has determined the appearance of a new, text messaging culture (Angel, Alvin 2007; Uy-Tioco 2007). The latter com-

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bines traditional written expression with the capacity for objectifying non-verbal explications, which are a kind of electronic language used for "displaying" emotions in e-writing. The new linguistic equivalent of this culture is a mix of national and international languages, a concentration of verbal and non-verbal (emoticon) explications as a set of digital and lexical signs and symbols. This new written culture, respectively reading culture – a predominantly youthful one – has revived written communication and accelerated the processes of reading; it has even caused some sociologists of reading to reject the frequent pessimistic remarks about the decline of reading. In their view, reading has not decreased at all, in fact it has increased many times over, but a large part of it is done through the new media

(Tsvetkova, 2006). We may add that traditional writing is also being transformed into accelerated writing through the new media. The personal blogs of individuals, including readers who contribute their own writings to the blogs, are one more argument in support of this claim.

In response to the question "Do you feel that text messaging has taken the place of sending traditional letters, telegrammes, postcards, etc. on festive occasions related to relatives and friends?", the greater share of respondents have indicated "*Yes, I strongly agree".* Together with the response "*Yes, I agree somewhat",* the total share of affirmative answers is 85, 5 percent: respectively 51,4 percent for "*strongly"* and 34,1 percent for *"somewhat". "I mostly disagree"* was the response given by only 8, 4 percent of respondents.

It was not long ago when traditional postal services constituted the only form of transmitting written communication. In what way have things changed? Is there a rejection of the traditional letter? In fact written communication still exists in its traditional form as well, but with limited parameters and with an inner change of structure. Today traditional forms of letters coming from institutions (announcements regarding taxes, bank deposits, etc.) are prevalent over letters between friends and relatives; while telegrams are increasingly falling into disuse as means for rapid informing. The new situation is characterized by an increasingly assertive substitution of electronic communication for the traditional written one.

New mobile-determined culture

With the appearance of internet and mobile phones, a new dimension of culture has been opened, connected with mobility. Culture is becoming increasingly mobile in nature. It could be said that a new media culture has emerged, the main feature of which is mobility.

With the increasingly wide use of the internet and mobile phones, several media-determined socio-cultural processes have started to emerge, related to mobility; these processes define present-day and future changes in everyday cultural patterns and in culture as a whole.

Research results indicate that, being mobile-determined, this new media culture is a youthful one. Youths have the highest percentages with regard to:

- number of possessed mobile phones, frequency of logging into the internet and the universal quality of the cultural choices.

The young age groups possess more mobile phones overall than the older age groups. As bearers of new trends, they appear to also express new searching for ways of dealing with the differing costs among the various mobile operators in our country. One of the reasons why individuals possess more than one mobile phone is the possibility this affords of using the advantages of different tariff plans offered by the currently existing three mobile operators in our country.

The situation is different as regards the frequency of communication through the Internet. A considerably greater share of young people than of older ones gets in touch through the internet, and youths use the full range of the internet cultural centuries according to their personal preferences. The table below indicates the main areas of interest with respect to the Internet.

Table No 1. Use of the Internet Total

		Total %
1	As a means for obtaining information	91,0
2	As a means for cultural communication	79,20
3	For downloading various cultural products: movies, music, etc.	74,90
4	As a means for professional work.	74,50
5	As a means of studying	72,30
6	As a means of getting acquainted with new people	55,80
7	For games	54,90

Several orientations are evident: 1. An active attitude to various kinds of communication choice; 2. Universality of socio-cultural choices: for obtaining information, for cultural communication, for getting acquainted, for games; 3. The use of the internet as a means for work and study.

- creation of new practices of marking down agendas

In our traditional culture noting the time of important meetings and special events was chiefly done in personal notebooks, on separate note sheets, etc. Today *this cultural manner has yielded its place to notebooks and organizers in mobile phones.*

The new practices in organization of time are in fact new practices in individual agenda setting for the day, the week, or the month. Research has shown that youths actually use mobile phones as **notebooks** much more often than do older age groups. This can be explained by the fact that older people have a tradition of using the usual paper notebooks, while young people have not acquired such a habit. Its convenience and handiness at all times are the qualities that make the notebook function of mobile phones a preferred means among the young age groups. The same is true regarding the use of the mobile phone organizer.

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New possibilities for participation in cultural life with a national and international scope

- the transformation of individual participation from passive into active

The internet and mobile phones generate new processes and forms of participation in cultural life. One of these is the transformation of individual participation from passive into active and the combination of the two. The individual is turning from recipient into communicator, from a viewer into an author, from consumer into producer, from contemplator into disseminator. He/she may often play the role of photo reporter, journalist, photographer, movie director, etc., thus contributing to the creation of the general audiovisual culture. The video clips sent to specialized sites like You Tube are often used by world media organizations when creating their programmes. Such video clips are used as visual or audiovisual arguments in the verbal explications of TV programmes, and also as separate included audiovisual material.

Thanks to its video camera function, the mobile phone makes it possible to take pictures, make video clips, and make short films in all places where the user can possibly be present. There is an ample amount of examples of this in the specialized internet sites.

In Bulgaria we all recall that when a fire started on a train along the Sofia-Kardam line, scenes of the incident were broadcast on TV thanks to films made through mobile phones by witnesses. Such possibilities afforded by the new media are potent arguments for considering the individual as creator and disseminator of his own film production.

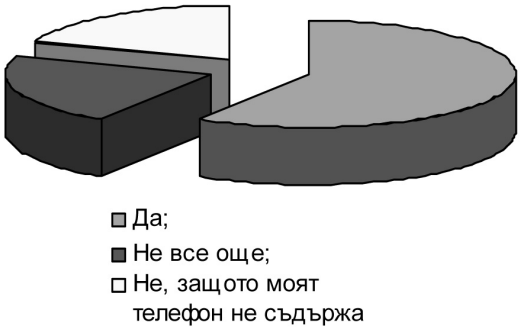
- the individuals become independent media.

As creator and disseminator of his/her own "production", the individuals really assume the features of independent media.

A person assumes the role of a sort of independent media likewise when creating personal blogs, vlogs, podcasts, etc.; this is a strong argument for the idea of mediatized (medialized) society, presented some years ago (Peicheva, 2003, 2006) .

In this context an extremely encouraging fact is that, when asked whether they had made video clips using their mobile phones, more than half of the respondents answered in the affirmative (56,4 %).

Graph No 1. Have you made video clips using your mobile phone?



Legend

Yes

Not yet

No, because my phone does not provide that option

For now the new opportunities for taking part in cultural life by creating video clips are typically used by young people. The data in the table below clearly show the young age category of the authors of audiovisual creations.

Table No 2. Authors of audiovisual creations

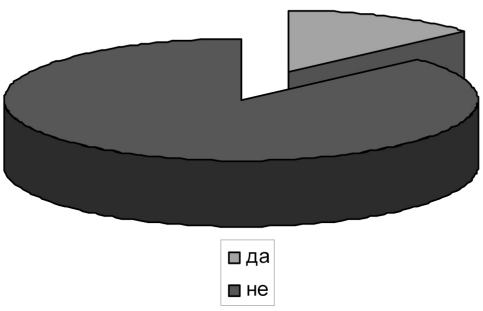
Rows	Yes,	Not yet	No, because my phone does not provide that option
Aged under 15;	100,0%		
From 15 to 18;	73,3%		26,7%
From 19 to 24;	78,6%	10,4%	11%
From 25 to 30;	66,7%	21,4%	11,9%
From 30 to 40;	68,8%	21,8%	9,4%
From 41 to 50;	30,1%	38,4%	31,5%
From 51 to 60;	22,7%	31,8%	45,5%
Over 60.	5,1%	28,2%	66,7%
Total	56,4%	20,5%	23,1%

But the survey data also show some important changes with regard to the age of users. For the response item "No, because my telephone does not provide that option" the largest percentage, about 60%, is of people aged above 60. The share of people in the age range between 50 and 60 is also high compared with other age groups.

According to these responses, while the younger age groups make up the potential new participants in cultural life, the older ones are not participating for lack of technical means.

Of course, as yet few people have actually sent their video clips to specialized sites. Of the surveyed persons, an average of 11,8 % have answered this question in the affirmative. Here again the younger age groups have a higher share, ranging from one fifth to one fourth.

Graph No 2 Have you sent video clips to specialized sites?



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Legend
Yes
No

About one fifth to one fourth of the surveyed persons in the young age groups can be said to be actual participants in cultural life in this aspect. But these percentages are highly encouraging, given that this practice is relatively new. The growing share of active communication at the expense of passive one, to which the mobile phone and the Internet have contributed, are a new and significant demonstration that individuals are starting to act as independent media, and an additional confirmation of the mediatization of society. By way of summary it can be said that the mediatization of society is acquiring real and perceptible dimensions. The mediatization of society is a process with global dimensions. In fact, it is one of the most important consequences of globalization, just as globalization, in turn, is possible thanks to mediatization. The new mobile-determined culture is the new convergence-determined culture, a culture of global dimensions.

The conclusions

The results of the survey confirm some familiar observations made in other surveys (Kenichi, 2006; Hyo, Gwang, Park, & Rice,. 2007), but reveal some new aspects, which are conceptualized in this article. Together with this, we have attempted to rethink some assumptions that are not sufficiently provable; we have raised issues that must be confirmed or rejected through further research.

Among the acceptable conceptualizations are the following findings: media innovations have caused and are causing permanent changes in the nature and ways of communicating and in the structure of communications; interpersonal communications between friends and relatives are increasing but the electronic mode of conducting them is also growing in share; there is a new revival of the letter in a greatly modified form; a new dimension of culture is being generated, and it is connected with mobility; individuals are becoming creators and disseminators of their own audio-visual "production", in other words they are becoming independent media.

Additional discussions and reconfirming of results through further research have yet to be made in connection with the following questions: the prevalence of mobile-determined interpersonal communication over direct communication; the youthful characteristic of many processes in the framework of the new cultural behaviour patterns connected with mobile-determined culture; the considerations and dimensions for generating a new communication "ecology" and new emphases in media literacy. The consequences of this new type of mobile-determined cultural processes have yet to be interpreted.

Notes

1. The two sociological surveys have been conducted with a uniform methodology in the Laboratory of Sociology of New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The surveys were based on a representative sample. In order to provide information for the research objective, the research covered respondents across the country, aged 10 to 75. The method used was direct individual enquiry.

2. See http://www.nsi.bg/IKT/IKT.htm Survey on Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households 2007.

The Survey on Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households 2007 is a joint survey of the National Statistical Institute and the European Community, carried out according to Eurostat requirements. The survey methodology and tool are in full compliance with the European Community Directives and Regulation No 808/2004 of the European Parliament.

The main target of the survey is to obtain reliable and comparable data on information and communication technologies usage in the Republic of Bulgaria, compliant with those of EU Member States. In order to provide information, which relates to the survey objective, the survey target is aggregations of ordinary households in the country and their members aged between 16 and 74 years. The collective households are not included in the survey, as well as one-member households, comprising of persons under 16 years old and above 74 years old, as these persons are not target of the survey.

The sample covers 4506 households in total, as well as 10163 persons from different regions in Bulgaria. A representative two-level cluster sample on national and regional level is designed aiming at provision of representative results and results with enough stochastic precision on persons and households aggregations.

3. E-Communications Household Survey (2007) April. Special Eurobarometer. European Commission.

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Abstract

This article is based on two sociological surveys dealing with the internet and mobile telephones, conducted in Bulgaria in 2008 with the participation of the author.(1) The survey findings made it possible to trace several socio-cultural processes and trends. The most important of them examined in this article, are related to: the transformation of individual communication participation from a passive into an active endeavor; the restructuring of the communication space and the preconditions for this; the revival of letter writing and the restructuring of written communication; the reorientation of interpersonal communication toward greater mobility and its electronic determination; the emergence of a new kind of mobile-determined culture; individuals' becoming independent media; the completion of the framework of processes of medialization (mediatization) of society.

Key words

Internet; mobile telephone; restructuring of communications; communication ecology; mobile determined culture; mediatization.

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