

# **The Media Paradox:**

**How an Increasingly Connected World is  
Increasingly Disconnecting – And if  
There is Hope for Re-Convergence**

*By Alan Boswell*

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**Advised by Prof. Timothy Titus**

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## Introduction

Plopping down on the living room couch after getting home from her night class, Rosie gets a text from a guy she met out last weekend at a new hip club in town. Her friend had heard about the club through its rave reviews on Yelp and over GChat convinced Rosie to come along. Rosie quietly acquiesced while processing through a spreadsheet on her work desktop.

Rosie's housemate, Linda, is relaxing in the nearby recliner with the nearby TV turned on. She appeared busy on her iPhone as Rosie walked in, but without looking up Linda offers an hello and asks how her day went. Rosie, moans an "Oh, fine I guess" as she pulls out her Macbook from her bag and nonchalantly flips it open. A quick glance at her email inbox bounces her over to her Facebook wall, where her friend Susan from high school posted a greeting; Rosie hasn't seen Susan since their graduation together years ago.

Glancing up at the TV, Rosie asks Linda what she is watching. After Linda utters a mindless, "Hmm?" – followed by a couple-second pause – she looks up and replies, "Oh, I was watching something else. Feel free to put it on whatever." By this point, however, Rosie is not really paying attention anymore as she scrolls through the posts she missed in today's RSS feed, which is then followed by a scan through the day's activity from her Twitter follows. She pops open a few links along the way that look promising – promising, at least, judging by the 15-word posts. The TV continues playing. After a few minutes, Linda grabs a cup of water and heads to bed. Rosie follows a few minutes later.

Never before has our society been so interconnected. Never before has our world felt so disconnected.

Within the structure of this paradox rests a crucial question for our age. As media increasingly takes a central and commanding place in the lives of Americans and the world's technological elite, the individual is becoming more and more connected to the world at-large. At the same time, however, the individual is growing increasingly isolated from society while society at-large is becoming increasingly fragmented and polarized.

Although the emerging popular consciousness of the "media revolution" usually hypothesizes a very recent and rapid emergence of media predominance, the truth is that the trends we are now seeing today should not be viewed as only new in origin but must instead be viewed in relation to a centuries-long progression of the media's emerging prevalence in society. Recently, with the rise of new media, what society has seen is the rapid acceleration of what is nevertheless a long and complex historical process. These new technological innovations are being developed not in a contextual vacuum but within the demands of a fragmented society of increasingly isolated mobile social units. Though media is not the sole or even main factor in late modernity's processes of fragmentation, these media advancements made modern society possible. Without media as the glue, the dispersed and disjointed social construction society bears today could not be held together.

The fragmentation of American society in the last century has been well documented, and, perhaps more importantly, is intuitively felt by the everyday American. The fragmentation can be discussed on two different observable and related levels: First, individuals become more and more disconnected from immediate communities in a process of slow atomization across society. Secondly, society becomes more fragmented into ever-narrowing subcultures and niches.

The rise of the media as a part of the daily life in Western society cannot be viewed in isolation from these trends of social fragmentation. Instead, media has been both a strong barometer of these fragmentations as well as serving as a catalyst and causative factor in these same social trends.

One hears a lot a lot today about “information” and the new ways in which we share information and have access to it. Much less, though, is said about the interaction itself – the technologically-mediated communication that we all to varying but increasing degrees employ in our daily lives – and how these mediated forms of human interaction change who we are and how we socially organize.

The questions are: How do these mediated communications relate to these fragmenting forces in society? Do these fragmenting forces arise from any essential nature of technologically mediated communications, or can the trends be reversible with further technological and creative advancement? Specifically, how must we critically view the rise of new forms of social media in relation to the fragmenting and potential re-converging of society?

The task here will be to explore the relationship between the mediazation of society and the fragmentation of society. The two will be seen to relate to each other in a historical dialectic that can place its modern roots with the innovation of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The new forms of social interaction that arose out of the mediazation process will be examined and analyzed as to their affect on society and the individual. Next, the specific turn into new media will be explored, followed by a look at the three major trends of new media looking forward. In all this, the focus will remain: How does mediated communication affect human society?

## Mediazation

The rise of media in the daily life of the average American in the past decade has caught the attention of even the most passive observer. It has been anything but discreet. With the recent Internet revolution and explosion of mobile technologies, people understand that something big is afoot. They understand that the ways that friends and family are now communicating and staying in contact are undergoing a significant shift, and that this shift must have widespread underlying implications.

What many do not fully consider, however, is how this recent groundswell is not really unprecedented, nor is this rise of media as a trend in Western society a recent phenomenon. While this current generation can lay claims to a new kind of media landscape with connectivity implications never before seen, the progressively upward role of media in society is a trend that is centuries old. This steady progression of media's technological advancement and its role in everyday life will be termed the *mediization* of society.

The word *media* has become popular in recent times, but it is worth uncovering the clutter around the word to retrieve its basic definition. Media is the technologies or means of carrying information between people.<sup>1</sup> Media is by no means a passive observer to human history. The history humankind learning to store or transport information is tied very closely to the arc of human history itself. The ability to participate in complex communication (information-sharing) through speech marked the rise of humankind as a dominant species. The advent of forms of systematized written communication in many ways marked the rise of human civilization. The growing capabilities and use of media,

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<sup>1</sup> *Media* will be used here interchangeably in a plural manner and in a singular manner depending on the context. Although originally plural, it can now also connote a singularity as a general phenomenon.

then, has not only been a steady trend throughout human history, but is integrally tied to mankind's actual evolution.

Although, as we have seen, the mediazation of society could be traced back to perhaps the origin of society itself, for our purposes we will focus the beginning of the modern arc of mediazation with the innovation of the European printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. With the rise of the printing press began the steady acceleration towards the modern media landscape. With the printing press came the ability to widely disperse information across society in a concrete form. With the publishing of books, pamphlets, and newspapers arose not only a new form of communications, but new socioeconomic possibilities and a newly widespread form of consciousness. Likewise, each new progression in the mediazation process has produced corresponding social consequences – some immediately clear, some clear in hindsight, and some forever subtle.

From the telegram to the radio to television to the telephone to the cassette tape to SMS technology to the Internet to 1000-channel cable TV packages to social networking sites and on and on, each new means of interacting and communicating carries with it new means in how we think and organize ourselves socially. It is these effects of the mediazation process that we will be explored as we move forward.

## **Fragmentation**

The growing fragmentation of American society has been a widely recognized phenomenon (Oldenburg 1999). The “fragmentation” of society is a broad term that includes, but is not limited to, trends of disintegration, atomization, alienation, internalization, and polarization. In this sense, then, fragmentation includes both the isolation of the individual in society and the wider splintering and drifting of American

culture. While broad in scope, “fragmentation” is a useful term because the social forces it umbrellas are not distinct from each other but are highly related.

Before discussing the relationship between media and social fragmentation, it is worth briefly describing the surface-level manifestations of this fragmentation in modern American society. The fragmentation of American society is simple to recognize. Modern society is very different from the way of life and community of pre-modernity.

Individuals are no longer reliant on the immediate support of surrounding geographic communities, nor does familial and fraternal ties require geographic proximity. The modern capitalist system requires a mobile workforce, and individualistic cultural upbringings support an increasing ability for youth to immediately strike out on their own upon early adulthood. As this mix of modern professionals cram into urban centers, the formation of localized neighborhood communities no longer materializes. Apartment renters are unlikely to have any relation to their immediate neighbors but instead rely on a trans-geographic network of relations that includes local and long-distance support.<sup>2</sup>

While urban centers are built around the atomized individual, suburbia is built around the family as the core social unit. However, the atomization in suburbia of the family is similar to the atomization of the individual in urban centers. The center of professional and most of recreational/social life still revolves around the city, but home life is centered in the suburb. This work-home split in-itself is a driving force of alienation, as the workforce in the cities are fragmented from their home lives in suburbia. Suburbia itself operates as a community only on a very shallow level – the

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<sup>2</sup> One could criticize this analysis as being narrowly focused on mostly the young, white, middle class of society. However, this analysis is describing social trends, not social facts, and these are the predominant social trends of the modern day. That the middle-class youth would be the early carriers of these trends is a predictable phenomenon.



community itself generally lacks any historical roots and the community remains anchored not in itself but in the urban center as both its economic and (largely) social core.

To give some more concrete clarity, it is worth drawing attention to the decline of two important social “institutions” in American communities. To some degree, the examples are valuable mostly on the anecdotal level, although this is not to say that their decline is not significant in its own way. First, notice the phenomenon of the decline of the “third place” in American society (Oldenburg 1999). The third place is a social gathering spot outside of work or home (hence the “third” place). The third place is easily accessible to those in the community, has a relatively casual atmosphere, and is cheap to hang out at. In a society, the third place plays a role of public forum of sorts, where people gather socially to casually hang out socially and engage in discussion. Germany has beer gardens, Ireland pubs, France cafes, Italy piazzas. In America, a myriad of institutions filled this role, from the barbershop to the coffee shop to the bookstore. However, in conjunction with late modern social forces, this third place is increasingly diminishing. Because of growing work hours, the suburban sprawl, and the atomization of individual and the family, and the rise of national chain stores, home and work now constitute the daily American experience. While certain urban neighborhoods still have functional third places, most suburban and residential neighborhoods do not.

One other notable example is the decline of the American front porch and the rise of the back porch. This shift is a powerful one on a symbolic level, but it is equally powerful on an analytic level. The front porch used to be the place for families to lounge during the evenings and weekends. Neighbors could stroll along the street and join each other for

friendly chats. Beginning shortly after World War II, driven partly by the flight to suburbia and the rise of the automobile (making the front porch less desirable a lounge location), the front porch began to be replaced by the back porch (Khan and Meagher 1990). Practically, this meant less community engagement as people withdrew to the privacy of their backyards rather than the sociality of their front yard. Symbolically, the decline of the front porch signals the growing disintegration of neighborly community engagement in society. Privacy and atomization now reigns in American neighborhoods; community suffers.

On a cultural level, much can be said about the deepening polarization in recent America. Whereas in the days of Tocqueville, America was mostly a homogenous society with a relatively level economic distribution, the America today is increasingly pluralistic, socio-economically polarized, and culturally divided. As an example, it is worth noting the current political divisions in modern society. For instance, only 27% of Republicans approve of Barack Obama's job as president compared to 88% Democrats in an April 2009 poll (*Economist* 2009).<sup>3</sup> While that may seem completely normal, note that this is a larger margin than we saw in George W. Bush's term in April 2001 even after a highly partisan election controversy. And digging farther back, 55% of Democrats approved of Richard Nixon and 56% Republicans of Jimmy Carter at their comparable points in their respective presidencies (*Economist*). While some would perhaps suggest this hyper partisanship is likely nothing more than a phase in American politics due to

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<sup>3</sup> While it is true that these numbers are slightly misleading since the Republican Party ID numbers have been shrinking as many of its moderates have stopped identifying with the party. This does not negate, however, and in fact supports, the argument of the increased political polarization in this country between very sizeable portions of the American people.

particular political tactics of the last couple decades, it will be shown that these trends are highly related to the transforming media landscape and will likely plague American society in some form for the foreseeable future.

## **A Dialectical Approach**

How does the prevalence of new media technologies relate to these trends of social fragmentation? The answer is more complex than any linear, causative explanation. Mediazation and fragmentation have been intertwined in a nuanced dialectical relationship for centuries, simultaneously feeding off of the other and pushing the other forward.

This is not to say that these two forces operate within an exclusive relationship, or anything that amounts to a near-exclusive relationship; as we saw above, for instance, the rise of the automobile played a major factor into the decline of the American front porch. This dialectic foundation does, however, suggest that neither the new media landscape nor contemporary forces of social fragmentation could be where they stand today without the one receiving supporting influence from the other. The rise of media in society has made possible and contributed to late modernity's social fragmentation; social fragmentation has supported and made necessary the rise of the new media landscape. This dialectical approach is crucial to understanding the media paradox.

In addition, it is important to distinguish that this mediazation-fragmentation dialectic operates on two different levels. First, the media revolution has been dialectically related to physically objective forms of social fragmentation and dispersion, including community disintegration and such phenomena as the decline of the front porch and the American "third place."

However, this dialectic also interacts on a subjective level within members of society. Technologically mediated communication is taking on stronger and stronger prominence in daily life, and these new forms of social interaction have substantive subjective implications in the communicating subjects. In other words, how people interact affect not just the interaction itself but the subjects as well. Subjective elements of fragmentation include alienation and social isolation. In accordance with the dialectic approach, these subjective elements of fragmentation can both arise from and partially cause these new forms of mediated communications.

While objective manifestations of this mediatization-fragmentation dialectic are easily noticed, the subjective elements tend to be more subtle – and, arguably, more in need of serious scholarship. While the relation between a more mobile society and the need for more enhanced forms of transgeographical communication is plainly perceivable, much more nuanced is how the mediatization effects relate to increased social estrangement or to hyper-reflexive passivity in the subjects of modern mediated interactions.

One of the clearest examples of this dialectic at work is the online dating phenomenon. Nobody originally decides that they want to find their romantic partner online. Rather, online dating has exploded because increasing numbers of single people are having a hard time really meeting people in regular society. This social fragmentation is driving desperate singles to browsing for potential mates online. In turn, though, this new mediated method for meeting one's future romantic partner creates a suction effect on other singles less eager to adopt the new technological use. As online dating gains steam, the already-poor active single scene in communities grows weaker and weaker,

causing the further exodus from sustained effort in the traditional single scene, and so on and so on. Here, then, media technology and social fragmenting are seen in their dialectical relationship, each working on the other, pulling the other forward.

As this analysis is carried further, the core importance of this dialectic approach will become apparent. It would be foolhardy to suggest that the fragmenting forces of society were caused by mediatization; it would be equally unavailing to assert that social fragmentation is the sole cause of the advancement in media technologies and their implementation in daily business and personal life. Neither of those cases must be asserted, nonetheless, to state a powerful, complex link between the two forces. And understanding this link is the key to understanding why in a world in which we are increasingly connected to one another, the world both appears and feels to be disconnecting.

### **A Brief History of the Mediatization-Fragmentation Relationship**

What exactly therefore does the mediatization of society have to do with the fragmenting of society? How are the two related?

Before jumping to modern day to take a critical look at the rise of new media, we need to first to take a look back at the back history of this relationship. To understand where we are heading, we first need to understand from whence we came. While this is not the place for a comprehensive analysis of the myriad of forms of media that have arisen, especially during the last half-century, looking at this history will give us a clearer notion of the up-to-now underappreciated relationship between media and forces of social fragmentation.

In the course of this analysis, three different issues should be addressed. How does media affect the personal subject? How does media affect the way society organizes and forms communities? How do late modern social forces create the dependence for existing forms of media and make necessary new advancing forms of media technology? These three questions, addressing both the objective and subjective levels of fragmentation and both sides of the mediatization-fragmentation dialectic, will guide us through the historical analysis of mediatization.

With the arrival of the printing press, mediatization began on its modern arc. The ability to disperse information across the literate world in a quickly replicable form quickly contributed to the erosion of pre-modern forms of authority, both political and religious. Besides the obvious quality of making all forms of opinion or information widely available, the printing press brought with it the wide immersion across society into new forms of consciousness, new forms of being-there in the world, and new forms of conceptualizing man's surrounding society. Overwhelmingly, of course, the spread of literature had a positive effect for mankind. In the immediate future, the effects were very revolutionary – the flux of social classes, the challenging of entrenched power, the beginning of the Enlightenment – building the foundations for modernity as we know it.

This is not to say, however, that the printing press did not cause significant effects worthy of grave concern, nor that the printing press did not have its serious intellectual opposition. A few centuries after the printing press was invented, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard decried the rise of a new age he saw corresponding with the rise of the press. Contrasting his present day with previous eras, he deridingly termed the modern age as the Age of Reflection. The Age of Reflection is

characterized by Kierkegaard with the invention of the “public” and endless public debate (2000). However, as Kierkegaard contended, since the “public” is a false entity – nothing more than an abstraction, an illusion arising out of the press – this mindset of constant deliberation has led to an age of hyper-reflexivity characterized by real-life passivity. Bemoans Kierkegaard ironically, “A genuine religious rejection of the world, followed with constant self-denial, is...unthinkable among the youth of our time: nevertheless, some bible college student has the virtuosity to achieve something even greater. He could design some projected group or Society which aims to save those who are lost.”

Kierkegaard’s polemic is not against the printing press itself (after all, it did eventually disperse his own writings across the world) as it is against a social phenomenon Kierkegaard identified as originating with the new modes of communication the printing press enabled. Kierkegaard’s polemic shines a light into a dark corner usually left to compile cobwebs: the consequences of our Information Age on the subjectivity of the individual himself. As we will see, the hyper-reflexiveness first noticed by Kierkegaard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century will become increasingly an issue as the mediatization continues.

Benedict Anderson, more than a century after Kierkegaard, also recognized deeper-than-surface-level shifts on account of the printing press. In his landmark book on nationality, Anderson suggests, similarly to Kierkegaard, that the printing press made possible what he calls “imagined communities” – abstract communities made consciously real through the extrapolation that others of a similar mind had read a piece of literature (1983). Anderson partially credits these “imagined communities” with the enigmatic rise of nationalism, where a wide society of people near-spontaneously develop a sense of

deep communion, shared purpose, and statehood entitlement. Anderson hypothesizes that in certain parts of the world literature was partly responsible for this perplexing phenomenon. National literature conjured up these “imagined communities” in the minds of the society, creating far-stretching bonds among fellow “countrymen” who could not even know of each other’s existence.

Though Anderson calls these communities imagined, this term is misleading. By imagined, Anderson is of course denoting that the individual who reads a certain material of course does not know who the others reading the material are, therefore the community is merely “imagined.” However, the community is clearly real – he himself credits it with the rise of nationalistic revolutions – just not “real” in the traditional always-present, being-there sense of community. To be sure, as a form of broadcast (one-to-all) communication, the community was not real in the sense that the members did not interact or know personally most members of the community; however, the community was real in as much as being a collective consciousness of similarly ideologically natured members. Anderson made the mistake of connoting non-traditional forms of community as unreal.<sup>4</sup>

On a more basic level though than even the creation of these abstract forms of community – the “public” for Kierkegaard and “imagined communities” for Anderson – the wide availability of reading material created new forms of widespread social communication. The act of immersion in a book is an act of communication that is transgeographical and transtemporal– in other words, a form of communication non-existent in traditional manners of being-there. This “transport” effect of reading is self-

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<sup>4</sup> Instead of *imagined*, a better term to describe these new forms might have been *virtual*.



evident to avid readers. Whether sought by an introverted teenager seeking relief from the annoyances of family life or by a relaxed business traveler on a plane ride, one of the addictions to reading is the ability to avoid the being-there of the moment by being elsewhere. This escapist desire is doubtfully a new facet of the human psyche; what is new, however, is the ability to be aided, through media, in escaping mentally while staying put physically. One imagines that before the press-instigated age of reading, an unhappy youth would simply flee to a private getaway place or go find a group of friends. Now such a modern youth would not have to move *physically* at all.

On a temporal nature, the printing press created the transport effect on the flip side of time-space being-there as well. As opposed to traditional forms of being-there communication, the printing press made widespread the ability to communicate transtemporally and semitemporally. Books are ideally transtemporal, meaning that the medium preserves the communication in a non-immediate manner. One can easily pick up today a copy of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* almost a century after it was written and well after the author's death. By semitemporally is meant communication that is immediate in nature but is communicated in such a medium that it need not interrupt the immediate being-there of the receptor. The daily newspaper is an early crude example of semitemporal communication – its content is immediate-in-nature, but the reader can fit its consumption into opportune times throughout the day. In contrast, traditional temporal communication (i.e. a public speech) must be received in the immediate present.

The printing press, therefore, led to the widespread ability for transgeographical, trans/semitemporal media to begin permeating the everyday lives of members of Western society. Now, of course, neither of these two distinctions was new in human society.

Scrolls carried sacred texts from one generation to the next; letter writing facilitated transgeographical ancient communication. What the printing press did, though, is start the mediatization of everyday life. Although the concept of a book may hardly seem revolutionary on the level of basic modes of human existence, this medium did in fact spread nontraditional, *ontologically*-distinct forms of how humans could interact. The printing press was merely the beginning.

Though Anderson and Kierkegaard have both touched on some potential influences of these distinct forms of human interaction, the broad question remains of exactly how this mediatization of society is related to trends of fragmentation. After all, Anderson noted its revolutionary ability to *bring together* a society. Before addressing this paradox fully, we need to take a look at how mediatization has progressed over the past few centuries since its humble beginnings in the printing press.

In addition to the geographic and temporal distinctions, one further categorization is helpful to understanding different types of media that have arisen – the type of communication the medium mediates. There are three main types of communication that technology mediates: broadcast (one-to-many), two-way (one-to-one), and interactive (many-to-many). Books, for example, are broadcast; telephones are two-way; online forums are interactive.

Employing these three distinctions (geographical, temporal, and communication-type), we can analyze the respective niches of the variety of media that have arisen since the printing press made manuscripts commonplace centuries ago.<sup>5</sup> Live radio and

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, there are further distinctions that one could make to further subdivide these groups (such as relative mobility vs. immobility). But these three factors are most useful in exploring the social implications of these innovations.

television are transgeographical, temporal, and broadcast. Films, video-on-demand, TiVo, and YouTube (and other Internet video sites) are an evolution off of the book model – transgeographical, transtemporal, and broadcast. Telegrams, phones, and video chatting are transgeographical, temporal, and (mostly) two-way. Short Message Service (i.e. text messaging) and instant messaging technologies are both transgeographical, semitemporal, and two-way. Email is transgeographical, semitemporal, and (usually) two-way. While the Internet nowadays is a different case altogether, the early Internet could be classified as largely transgeographical, transtemporal/semitemporal, and broadcast.

First, for instance, notice that nearly all media thus far is fundamentally transgeographical in nature. Explicitly recognizing this root force in historical media is central to understanding some of the ways in which mediazation affects the way our society now can organize and interact. Traditionally, in order for two humans to interact, they had to communicate the shared immediacy of space and time (or send a messenger to communicate in shared space and time). One of the powers of nearly all media thus far is its ability to transcend the geographical limitations of being-there existence to allow human communication across distances.

The implications for how humans can begin organizing differently socially then are apparent. As such transgeographical modes of communication progress technologically, communities and social ties within a society can disperse farther and farther apart while still being able to maintain (to varying degrees of strength) a social connection.

Now, what exactly does all this have to do with all this social *fragmentation* again? Recall that the paradox of the present age is that while society is becoming

increasingly connecting through more powerful and converging forms of media, it feels and appears to be increasingly disconnecting. Society feels more disconnected at a subunit level, inasmuch as individuals and families become increasingly isolated from the traditional surrounding communities. And it feels more disconnected culturally, as technologies have shifted the primacy of traditional communities towards self-chosen communities.

As distinguished above, the mediazation of everyday life relates to fragmentation on both an objective level and on a subjective level. Objectively, for instance, transgeographical communication allows for human society to become more dispersed geographically. The increased likelihood for broad disjointed empires to arise, for youth to be to leave home, for a lack of cultural resistance to the mobilization and atomization effects of modern capitalism – all these add to the disintegration of traditional communities, and all are objective manifestations of fragmentation.

On the subjective level, the consequences can be even more numerous and complex but the implications even less clear. Psychologically, how do increased states of transported consciousnesses and mediated communications affect members of society?

Of course, the subjective is not isolated from the objective. Society is nothing more than the sum of its parts. Widespread changes in subjectivity will inevitably manifest itself behaviorally. However, these secondary affects of mediazation are not always easily discerned or manifested the same way across society.

Especially today, this issue of discerning some of the subtler effects of mediazation needs to be kept in mind. Only very recently has the mediazation accelerated to the point where one would expect to see some of the deeper consequences of these new

forms of interacting arise. Even with the surging, converging nature of media today, it will be a while – if ever – before sociological research will be able to delineate objectively some of the actual societal affects of the subjective changes in society's subjects.

Before many such changes would have any chance of being clearly objectively shown, however, one can still explore on an informed theoretical level how changes happening right now would affect society. Some reasonable subjective consequences of mediatization must merely be asserted for the time being, and, being subjective in nature, these assertions must to some degree be judged on the basis of how other careful observers feel these assertions match their and others' subjective experiences with reality.

Nevertheless, we do have some fragmented glimpses at how some of these technologies are affecting our daily lives. A recent study has shown, for instance, that watching one's favorite television shows helps ease people's feelings of loneliness and personal rejection by raising illusory feelings of "belongingness" (Derrick 2009). This would likely hold just as true for films, music, video games and other form of media. A study from 2003 also showed that enhanced Internet use was similarly tied to poor social health (Modayil et al). The study found, however, that the poor social health usually predated the excessive Internet use by years, suggesting that those already suffering from social isolation fled to the Internet for relief.<sup>6</sup>

Both of these studies suggest that the broadcast media in question was therapeutic rather than being a causative factor in the social isolation. This finding should not be a major surprise. But are those two necessarily exclusive? In the past, if one was lonely,

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this study takes place in 2004, right before the major social media revolution. One could reasonably expect much more nuanced findings now.

there was an obvious remedy – finding companionship. With the prevalence of certain types of media now, however, loneliness can find therapy through the illusion of social communities. While Anderson’s “imagined communities” were not really imaginary – inasmuch as they were formed by unknown but real individuals assuming each other’s existence – these are truly imagined. One of the subjective realities of narrative media (including films, TV, and books) is the experiencing of secondhand emotions. Those who are lonely can feel friendship, hurt, and love indirectly through a character. If a person struggles with social isolation, easy-acquired indirect emotions may be more appealing than seeking situations that could lead to direct emotional experiences.

But while loneliness drives people to these media, does not the media’s existence exacerbate the issue in a downward (dialectical) spiral? The individual no longer has to healthily cope to find sustainable relief from the loneliness, and society is let off the hook from dealing with the socially isolated. If viewed in context with the processes of atomization in society due to factors such as longer work hours, the middle class economic squeeze, urbanization of the youth and suburbanization of the family, and the decline of traditional communities, one could reasonably hypothesize that broadcast media has picked up a lot of the social slack for helping those who fall through the cracks socially.

While these studies provide some clues as to certain subjective effects from broadcast media (which is the most accurate characterization of the Internet in the early 2000s), what about two-way types of communication? Of course, in two-way communication, the social contacts are not merely illusory as in broadcast characters. Claude Fischer’s detailed analysis of the rise of the telephone in America gives a peak

into how even media that is actively connecting real social contacts can cause upheavals in how we build our social lives (1992). Fischer found that the telephone was used largely to reinforce existing social relations rather than create new kinds of relations. He also found, however, that the telephone could be “implicated” in what he calls increased “privatism” – meaning that the social use of the telephone seemed to correspond to an increased insulation within one’s own private social world and a decline in broad community socialization. Those most likely to use the telephone for social reasons were rural and suburban residents and young people.

Social isolation and atomization (or “privatism”) are given here as just examples of some of the ways that basic media of the past century has led to fragmentation at the individual subjective level. Numerous theorists and researchers have suggested other new subjectivities in the media age. Giddens argues media technologies are implicated in hyper-reflexivity, behavioral passivity, the burden of self-constructing one’s own identity, and the alienation of the subject (1991). Erich Kahler suggested that the paradox of modern man is his increased detached desensitivity to society together simultaneously with his increased hyper-reflective sensitivity (1957). Thomas Keenan has suggested 24 hour cable news has created a voyeuristic passivity in regards to world affairs, especially world atrocities such as ethnic wars and genocide. This voyeuristic mindset lacks the gritty grounding in reality to backbone any serious political intervention (2002). Other assertions have included that media technologies have contributed to a duality of modern selfhood – a split between the reflexive, second-guessing, anxious inner self and the proper, well-adjusted, extroverted outer self (Stivers 2004). As evidenced, the views on how media technologies are causing havoc on personal subjectivity are about as

fragmented as the society they seek to explain. The subjective implications of mediatization are numerous, complex, and often paradoxical. However, through all these hypotheses runs a clear line of the individual subject being turned into oneself as society increasingly submerges in the background.

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The mediatization-fragmentation relationship has continued strongly to the present day. The mediatization of society has contributed to fragmenting forces on both an outward, objective level and an inward, subjective level within society. Mediatization has reinforced both the atomic fragmentation of social subunits and the cultural fragmentation of social circle insulation. In turn, meanwhile, these fragmentation forces have driven the adoption and innovation of the new social use of communication technologies. As Fischer pointed out, the youth and residents of suburban communities – both demographic objects of fragmenting forces – were the major early adopters of the telephone. Social isolation is also shown to drive the isolated towards broadcast forms of media in order to relieve feelings of social rejection.

What has been mapped here then is a sketch of this dual-acting relationship. The mediatization of everyday life has caused shifts in consciousness and modes of interacting that had much deeper significance than might appear to be the case. Advances in media also made the physical dispersion of modern day humanity possible, and, in so doing, also made the need to form localized communities less necessary. In turn, these modern fragmenting forces created eager markets for new communication technologies and forms of broadcast media. On the subjective level, the deep internal turn of the individual back into oneself is a hallmark of contemporary society, a product of this dual relationship



between modern social forces and the rise of media as a tool for both communication and escape.

All of this leads us up to the modern day. But today the media landscape looks much different than discussed so far. New media is not as crude of an instrument as its disjointed predecessors. Media now flows increasingly seamlessly through our daily lives and is becoming increasingly good at simulating being-there experiences – audio-visual media is available in most kinds of media now and in a mobile form.

Does new media just accelerate the processes of old that have been discussed, or does it represent something different? Can media ever get close enough to traditional forms of interacting that it eliminates some of its negative psychological and sociological consequences while augmenting its revolutionary advances?

## **The New Media Landscape**

“New media,” as being discussed here, is an umbrella term used to describe certain types of media that have arisen in the past decade - and usually even much more recent than that. These new forms of media represent a sharp jump forward in the mediatization process that has been carrying on for centuries. New media is an extension of this mediatization process, but it has accelerated that process to such an extent that it is fundamentally altering the grounds out of which it arose.

Whereas past, elder media creations – books, radio, television, telephone – presented themselves as a clunky break with regular being-there consciousness, new media offers something different. New media is demanding on the daily life, but demanding with the sugary promise that it can be easily be switched off, get pocketed and put away, be ignored with a simple act of the human will. In the meantime, though, new

media is always on call, its presence always lurking, luring even the busy mind with visions of multitasking.

New media is different from old media because it demands near-full integration into the daily being-there of the human individual. Past forms of media recognized their own transport effects, their own space/time “elsewhere-ness,” and accepted being called forth when desired and in between such moments sitting on the shelves. New media does not accept such a fate. New media has its sights set on nothing less than inserting itself in all human relationships, in all potential types of human communication. For common types of communication, it wants to augment them or change how they are done. For difficult or inconvenient forms of being-there human interaction, it offers the promise of replacing them. For the desired abilities to communicate whenever wherever to whomever, and in such a way that it barely interrupts the day’s tasks – it vows to create them.

The seamlessness of new media is seductive, but is it deceptive? Its powers are very real, but are they what they claim to be? What lies behind this new media revolution which in the course of a matter of years has slipped its way into the farthest corners of how we interact? How does new media affect the essential modes in which we communicate? In effect, does new media alter the mediatization-fragmentation equation, or is its distinction just one of exponential power?

Most of the explosion we have seen recently in new media is the convergence of pre-existing forms of media, creating what are in effect super-forms of media with, when connected to the World Wide Web, gives these super-forms of communication additional access to near-infinite amounts of information. Forms of media are no longer always

designated as strictly broadcast, two-way, or interactive. The rise of social networking websites, for instance, provide tools for all three of these media types within the same site and often from within the same webpage. Television no longer offers itself in merely temporal fashion – technologies such as TiVo and video-on-demand give it a near-transtemporal quality. Skype and Google Talk both offer the semi-temporality of instant messaging right next to the live temporality of videochatting. New media can be both geographical and transgeographical, temporal and transtemporal, and broadcasting and interactive.

Absolutely crucial to this new media expansion in daily life has been the explosion of mobile technology. Smart phones and increasingly portable computer notebooks represent the epitome of the new media convergence not merely because of the dizzying array of media forms which it converges together in one device but because these tools are mobile. Mobile-qualities in media are not new – consider portable radios and walkie-talkies – but never have mobile qualities been so powerful or been capable of converging so many types of media into a single device. New forms of communication have been created, but mostly pre-existing forms of communication become more powerful. Through the wide use of the smart phone and laptops, email is transforming into a much more immediate medium. YouTube now becomes streamable whenever and wherever. Micro-blogging tools such as Twitter (or, increasingly, Facebook) become more relevant as posts are received and accessible in real time.

The “seamlessness” of new media in daily life flows directly from new media’s mobility. With new media available on the go at all times, it can now be trusted with the care of whole segments of our social life. It was not very long ago when email’s

immediacy was so non-immediate that one could not send out an email and expect a greater than 50/50 chance that it would be read that same day. Text messaging would not be used in nearly the same manner if the service happened to be connected to regular landline telephones instead of mobile phones. Since the mobile revolution is just starting, it remains to be fully seen what other forms of communicative media transform to become a totally different phenomenon once smart phones become the norm and not the exception.

But new media is also *essentially* distinct from its ancestors in its distinctive characteristics. New media is not just regular media on steroids, but it often mediates different types of communication altogether.

Earlier, we broke down the categorization of media into three different distinctions according to each technology's geographical, temporal, and communication-type nature. Notice the holes in those communication-types that old media had failed to cover. No major media technology had been acclimated socially yet that counted as a truly interactive (many-to-many) communication-type. In addition, all major media were transgeographical – none could yet be classified as simply geographical. New media is filling these holes. The interactive niche is rapidly expanding, and the revolution of geographic media is just getting started (as will be discussed in the next section).

The rise of interactive media has become popularly known as “social media.” “Social media” is a misleading term, though, since in fact all media is “social” inasmuch as it mediates some form of human communication – but the term has come to mostly signify these new forms of many-to-many communication that have been enabled due to the World Wide Web and augmented by mobile technology. Most popularly referred to

out of these interactive tools (or “social media”) are social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and (to some degree) Twitter. However, the reach of interactive media extends far past social networking sites. Wikipedia, as a “crowdsourced” reference site, is a form of interactive media. Yelp.com allows customers to share service reviews. YouTube’s platform is partly interactive. Virtual reality sites such as Second Life have become increasingly more realistic and more popular. Pandora.com and iTunes’ Genius feature both aggregate users’ music choices to create personal playlists. Internet forums and group tools such as Google Groups are platforms for many-to-many interaction. Interactive news aggregating sites such as Reddit and Digg have used interactive communication to leverage the viral potential of catchy news stories.

These interactive media are, in fact, revolutionary; as shown, this is a brand new turn in the mediatization process. Much has been written speculating how this new form of communication is changing society as we know it (for example, see Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* or Tapscott and Williams’ *Wikinomics*). But no one claims to see where this is all heading. Literature on the subject as it is already trails the actual technology advancements. When broadcast-type media first got popularized through print, few could have seen the far-reaching consequences of enabling one-to-many communication on a wide scale. In the near term, it contributed to the rise of nationalism and made possible the Protestant Reformation. In the long scheme of things, audio and video broadcasting arose with its far-reaching social and political effects, while the print side of broadcasting has morphed into the blogging revolution (and now micro-blogging). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century,

such extrapolations from invention of the printing press would have been impossible to foresee.

In addition, trends in new media do not follow a simple trajectory as might be assumed but follow instead complex human inclinations. Consider, for instance, how accustomed we have become towards incorporating unnatural forms of communication into our daily lives. One might expect that as certain technologies become more “natural,” closer to being-there communication (face-to-face being the most natural form of interacting), then those more advanced technologies would quickly be adopted, as, for instance, radio progressed to television. However, consider how, despite the ease nowadays of engaging in videochat, most continue to opt for the more “primitive” text-based version of instant messaging. Similarly, the spike in audio phone conversations that followed the rise of mobile phones is already being curtailed by the rise of text messaging. Instead of choosing the more humanly “natural” form of communication, society has opted for text-based alternatives. In other words, individuals do not always choose the medium that most closely imitates life. One can see that trying to guess anything past the immediate trends in mediatization can be impossibly tricky.

This addiction to these text-based forms of media in the face of media technologies that allow more natural communication is due to another new development in new media – the rise of semitemporal communication. In addition to the interactive technologies, which are clearly obvious, right up there in terms of significance is this less noticed revolution. In this semitemporal mode of media, the mediation is immediate (unlike transtemporal communication), but the message itself is more permanent than the immediate (unlike live temporal communication). Live temporal communication places

an immediate demand on our immediate consciousness. Live conversations requires two participants' full attention. Semitemporal conversation, on the other hand, requires only the part-consciousness of either party. Semitemporal communication – whether broadcast, two-way, or interactive – lets the individual control the rate of input flow into one's consciousnesses and then decide on one's own timetable to moment to respond. Most semitemporal communication is text-based, and can include text messages, instant messaging, email (increasingly so), and many of the tools found in social networking sites. In our increasingly jumbled, scattered, being-there-but-also-elsewhere lives, the convenience of semitemporality has led to its taking over an increasingly large portion of our everyday means of communication.

One revelation that new media has also highlighted is that Anderson's "imagined" communities are actually very real. In the early phase of new media, blogs were simply broadcast (one-to-many) forms of media. In this sense, each reader could have experienced Anderson's "imagined" communities with other potential readers without ever having any idea who these other people are. However, once some of these blogs incorporated comment and personal diary (i.e. interactive) features, the community that was hitherto deemed "imagined" emerged out of the shadowy darkness of silence. This development is important to note because it stresses that virtual communities – even those abstracted centuries ago from literature – are no less "real" than traditional communities, they are just the offspring of new, non-traditional modes of human communication (and are therefore not traditional communities). The fact that these new forms of social communities that are now widely accepted as such were just 25 years ago

(when Anderson published *Imagined Communities*) considered as near-irrational abstractions shows how quick the recent turn in the mediazation of daily life has been.

Before heading into any more depths of the future course of new media, we need to take a look at how these new forms of media are affecting how society is organizing itself and how it relates to societal and cultural fragmentation. After exploring the ways that the current new media landscape is affecting social fragmentation, we will then explore the immediate trends of new media for the near future, and how, if at all, these change the equation.

## **New Media and Fragmentation**

The mediazation process that had gone on for centuries has now progressed to here, to a society increasingly saturated in all its interactions with mediated communication. What effects is new media having on social cohesion?

Cass Sunstein, an American legal scholar (who happens also to be a friend of Barack Obama's and the new head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs), has described in depth a fragmenting phenomenon of new media which he calls the Daily Me (2001). The Daily Me is an allusion to the new media phenomenon in which Americans self-filter the information they receive. There are now so many available outlets to receive one's information that one picks and chooses the content one receives. This allusion refers to the fact that the consumer is now also one's own news editor, constructing each day one's Daily Me of news and information.

If everyone is receiving different information from sources they choose, than how can the necessary public discourse exist that supposedly holds together a democratic society? This self-filtering process is problematic because it threatens a core ingredient in



a healthy cohesive society. In a republic, Sunstein argues, citizens have to be occasionally faced with information they did not expect to find and be faced with reasoned points of view contrary to their own personal bias. When they are not, when they are able to filter news to their personal liking, then society begins to splinter into self-reinforcing enclaves of ideological communities which share bias-slanted news and insight, a phenomenon Sunstein calls the “echo chamber.” Within the echo chamber, opposing viewpoints rarely become anything more than caricatured scarecrows. When society is not sharing a common experience of reality, then society will become increasingly divided.

With the forces of new media causing the “niche-ification” of the news industry, consumers are increasingly discovering their own niche for news analysis. For example, consider a person already pre-disposed to the ideological right who gets most of his news from Fox News, and a person already pre-disposed to the ideological left who gets her news from the Huffington Post. Now, not only will the news stories they receive likely push each person further to the extreme ideologically, but these two people would on many days not even receive the same news – or, if a story was in fact covered by both outlets, the angles would be so distinct from each other that the two persons could not be expected be able to hold a reasonable discussion on the matter because the information they received would likely be so far divergent. However, due to the loss of traditional community and public forums in society, it is unlikely that such a mutual discussion would arise anyway as private social circles become increasingly insulated from the wider community-at-large (a process that Fischer attributed partly to the telephone and that has certainly been accelerating ever since).

Now compare this situation with days not so long ago when most Americans received their news from a relatively few central outlets. With common news sources for most of society, these two, assuming neither was too far to the left or the right, would have likely disagreements about the news, but the two would most likely also be able to carry on a civil conversation about a given news item. As such common starting points for interpreting reality increasingly vanish, public society will grow increasingly dysfunctional across the nation.

Not only is the “niche-ification” itself of news sources an issue, but the sheer amount of information immediately available to us actually requires that we construct a Daily Me. The news consumer is so overloaded with information that one has no choice but to filter the information. Those who hoorah the Information Age as a purely utopian development should note that the human brain has shown itself to be a rather poor receptor of too much information. Studies have shown that even in good faith, humans are cognitively poor at filtering large amounts of information. A recent study on online dating selection showed, for instance, that past a shallow pool of options, participants became progressively worse at choosing a potential romantic partner as the number of options increased. The researchers credited the result to limited cognitive resources that perform less well when spread over too much information, at which point the brain has a harder time distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant details (Wu 2009). Similarly, one could expect that the mind becomes increasingly susceptible to biased news as the amount of information input increases, as the mind can spend fewer resources critically analyzing each news item in any sort of depth.

One of the further effects of this self-filtering process is a phenomenon known as group polarization. As explained by Sunstein, after a group deliberates an issue, group members are likely to move to a more extreme position in the direction the group was already leaning. The group as a whole becomes more extreme than when it started. This phenomenon of group polarization has been confirmed numerous times by study after study. In one experiment, a group of people from liberally minded Boulder, Colorado, were asked their opinions anonymously on three political issues before and after a group discussion on these issues. Before the discussion, the group leaned left but had some decent diversity in viewpoints. After the discussion, group members' positions were both more liberal and less diverse. In the same day, the same thing was done to a group in conservatively minded Colorado Springs with the exact same effect except in the opposite direction (Heuvelen 2007). In the real world, group polarization is evidenced in that when three Republican-appointed judges sit on a three-person court, the court turns out much more conservative rulings than how those individual judges rule when serving on an ideologically-mixed court (Heuvelen). (The flipside of this is just as true with Democratic-appointed judges.)

Group identity is shown to be an especially critical component in group polarization. If a person identifies himself with a certain group, then the effects of polarization are even greater. On the other hand, if a person identifies against a group, its arguments/positions have no effect on the person. In other words, if a conservative identified against the *New York Times* and were to read a negative news article in the paper in regards to the Iraq War, the conservative's position would likely not shift even if

it would be likely to shift if the story had come from what was considered a more neutral source.

As online communities tend to have very strong group identity levels, group polarization is even more dangerous there than in physical group settings. Research has also shown that groups that operate under high levels of member anonymity also rated much higher on polarization tendencies. In one study, groups were asked to come to a conclusion based on information they held collectively in its entirety, but of which each group member only had fragmented bits. Members in online groups were found to share information supporting their preferred group decision while suppressing information opposing that assessment at a rate twice as high as participants in other groups (Sunstein 2002).

New media is therefore doubly implicated in the group polarization phenomenon. The Internet is the major contributor to the Daily Me phenomenon, and the interactive-type of communication that has exploded across the Internet is likely to only accentuate polarizing predispositions. While Sunstein's main concern was for the cohesion of society at a political level, this example clearly demonstrates how interactive forms of new media can create cultural bubbles and fragmented social enclaves in regards to all sorts of social communities.

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The group polarization phenomenon illustrates how new media forces, even while facilitating social interaction, can also contribute to cultural fragmentation. How about the subjective effects of new media? What can we deduce about those?

The effects of new media on the subjectivity of media consumers are incredibly complex. Earlier, it was shown how broadcast forms of media, such as television and the earlier Internet, could be tied to social isolation. With two-way and interactive forms of communication, however, the prolonged effects of significant use of the medium is much more complex – and the answers are not entirely conclusive.

Two main sides debate on this issue. On one side (Side A), you have those who argue that new media has an overall positive affect on the sociality of society because it connects people in such a way that it augments real being-there relations. On the other side (Side B), you have the position that new media interaction is by nature isolating in effect and has a net negative consequence on society's social cohesiveness.

In other words, the debate becomes, whether, even though mediatization in the past has contributed to social fragmentation, the unique social characteristics of this new wave of media – with its better capabilities of connecting people – will outweigh the lingering isolating and fragmenting effects of media use; or, conversely, whether, despite these new modes of interacting, mediated communication is still distinctly inferior to traditional means of interaction and whether the ever encroaching field of media in daily life is only adding to the process of individual atomization.

As it turns out, research has shown that Side A in this debate is not entirely incorrect. A recent study showed that those most active in using communication media such as mobile phones, landline phones, social networking sites, and SMS also tended to be more social offline as well. The researcher concluded from these findings that the media technologies (facilitating two-way and interactive communication) augmented

rather than inhibited social connections outside of mediated communications (Petrovčič 2008).

That study's findings, however, do not necessarily warrant such a conclusive. Rather than augmenting social life, it could also be that those already pre-disposed to high levels of sociality are also those who most often use these media. Even to Side B-ers, the results of this study make sense on a number of levels. Researchers (including Fischer) long ago debunked the theory that transgeographical communication would foment the creation of new social ties to faraway places. Instead, non-broadcast media have always overwhelmingly reinforced existing social ties rather than forge new ones.<sup>7</sup> Because "social media" reinforces social ties, therefore, it should not come as a surprise that those who already have wider social circles therefore end up employing more media use to connect that wide circle. It is no surprise, moreover, that social loners are also those less likely to spend tons of time sending text messages or writing on Facebook walls. Within the findings of this study rest a classic chicken and egg dilemma.

In addition, there is another hole to this line of reasoning offered by Side A. Fischer, for example, also concluded that the rise of the telephone produced more, not less, social interaction, on both a local and long-distance manner. He also found, however, that this increased sociality corresponded with a withdrawing from the local community outside one's immediate social circle, resulting in what he termed "privatism." Therefore, even if new media does augment pre-existing social relations, as

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the creation of online friendships never happens, just that humans overall continue to rely on traditional means of acquiring a social community, even if they rely heavily on non-traditional mediated forms of interaction to keep those formed social bonds tied.

Petrovčič concludes, is this done at the expense of any potential movements towards social relations outside of ones' immediate social circle?

In the absence of conclusive evidence circumventing the chicken and egg issues surrounding how online interaction affects being-there social interaction, Side B argues that Side A naively overlooks the more fundamental implications of the increased wired-ness of present day. Side B's objection to the mediatization process is more philosophical and anecdotal than empirical (similar to Kierkegaard's 19<sup>th</sup> century polemic against the consequences of the "press.")

Side B does not dispute that connectivity between individuals has increased with the rising reach of media in society. What Side B disputes, however, is that this mediated communication between individuals is comparable to non-mediated, geographical, and temporal being-there of traditional human interaction, or that these differences do not have potentially very grave consequences for the social health of individuals and society-at-large.

One of Side B's most clear arguments rests on a mostly descriptive and somewhat anecdotal level. Side B points out that even though forms of new media may always be connecting, they all also always isolating because it is also always pulls one out of one's contextual environment, one's surrounding people and sensory perceptions. By being transported across traditional space and time, one is by definition not existing as being-there.

Additionally Side B will argue that new media is being acclimated in such a way that it lessens human interaction in general. When one can perform one's social duties via mediated communication, is "friendship" itself being cheapened? Does giving a

transtemporal, transgeographical greeting remove one from the burden of planning a face-to-face greeting? Can convenience justify to preferred use of ontologically-inferior forms of interaction? Side B can not deny that media has given more permanence to a wider arc of social relations as one moves through life, but it can question the balanced social utility of holding on to relationships on the fringe of one's social network at the expense of devaluing major portions of human interaction and limiting cognitive and temporal resources towards the being-there relationships of one's immediate "there."

Even more foundational than these claims is the assertion from Side B that, taken as a whole, the mediatization of society is dissolving away the strong outward social skin of human consciousness, that all forms of media place the individual unhealthily at the center of all equations - the individual isolated from one's immediate surroundings, the individual asserting oneself into other consciousnesses, the individual taking time to decide when and how to properly respond to a mediated message. We forget sometimes that in ancient humanity, most human interaction was spontaneous and responses could not often be playfully twirled around the mind's echo chamber, wittily strategizing one's next move. Today in late modernity, this mediated delayed response is becoming the norm. Have we fully considered what such a temporally detached, action-delayed, reflexively centered mode of existing *might mean*? Side B's assertion is that media creates the paradoxical state in which the individual withers precisely because it becomes the core of all existence.

This more foundational claim is summed up pointedly (and perhaps a bit flippantly) by Nicholas Carr when he writes:

The great paradox of "social networking" is that it uses narcissism as the glue for "community." Being online means being alone, and being in an



online community means being alone together. The community is purely symbolic, a pixellated simulation conjured up by software to feed the modern self's bottomless hunger. Hunger for what? For verification of its existence? No, not even that. For verification that it has a role to play. As I walk down the street with thin white cords hanging from my ears, as I look at the display of khakis in the window of the Gap, as I sit in a Starbucks sipping a chai served up by a barista, I can't quite bring myself to believe that I'm real. But if I send out to a theoretical audience of my peers 140 characters of text saying that I'm walking down the street, looking in a shop window, drinking tea, suddenly I become real. I have a voice. I exist, if only as a symbol speaking of symbols to other symbols. (2008)

Carr's overall point here is skewed by the fact that this quote comes after a long discussion on Twitter, where – at its current stage anyway – the community does happen to be narcissistically-grounded and mostly symbolic. Nevertheless, one can see how his critique could apply elsewhere to new media as well. Most telling, however, is the modern angst he portrays, the atomization at the individual level that leaves the individual isolated and alienated from the world at large and increasingly dependent on media as a means of escape. In some sense, what Side B is afraid of is that through new media the individual is in effect building one's own prison out of which the convenient path of escape is an ever-spiraling staircase of immediate relief that leads one deeper and deeper into imprisonment.

As Carr's criticism of society is directed mostly at an even more recent trend in new media, micro-blogging, let us now move towards examining the future-directional trends of new media to determine if these trends add any insights into this debate over media's relation to social cohesion or fragmentation. It should be clear from the previous discussion, however, that while media must be credited with creating more permanent social nets and expanding humankind's quantitative connectivity, it remains far from

clear that this media is only now bridging above the forces of social fragmentation it in part helped to create.

### **Discerning Future Trends in New Media**

Three main trends today look to change the face of new media in the near future. Two offer potential to drastically alter the media-fragmentation dialectic. The third appears only to further it.

The first of these three trends is **locative media**. Up to now, through the history of the mediatization process, all major non-permanent forms of media have been transgeographical. Media has always been used primarily to connect place to place. After all, why use media if the person is standing right next to you?

Media is now beginning to turn that corner, however. The smart phone carries along with it the power to measure with minute accuracy one's exact location. With the growth of the smart phone industry, a platform for serious locative media has finally been launched. The technology is all in place. The media just needs to be given time to be developed and smart mobile technology must be given time to adequately expand its market.

Consider this: You are sitting in a restaurant and want to send a message to all users of a certain popular new application on the iPhone in the restaurant. With a click of a button, all those within 25 yards of you who have the application receive the message, which kindly lets them know that the turtle cheesecake is out-of-this-world delicious. This message could be easily have been sent by standing on your chair and shouting this message at the top of your lungs – in other words, the media is not needed for its transgeographical features. Rather, it is needed for its specifically geographical quality.

Clearly, a polite textual message is less interrupting to everyone else's meal and less violating to social norms. This geographical, temporal/semitemporal niche has yet been untouched in the mediatization process

The second trend is that of **live feeds**. Now, clearly, live feeds are not a new development. The newness of the trend is its growing predominance in the media landscape. Before the very recent explosion of smart mobile technology, actual live feeds were rather self-defeating because the content would disappear before users would likely ever see it. Now, with the constant wired-ness of modern life, along with the information overload that makes content practically obsolete a few moments after its creation, live feeds are beginning to hit their stride. Part of Twitter's appeal is the live feed portions of its website, and Facebook just adapted its homepage into a live feed as well.

Before now, text media never really crossed the line past semitemporality. To think about how little the current Internet is set up to handle live information – despite its seemingly always-updating status – consider how useful a Google search is in finding out the immediate resolution of a sports game. Google would be incredibly unhelpful for such an immediate matter. Alternatively, go to Twitter's search feature and enter one of the sports team's names. Bam! Immediately you would find out how the game ended and which team won. Consider also how powerful a tool live feeds could be when combined with locative media, and one can begin to understand how media might be undergoing a new revolution in the near future.

The third trend is **micro-blogging**. Micro-blogging is the further progression of turning message content into shorter and shorter fragments. Micro-blogging is trending upward because as the information overloads more and more, quicker pithier statements

become more and more necessary in order to process the information flow. Micro-blogging's future also looks bright not only because the phenomenon of information overload is on its side, but also because its fate is integrally tied to both locative media and live feeds. Textual live feeds are only digestible in micro formatting, and locative media will likewise be communicated largely through the micro format.

How do these new trends alter the landscape of how media affects society? Clearly, micro-blogging does not represent a positive new turn. Micro-blogging presents the world in short witty statements, but it does not present the world in any kind of depth. Just as troubling is the trend itself, though, which shows book devolving to the article, the article to the blog, and now the blog to the micro-blog. As the mediazation of society continues to accelerate, one wonders where this drive to the tiniest, quickest, most shallow form of content possible will ever end.

Live feeds and locative media, however, could represent a significant full circle in the mediazation process. What does such a statement as “full circle in the mediazation process” mean? After centuries of disconnecting users from the immediate geographic and temporal realities of their situation, the mediazation progression has looped back around to re-connect users in the real time and real space.<sup>8</sup> One of media's distinguishing features relating to social fragmentation was the media's transport effect away from the being-there of existence. *Is media now entering a stage where it has the power to re-converge what it has helped push apart?*

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<sup>8</sup> This full-circle hypothesis of the mediazation-fragmentation dialectic helps explain also some of the allures of online virtual reality communities. To those who struggle with lost social interaction and fall into media as a means of escape, virtual reality offers the full simulated experience of bodily existence – a suggestion that even in escaping from reality mankind is still always-already seeking out fulfilling being-there sociality.

Remember the rapidly diminishing “third place” of American society? Fred Gooltz argues that social networking sites may be the “third place” for the new generation of Americans (2007). If one considers the future locative and live feed potentialities of future social media, one could see the potential possibilities within this statement. Perhaps this new turn towards a more immediate media both temporally and geographically will prove more successful at facilitating new social connections rather than simply reinforcing old isolated social networks. Likewise, perhaps the news sharing features of social networking sites might end up becoming the public forums that society is losing and that Sunstein worries the loss of which threatens America’s democratic society.

But is such a re-convergence really the same? Or is that even the right question? If the road back is cluttered and impassable, does it matter if the way forward is in all ways preferred than previous points along the path? Should not the question be if the road forward is preferable to now?

Yes, the latter question must be our question. Mediazation may have helped bring society to this disjointed and fragmented point, but the question now must not be whether society should try to pull back the clock or even reign in the mediazation forces. We will not and can not as a society. Social networking, semitemporality, micro-blogging – all these are here to stay. However, does new media offer us hope in curbing these trends of fragmentation?

As mediazation is reaching the juncture where all parts of life could soon be called upon by new media to surrender to its inevitable encroachment, media’s longstanding relation to social fragmentation should be a cause of serious worry.

However, paradoxically, precisely because of media's increasingly seamless immersion into daily life, media is advancing to new forms of communication that no longer always transport messages across space and time but can facilitate interaction in an immediately local and live manner. If new media technologies progress in such a way as to begin re-converging where society has fragmented, mediatization might finish its loop at the same point as it where it began. Though mediated communication can never replace the ontologically distinct mode of being-there existence, it might nevertheless be able to offer back some of what it has snatched away.

## **Conclusions**

Reasons abound to be skeptical of utopian views of new media. Mediated forms of communication can never replace the full bodily experience of being-there existence. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's main contribution to philosophical discourse was his description of man's existence as essentially bodily, claiming that man only appropriates his world through the context of fully sensory, active, spatial being-there. Mediated communication can never replicate this essential bodily interaction with one's immediate surroundings. Then again, being-there existence has never been threatened. Encroach as it may, face-to-face human interaction will always be the essential mode of human life.

There can be little doubt that man's mode of interactions consist increasingly less of the traditional face-to-face (and increasingly more of the face-to-screen) – but man will always be essentially man, and man always adapts. Proper perspective needs to be used. Basic human nature is not at stake, nor will it ever be. While the being-there may diminish as a mode of existence, it will never disappear. And while we can guess at how

media might affect social fragmentation and this and that, only one thing is certain: no one really knows where this process is heading or how it will end.

Nicholas Carr, ending a long essay on how the Internet is stripping away the brain's ability to concentrate and process in-depth information, notes that history is adrift with the skeptics of media that correctly prophesied the bad but failed to recognize the overwhelmingly positive results of such revolutions (2008). Socrates lamented that writing would lead the brain's memory capabilities to go unused and limp and that readers would be able to appropriate instruction without truly learning it. Likewise, the printing press arose much criticism, including the prediction (again) that information's easy accessibility would lead to intellectual laziness and that widespread literature would ultimately undermine Church authority.

All these predictions proved true. But what is missing from these prognoses are the ways these new media transformed society in unpredictable and overwhelmingly positive ways. Despite the historical relation of media to forces of fragmentation in society, no one would suggest these negative consequences somehow outweigh the centuries of enlightenment and human robustness that followed in its stead. While important to understand these negative side effects of media, it is also crucial to not lightly brush aside how these new modes of human interaction have advanced human society. So it is quite right to treat these questions concerning media technologies with a critical eye.

History, then, would not seem to be on the critic's side...except, in some ways, history *is* its side. The correlation of media to social fragmentation has up to now been little understood and even less fully appreciated. Society seems perplexed at why society

seems to be pulling apart at the same time as it is more connected technologically than ever before. The paradox is clear; its roots have long been left concealed.

New trends towards locative media together with live temporal feeds offer some promise for re-converging some of the missing ties. Nevertheless, mediated interaction will still be mediated interaction.

The new media revolution has just begun. And, like it or not, we are along for the ride.



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