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**eCommunication:**  
**The 10 Paradigms of Media in the Digital Age**

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## **Introduction**

The arrival of the Net changed most of the paradigms that until now helped us to describe and understand the public communication dynamics in the traditional analogue mass media environment. The digital age arrives with a set of big communication challenges for traditional mainstream media: new relations with audiences (Interactivity), new languages (Multimedia) and a new grammar (Hypertext). But this media revolution not only changes the communication landscape for the usual players, most importantly, it opens the mass communication system to a wide range of new players.

As far as enterprises, institutions, administrations, organizations, groups, families and individuals starts their own online presence, they become "media" by their own, they also become "sources" for traditional media, and in many cases, they produce strong "media criticism": opinion about how issues are covered and delivering of alternative coverage.

The blogging phenomena represents the ultimate challenge for the old communication system because it integrates both: the new features of the digital world and a wide democratisation in the access to media with a universal scope.

Ten thesis about this new scenario are proposed, and the term eCommunication is coined to describe it in a single word. The global process could be understood as a big shift from the classical mass media models to the new media paradigms: the user becomes the axis of communication process, the content is the identity of media, multimedia is the new language, real time is the only time, hypertext is the grammar, and knowledge is the new name of information.

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## **The 10 Paradigms of eCommunication**

The formulation of this ten thesis in terms of "switching", should not be understood as if the old model is replaced with by the new one, because as a mater of fact, both sets of models are, and will be, coexisting.

### **Paradigm I: from audience to user**

During the 80's, the merge of satellite and cable technologies enabled broadcast media the delivering of content to thematic segmented target audiences, evolving from broadcasting to narrowcasting. From the 90's on, the Net opens the way to a next step: from narrowcasting to pointcasting.

Online content provision not only could fit niche targets, but even more: it could be arranged to meet the specific interests and time constraints of every individual user. The de-massification of public communication arrives with the personal configuration options of online media and services.

The passive unidirectional way of media consumption is replaced by the concept of active user seeking for content, exploring and navigating info-spaces. Users becomes also content producers in many web environments, mainly the blogosphere.

In a recent RFC for a book project, Dan Gillmor focus on this, right from the title: *Making the News: What Happens to Journalism and Society When Every Reader Can Be a Writer (Editor, Producer, Etc.)*[1].

The communication process in the eCommunication scenario is user centred: users have the control to choose, to decide, to search, to define and configure, to subscribe or unsubscribe, to comment and, most important: to write, talk and film. *Self media, Nanopublishing* or *Thin Media* are the new names for the strategy of those users who decide to become even more active and start low profile media activities.

### **Paradigm II: from media to content**

The focus shift from the industrial production constrains (press, radio, television) to content authority in order to define media. *National Geographic* and *CNN*, for example, are not a particular kind of media, but brands which represents authority over an area of content (natural life) or expertise in current affairs content management (journalism).

The media convergence towards digital resets media identity, shifting from platforms to contents and outstanding brand image in relation to a type of content not to a media format. Media brand image is one of the most valuable actives of media companies in the new environment: a source of credibility and prestige for digital content.

Today media starts to understand that their business is selling the content, not the holder: multiplatform services to be accessed by users from a range of terminals according to the users situation and needs.

### **Paradigm III: from monomedia to multimedia**

One of the strongest issues about digitalisation is that text, audio, video, graphics, photos and animation could be arranged together and interactively on a single media for this first time in history. This multimedia identity of the eCommunication environment allowed all

media industries to converge on the Net (press, broadcast, movies) and this is the reason why media distinctions related to use of single language (textual, audio, visual) tend to be erased. Online media are multimedia, and multimedia is a new language.

This meta-medium nature of the Net should be understood at the light of older media revolutions: the first step of older media being the content of newer media is followed by a next step in which newer media develops its own language and content, and older media redefine their identities.

#### **Paradigm IV: from periodicity to real time**

Regular frequency was a strong paradigm of the old scenario to the point the many media were defined in relation to its time constrains (daily, weekly, monthly). Online media (whether they are digital versions of daily newspaper, or a weekly or monthly magazine) assume that they must to be real time updated to survive in the new environment.

The global news channel CNN started the era of round-the-clock-round-the-world-live. CNN changed the way of telling the news, established the forum for a new way of dealing international affairs: the public diplomacy and gave the audiences the feeling of being there through the CNN eyes.

The Net expand the real time paradigm by multiplying the voices: it's not just the CNN view, neither just media views: is everyone-online view and with the advantage of full interactivity.

The first Gulf war was to CNN what the second one was (¿is?) to the Internet. Warblogging is the first wave of a completely new scenario of covering international events, relating sources and readers, aggregating opinions and generating social movements, and a extraordinary mechanism of media control and criticism.

What we lost in the road from periodicity to real time is reflection. What we gain is dynamism and conversation styles. Sharing news and opinions with the ability to interact in real time is the seed of cyber communities.

#### **Paradigm V: from scarcity to abundance**

Space for the print media and time for broadcast media ceased to be the limit to content and now time of the user is the new scarce resource.

One of the strong effects of "readers becoming writers" is the proliferation of online information without clear attribution of source authority and heterogeneity of content quality. The overflow of information calls for new skills and tools to manage data, news and opinions

Content syndication, news aggregators, news readers, popularity rankings, recommended reading, "most linked" directories, neighbourhoods, rings, thematic and geographic directories and blogtracking, are but just a few of the tools available to manage the chaos of abundance.

#### **Paradigm VI: from editor-mediated to non-mediated**

The gate-keeper paradigm was broadly used to explain the role of media editors and the agenda-setting theory and to describe the functions of media in defining the daily issues.

This intermediation function should be revisited nowadays at the light of the decentralized nature of the Net. Together with mainstream media, many other informal sources become relevant to establish the agendas (because the agenda does not exist anymore).

World wide publishing without editors, but with a close peer review daily process and in most cases open to comments from readers is the nature of web and weblog publishing. As a result of that, the agenda of relevant current affairs goes beyond the established media land and now is shared with a wide variety of new sources, most of them not media, including web portals, mailing lists, e-bulletins, search engines, news groups, forum and weblogs with their respective feeds when available.

### **Paradigm VII: from distribution to access**

The broadcasting paradigm of one to many unilateral distribution is replaced by both: many to one access and many to many communication. Client-server architecture of the Internet started a new model based upon the decisions of the users.

The access paradigm is complementary with the user centred paradigm and both explain the strong interactive nature of the new environment. Access means seek, search, navigate, surf, decide: an active attitude, a will to connect and communicate, the contrary of the passive reception of media content.

"My daily visits", "My home page", "My Favourites", lists of links and blogrolls are expressions of this personal way to seek for content, and the latest attempts of contextual advertising shows how the old dynamics has changed: now advertisers are looking for targets outside the media arena, testing ways for a personal approach based on key words searching and data base mining.

### **Paradigm VIII: from one way to interactivity**

Far from the single-direction point-multipoint asymmetrical distribution model of traditional media, with the Net emerges a bilateral inverse model many-to-one based on the client-server architecture of Internet, but also a multilateral horizontal and symmetrical many-to-many model.

The fact that content providers and users access the same channel to communicate, enable the users to establish a bilateral relation with media and also a multilateral relation with other users of the system. Secondly, by the same rule, users could become content providers.

In the new environment the user has the ability to choose between content options and to define the time for access, but interactivity also means the capacity to change the aspect of the content, to produce content for a system and to communicate with other users.

The first level of interactivity has to do with the possibility for the user to choose the format of information display (browser and navigation interface configuration).

The second level of interactivity is the possibility for the user to produce input for a system. This contribution could be co-authoring, writing comments, answering polls and tests, posting news, and so on.

The third level of interactivity has to do with the possibility for the user to communicate with other users of the system in real or delay time.

Dealing with interactivity in the context of media with a long and strong tradition of one-way distribution of content is one of the most important challenges that mainstream media has to face.

### **Paradigm IX: from linear to hypertext**

Analogue media narrative construction is linear and narrators has the power to control the story organization and tempo. The digital platforms enable narrators to organize content by fragmenting it into small units (nodes) with multiples paths between them (links). Hypertextual narratives empower the user shifting the control of the narrative from the narrator to the reader.

From linear temporal media we are shifting to non linear spatial content. Hypertext becomes the grammar of the digital world.

Reading text lines, listening or watching temporal (linear) audiovisual media are typical activities of traditional media consumption. The digital nature of the eCommunication environment opens the way for a spatial, rather than temporal, organization of content. Web sites and blogs are spaces to visit. Virtual spaces where users perform activities: they meet each other, learn, gather and share news and opinions, do shopping and gaming, entertain and create.

The pathways of the info-spaces are built on links. Creating and activating links on websites and blogs could be the new name of alphabetisation. Reading and writing by linking, this is, exploring and creating hypertextual environments on a daily basis is the most strategic skill bloggers are achieving.

### **Paradigm X: from data to knowledge**

The extraordinary amount of data available in the Digital Age bring back the strategic role of media as social managers of knowledge, a role to be shared with an increasing number of new players.

The analysis of data and its transformation into knowledge (not the management of a platform) becomes the axis of media activities. Today, the strategic mission of media is the information about the information: information intelligence, interpretation, filtering and searching combined with the challenge of new interactive multimedia narratives and delivered by a wide range of channels.

### **Conclusions**

The new scenario for public communication in the Internet era, the eCommunication, should not be understood in an apocalyptic way, but it should be considered, instead, as the opportunity to redefine the profiles, the professional challenges and the academic training of communicators, and also to rethink about the changing nature of media and mediators.

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