

Wojciech Zawadzki, Mateusz Dyrda, Richard Willmetts*

SLOWNEWS

1. THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

All works eventually break away from their authors and begin to take on a life of their own. The concept of the “global village”, commonly used today to describe a multitude of themes related to the internationalisation and globalisation of societies, has met similar fates. This is most noticeable in the media arena, where the concept is disseminated in dozens of languages every time an event causes turmoil in the financial markets. This is, in fact, quite ironic, as Marshall McLuhan, the creator of the concept of the global village in the 1960s, associated it with the trend happening at the time of media globalisation and its emerging role in the leading of functioning of a global society. Today, in the age of internet media, it is worth returning to the conceptual background of this idea and reflecting on how global, rapid, and highly automated the way of propagating information in modern media affects us.

Marshall McLuhan’s period of scientific activity coincided with advanced transformations in the field of media technology, including the popularisation of television. The author’s scientific interests revolved around issues related to society’s interaction with the new media technologies of the time, particularly the impact of “new media” on human perception and behaviour. Observing the increasing dependence of society on immediate global information, McLuhan stated that “New media” are not bridges between man and nature; they are nature. He advocated perceiving the media space as an environment in which humans function. As he stated, understanding cultural and social changes is possible only when we consider media acts as an environment. All media are extensions of our abilities – mental or physical. Extending any sense changes our way of thinking and acting - the way we perceive the world¹.

* Institute of Information Security

¹ M. McLuhan, Q. Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, New York 1968.

Referring to the changes in information technology and the form of information propagation in society, McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message” in his book “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man”, emphasising the impact of the message’s form on its content. He developed this idea in his book “The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects”. The title of the book hides a typographical error – message instead of message, which McLuhan liked so much that he adapted it as an extension of the concept of the influence of the message’s form on its content, concerning the participation of many media in this process that “massage” human perception. As the author argued: “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences; they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered”². In the era of internet media and mobile devices, this information message has gained strength and changed in its form. Mobile devices provide users with constant access to the world while also providing the world with constant access to the user, which participants in the media market skilfully monetise. While the message conducted in the era of newspapers, television, and radio was general, the one which is performed using digital tools can already be recognised as a targeted message – thanks to the collection of data on user preferences, content delivered in this way can be tailored to the recipient’s profile to provoke the intended reaction by its sender.

2. THE TECHNOLOGY BEHIND INFORMATION

Information requires a medium to be transmitted. The first culturally significant information was transmitted orally between members of tribes, between different tribes, and between generations within one tribe and was made possible by the emergence of language. Thus, language, in a broad sense, became the first medium – a carrier of information. With the development of technology, not only has the speed of information transfer increased, but it has also made it possible for the information to interact with the recipient’s other senses. Oral communication requires the use of imagination. The more precise written language became, the more specific concepts could be defined. The first photograph published in the French newspaper “L’Illustration” on 1 July 1848 depicted barricades in the streets of Paris related to worker riots. The ability to show a photograph instead of an illustration or painting, and thus a physical record of reality, changed the perception of newspapers as a medium. The introduction of further technical advances created demand from recipients in

¹ M. McLuhan, Q. Fiore, J. Simon, *The Medium Is the Massage*, Conceived and co-ordinated by Jerome Agel. Columbia Stereo CS 9501, Mono CL 2701, p. 26.

two dimensions: speed and volume. The natural expectation was for the first colour photograph and photograph taken the day before the newspaper's publication.

When technology developed beyond the physical shape of the printed medium, a new medium had to be developed. With the development of moving image recording, a completely new communication channel, television, also came onto the market. The old solution of printing information on paper could not accommodate the stream of information offered by the emerging technology of cameras. Each second of video recording consisted of at least 23 frames. This led to an avalanche of the information delivered to the user.

Similarly, when we compare this with the development of technology in recent years, the emergence of streaming platforms such as TikTok was made possible by the development of super-fast 5th generation (5G) mobile networks. Just a few years ago, broadcasting live in Full HD quality was reserved for professional journalist teams. Today, any teenager with a smartphone is able to do so.

The pace of data production is not only increasing but also accelerating. Forecasts relating to the amount of data processed on the Internet are regularly inadequate in relation to real-world development. The amount of data produced by culture seems to be limited only by the ability of technology to process it. As the ability to collect, transmit, and store data evolves, our communication and information reception methods change. The technology of 360-degree films, which allows for incredibly free access to the environment in which the material has been recorded, requires enormous resources, both computing power and memory for its storage. With the development of technology, new, increasingly immersive methods of presenting information will be developed. 3D technology, despite its many false starts, will eventually become as ubiquitous as colour photographs or movies. The growing volume and density of information mean they affect recipients faster and much more intensely. Information becomes less important than the sensation that the material associated with the information will evoke. In the book "Dopamine Nation – Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence" Dr. Anna Lembke compares the smartphone to a needle permanently inserted into the body, providing continuous dopamine injections. A device that allows high-quality audio-visual content to be displayed in almost any location on earth will soon be the norm thanks to 5G satellite connectivity; it is like an intravenous drip of an addictive drug for society. However, to maintain dopamine releases, news must be constantly new and attention-grabbing, causing short-term satisfaction of curiosity and, at the same time, causing a sense of anxiety that other news will be missed (the Fear of Missing Out syndrome).

The human mind and its information-processing abilities have not changed much over the last millennia. However, the development of information and

media technologies has increased the amount of information the human mind is exposed to has drastically increased. Social media and mobile devices have changed the information landscape and exposed us to a continuous stream of information. Too much information reaching the human mind can cause information overload syndrome. The term refers to the state of having too much information to make a decision or remain informed about a topic. A fairly simple concept of human information processing is at the heart of this understanding of the phenomenon – a three-stage model consisting of reception, processing, and action. In the first stage, information is received in some manner; it is a system input. The second stage involves the person processing these inputs cognitively to absorb, interpret, and understand them. In the third stage, the person takes some action in response to the information. The development of technology enabling instant access to information has, therefore, led to a paradoxical situation – although news from the other side of the world can reach the recipient in a fraction of a second, its processing and assimilation are as difficult as ever before. According to the researchers, the most effective methods to prevent information overload, whether personally or collectively, involve a range of approaches, including filtering, withdrawing, queuing, and ‘satisficing’. Improving information system design, enhancing personal information management, and encouraging digital and media literacy also contribute to addressing the issue. Overcoming overload might be optimally achieved by pursuing a conscious equilibrium of information consumption and the strive for its comprehension.

3. YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT! SEE HOW THEY FIGHT FOR YOUR ATTENTION

Modern media competes for our attention. In this battle, they employ a range of psychological and sociological techniques. One technique exemplified in this article is called clickbait. This method is characterised by sensational and suggestive headlines that entice the audience to click on a link redirecting to the content. From a psychological perspective, this method exploits the so-called information gap, also known as the curiosity gap, which refers to the difference between what we know – the content presented in the headline – and what we would like to know – the content that is included or should be included in the material according to the potential reader’s assessment. Typically, clickbait material is accompanied by a significant number of advertisements, which serve as the primary message for the creators of such content. A characteristic feature of this technique is the use of suggestion in the title, referring either to the subjective sphere by employing pronouns such as “he”, “she” “they” etc., or to the objective sphere by using pronouns like “it” instead of specific or generic names for objects.

Many of the methods employed in the battle for attention are based on the cognitive biases of the human mind. One of the key biases can be considered confirmation bias – people’s tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with their existing beliefs. This unintentional inclination in decision-making often leads to an individual overlooking data that contradicts their beliefs. Such beliefs may encompass an individual’s anticipations in a specific situation or their forecasts regarding a particular result. When a matter is of great significance or closely related to oneself, people tend to be more prone to processing information that reinforces their own beliefs³. Confirmation bias can manifest in various ways, such as selective attention, where individuals pay more attention to information that aligns with their beliefs, and biased interpretation, where ambiguous information is interpreted in a manner that supports one’s opinions. It can also take the form of biased memory, where people are more likely to recall information that confirms their beliefs. One of the primary reasons behind the prevalence of confirmation bias is the human desire for cognitive consistency. People generally prefer to maintain harmony between their beliefs, opinions, and the world around them. When confronted with information that contradicts their existing views, individuals may experience discomfort, known as cognitive dissonance.

The data generated by internet users, such as browsing history, post likes, comments, time spent on a website, and even sensitive data such as the content of private messages or the time spent focusing on a specific material, allow software operators to collect data on users that can be used to select materials that will effectively attract their attention. In the fight for human attention, considering the aforementioned confirmation bias, content selection algorithms choose the material that corresponds to the user’s beliefs, as it has a greater chance of attracting their attention than contradictory content. This results in the formation of an information bubble around the individual, also known as a filter bubble, which, by absorbing only information consistent with preconceived views, eventually becomes an impenetrable information cocoon⁴. Social media, internet forums, and similar portals create communities of people who hold the same views. This gives rise to the so-called “splinternet” a phenomenon of cyber-balkanisation of society through isolating groups of Internet users in virtual communities and their separation⁵.

The danger posed by targeting citizens to influence their electoral decisions is evidenced by the 2016 US presidential election case. At that time, the elec-

¹ J. Bettina, J.E. Luebering, "Confirmation bias", Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias>. Accessed 28 April 2023.

¹ J.A. Barlow, R. Leston, *Beyond the Blogosphere: Information and Its Children*, ABC-CLIO, 2012, p. 233. ISBN 978-0-313-39287-0. [2016-05-03].

¹ M. Van Alstyne, E. Brynjolfsson, *Electronic Communities: Global Village or Cyberbalkans?*, Cambridge 1997, p. 3 [2016-05-03].

tion teams of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz collaborated with the British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica to target political advertising based on the data of 50 million voters that the company had acquired from Facebook⁶. According to many commentators, the selection of undecided and potential swing voters during the pre-election period and their targeting with aggressive political marketing of Donald Trump allowed him to win the election with a marginal advantage. The need for a legal solution to the possibility of influencing electoral decisions using marketing profiling has been acknowledged at a European Union level, which has led to a legislative initiative currently being processed by the European Parliament on this issue. As argued by the European Commission, as the initiator of the legislation, political advertising is crucial for informing and influencing the way people vote, and it can affect citizens' perception of the validity of their political system, especially when it is published in a pre-election period⁷.

As per Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety is the second need of human beings after physiological needs. With civilisational changes, the types of threats that affect human safety have gradually changed. From threats of wild animals and hostile tribes to concerns about crop yields and invasions by barbarians, we have arrived at concerns about breaking contracts, inflation, or... the nuclear destruction of the world. In the era of the global village, the threats felt by society have also become global – the globalisation of society is also the globalisation of its fears. Nevertheless, distance or the global nature of the sources of threats creates a sense of helplessness in combating them. The allegorical red button, the pushing of which by one of the participants in the Great Chessboard would initiate the nuclear destruction of the world, kept citizens of Western countries awake at night, fuelling the Cold War nuclear panic. In today's world, this sense of powerlessness is often heightened by the perception of being overwhelmed by information and news, which can create a feeling of anxiety or depression.

The above-described specificity of information society security is related to negative bias – the tendency of the human mind to pay more attention to negative information. An extensive collection of studies has consistently demonstrated negativity's significant role in news value. From the standpoint of news value, negative news is seen as a vital tool in capturing the attention of audiences. Generally, negative news is perceived as more entertaining, fascinating, attention-grabbing, and comprehensible compared to positive news. As such, due to the influence of competition and commercialisation within the media

¹ See: E. L. Briant, Evidence for the US Senate Judiciary Committee on Cambridge Analytica and SCL Group, [in:] www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Professor%20Emma%20L.%20Briant%20Report%20on%20Cambridge%20Analytica.pdf [19.04.2023].

¹ M. Crego, Towards new rules on transparency and targeting of political advertising, European Parliamentary Research Service, Bruksela 2023, p. 1.

landscape, media outlets and their journalists tend to overstate negative news in pursuit of the highest ratings. From a psychological perspective, the inclination towards negativity can be explained by the inherent mechanisms in humans, developed through the evolutionary process, to scan our surroundings for potential dangers constantly. When information environments, including online sources, indicate possible threats to an individual's well-being or identity, this information must be processed to assess risks and prevent potential harm. In contrast, positive information typically does not present a direct threat to individuals. As a result, based on evolutionary theory, negative information possesses unique importance in terms of its “diagnosticity” or “vigilance”, which is required to avoid negative consequences⁸.

4. SLOWNEWS.PL – OUR RESPONSE TO THE MEDIA MESSAGE

How shall we counter the negative impact of the new age digital media on human mental health and cognitive abilities? In journalistic circles, the negative relationship between the speed of delivery of messages and their quality is increasingly noted. In the pursuit of maintaining high reporting standards, the trend of slow journalism was born. Slow journalism is a movement within journalism that emphasises in-depth, carefully researched reporting and analysis. It responds to the fast-paced, incessant news cycle that dominates much of the media landscape today. Slow journalism is a deliberate attempt to counteract the trend of sensationalised, superficial reporting that often prioritises speed over accuracy and context. Slow journalism also values transparency and accountability. Reporters are encouraged to be open about their methods and sources and to acknowledge their biases and limitations. This helps to build trust with readers and to establish a sense of integrity and credibility. Slow journalism is an important step forward to promote quality journalism and counteract the many challenges facing the media industry today. By valuing accuracy, transparency, and depth, slow journalism provides a valuable service to readers and helps to maintain the integrity of the press.

It should be noted that the media market operates on the principles of supply and demand. As long as there is a societal demand for “junk” news, someone will always be willing to provide it. It is necessary to develop the concept of slow journalism into the slow news⁹ movement and to undertake educa-

¹ T. Van der Meer, M. Hameleers, A.C. Kroon, *Crafting Our Own Biased Media Diets: The Effects of Confirmation, Source and Negativity Bias on Selective Attendance to Online News*, *Mass Communication and Society*, 2020, p. 942–943.

¹ See: P. Laufer, *Slow News. A Manifesto for the Critical News Consumer*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press. 2011.

tional initiatives aimed at explaining the impact of the character and quality of information absorbed by the human mind on its ability to function effectively. It is crucial to develop and promote good practices of information hygiene – activities and behaviours that individuals should adopt to protect themselves and others from harmful information, mainly misinformation, disinformation, and attention-seeking online content. Just as personal hygiene is essential for maintaining physical health, information hygiene is crucial for safeguarding one’s mental and emotional well-being in the digital age. Taking the above into account, the management of the Institute of Information Security has decided to create the SlowNews.pl portal, which aims initially to promote the slow news movement in society and, following on from that, to realise it by publishing articles on the portal that are edited in this spirit.

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