Individuated Media: A Cognitive Framework for Understanding the Changes Underway in the Media Environment

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Abstract

This article asserts that new, extremely popular modes of media services have arisen during the past 25 years that need to be critically categorized as different from the Mass Media we have known from the Industrial Era. These aggregational, extremely customized new modes of media services, which I term collectively *Individuated Media*, arise solely from computer-mediated technologies, and are unprecedented before circa 1998. All these take marked advantage of a largely overlooked inherent limitation that Industrial Era technologies have, but that Informational Era technologies don't. Among forms Individuated Media take are search engines, Social Media, and extant forms of individually customizable topical or genre services produced solely via computer-mediated technologies. The fulminant rise of these extremely popular Individuated Media modes is already causing them to supersede Mass Media products and services as the predominant means by which approximately half the world's population now obtains news, entertainment, and other information—the 4.4 billion people who own computer-media devices such as personal computers and smartphones. (Internet Usage Statistics: The Big Picture, 2019)

The first major sector of media experimenting with computer-mediated technologies to deliver services to consumers were daily newspapers, and their experience has been illustrative of the differences between Mass Media and Individuated Media. Perhaps because daily newspapers' initial experiences with online were with videotext systems in which text contents were distributed electronically onto video monitors, the daily newspaper industry myopically misperceived *computer*-mediated media as only an *electronically* mediated means of delivery for otherwise printed content: as wired ways to distribute texts, graphics, and photographs, without the expenses of purchasing, printing, and distributing paper products. A result of this

misperception was the industry's misbelief that all it needed to succeed online would be to transplant into online its products' contents and business models, along with the Mass Media theories, doctrines, and practices which had led to success with its printed products. The newspaper industry expected that consumers who shifted their media consumption habits to online would use online editions the same way they did printed editions, and that online editions would thus generate revenues commensurate with those generated from printed editions. But as thousands, millions, then billions of consumers made that shift, the newspapers' online revenues did not reach the levels expected.

Empirical data from the online auditing firms such as Nielsen/Netratings and Comscore began to demonstrate that although some newspapers' websites were receiving more *monthly* 'unique users' than those newspapers had *daily* purchasers of printed editions, but that these unique users on average visited the newspapers' websites infrequently and superficially. For example, the average user of *The New York Times*' website during 2007 visited it only 4.05 times per month; spent an aggregate total of 20 minutes and 20 seconds on the website that month; and read a total of only 27 webpages during those total visits. (NADBase, Combined Home and Work, Six Month Average March-August, 2007) That average visitation frequency is equivalent to once per week, and the average total *monthly* time spent roughly equivalent to the time the average reader of printed edition spends reading during an average *day*. Data from lesser renowned newspapers' websites showed worse consumptions. For instance, the average user of the *Miami Herald's* website visited merely 2.09 times per month, spending a total of just six minutes there all month, seeing only nine web pages during that period (NADBase, Combined Home and Work, Six Month Average March-August, 2007).

Furthermore, this severely reduced average consumption online compared to print, combined with online advertising different pricing mechanism than print, markedly diminished the website's advertising revenues compared to print. The price of print advertising is based upon the edition's net daily circulation, regardless of how many readers did see the page upon which the advertisement is placed. However, computer-mediated technologies can detect the actual number of users who saw the advertisement itself, so the advertiser is charged for the actual number who did (generally enumerated as a cost-per-thousand). If the average unique visitor to a newspaper's website visits only 4.05 times per month, then that newspaper can expose advertisements to him an average of only some four days per month and then only for the number of advertisements he saw during those few visits. This is the prevalent pricing model online, used by online advertising behemoths such as Google, Yahoo!, and Facebook. thus market forces compel most newspapers online to adhere to it.

Consumers' infrequent and superficial usage of newspaper contents online compared to printed editions was an unexpected shock to publishers, although it was predicted. As business author Evan Schwartz wrote in his 1997 book, *Webonomics*:

> You can already see it happening right before your eyes. Once they enter the Web economy, all magazines and newspapers that you hold in your hands deconstruct—in the true sense of the word. They lose their unity. They break up or decompose into their constituent elements. No longer is the editorial product a cohesive package tightly controlled by a team of editors. Once on the Web, the editors must relinquish some of that control to the readers, who play a big part in reinventing and reinterpreting how that information is seen. Instead of flipping through pages in a linear fashion, readers may pick and choose from menus of stories, look up

> stock quotes, search databases of classified ads, and have conversations with editors and other readers. They may never even see what the editors deem the top story of the day. *(Schwartz, 1997, pp. 33-34)*

A dozen years later, Peter Horrocks, director of the British Broadcasting Corporations World Services wrote:

> The consequence of this change in users' consumption has only dimly been understood by the majority of journalists. Most of the major news organisations had the assumption that their news product provided the complete set of news requirements for their users. But in an internet world, users see the total information set available on the web as their 'news universe'. I might like BBC for video news, the Telegraph or Daily Mail for sports results and the New York Times for international news. The ability of audiences to pull together their preferred news is bringing the walls of the fortresses tumbling down. In effect, the users see a single unified news universe and uses technology (e.g. Google, Digg, etc.) to get that content to come together. Thus, if media companies simply transplant into digital their traditional packages of content–even with the converged additions of hyperlinks, multimedia, editors' or CEO's blogs, and 'hyperlocal' coverage–and offer these enhanced traditional packages content via Web sites, mobile phones, and e-book devices, the companies will fail *(Horrocks, 2009)*.

Imagine that all your life you've been fed the same type of institutional or standardized meal as everyone else in your school, your company, or your community received that day. This might consist of an entrée, a vegetable, and a beverage, none of which were chosen by you but

by a nutritionist who thought that those were what most people in the community would want or should eat. On some days, the mix of items in this meal might interest you; on other days, not. Yet what if you were then given an alternative: a gargantuan buffet of appetizers, entrées, vegetables, salads, fruits, deserts, and myriad other items, the mix of which you yourself can select? Would you continue to consume the same standardized meal as everyone else that you have been given? Or instead select from this newfound buffet whichever mix of items that you think best match your own needs, interests, and tastes? What would you do?

You'll probably stop consuming the standardized meal and instead select your own choices from the huge buffet to which you now have access. That is like what billions of consumers who use computer-mediated devices are doing when they now consume news, entertainment, and other information. Rather than continue to rely upon any legacy media company's editors, who aggregate contents from their own reporters and other sources, to provide consumers with a packaged mix of contents that those editors think *might* interest most or should be given to all consumers, each of those consumers is now utilizing their computer-mediated access to the Internet to obtain a better match for his uniquely individual mix of needs, interests, and tastes, than that media company (or practical combinations thereof) can provide.

In his book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More,* Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, charted the relative popularity of people's myriad interests and found that these could be displayed as a power curve graph (Anderson, The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More, 2006). The numbers of people interested in a few topics was inversely proportional to the huge number of topics: very few topics (such as the weather) always interest everyone, some topics (such as the Barcelona football club) interest large groups of people, and few people are interested in any of a huge

number of specific topics (such as growing bonsai trees, reading Greek crime novels, nose piercing). Yet the largest area measured within the power curve is the total number of people interested in all those specific topics rather than the topics interesting everyone or large groups of people. Anderson termed that area the ‘Long Tail’. (Anderson, The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More, 2006, p. 10) The newspaper industry’s fortunes during the Industrial Era were built upon delivering a physical product, printed editions, that attempt to satisfy consumers’ universal or group interests, but not necessarily the remaining full mix of each consumers’ myriad specific interests, which might be most of their interests. However, the computer-mediated technologies of the Information Era don’t involve delivery of a physical product, such as printed paper, and by using computerized algorithmic processing can be programmed to provide an individually customized editions to a virtually infinite number of people. Anderson wrote:

> The theory of the Long Tail is that our culture and economy is increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of "hits" (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve and toward a huge number of niches in the tail. As the costs of production and distribution fall, especially online, there is now less need to lump products and consumers into one-size-fits-all containers. In an era without the constraints of physical shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare. (Anderson, The Long Tail in a Nutshell, n.d.)

From media technologies arise not only media products and services but the theories, doctrines, and practices of those. The technologies that arose during the Industrial Era, such as

the analog-image printing press (or the analog waveform broadcast transmitter), are incapable of producing truly customized ('individualized' or 'individuated') editions for every recipient, according to each recipient's own uniquely individual mix of needs, interests, and tastes. That is the hallmark limitation of Industrial Era media technologies. However, that technological limitation does not exist in the Informational Era's computer-mediated technologies, which has mass reach but can individually-customize a unique edition for each person among the masses who use it. Is Facebook a Mass Media company? With its 2.4 billion active users (Clement, 2019), Facebook certainly has mass reach; yet each of those users simultaneously sees a uniquely different mix of contents, one based upon his own individual mix of friends and 'Likes' than does every other users—quite unlike with a Mass Media product or service. So are Google, Yahoo!, Baidu, Twitter, Sina Weibo, and RenRen, to name a few other individuated new media services. All search engines and Social Media services provide individuated services, individuated experiences. So, too, do aggregational, extremely customized topics or genre services such as Pandora for music, whose 68 million unique users (Schneider, 2018), an audience larger than any radio station's in any but a handful of the world's nations, each simultaneously receive an individuated stream of music based upon his own tastes and favorite performers. Or Flipboard, whose 145 million unique users (Peterson, 2018), numbering far more than the circulation of any magazine in the world, each receive an individuated online magazine, aggregated from the contents of 4,000 of the world's periodicals, according to each of those users own needs, interests, and tastes. Or Netflix and Amazon, each of which stream cinema videos and television programs to their 158.5 million (He, 2019) and 75 million users (Dastin, 2018) respectively, a mix those services suggest according to each of those user's own demonstrated interests. Each of these Individuated Media companies, unlike Mass Media companies, delivers

highly or extraordinarily customized mixes of contents to each of their user, according to that user's own individual mix of needs, interests, and tastes. Each utilizes computerized algorithmic processing to achieve that cogent difference from Mass Media companies. These companies have already become the predominant means by which most people under the age of 30 obtain and consume news, entertainment, and other information (Shearer, 2018).

As the sheer number of people who use computer-mediated devices increases to include virtually everyone worldwide, something which will likely occur by the end of the next decade or two, the popularity and dominance of Individuated Media services will correspondingly grow. Media products or services that are not or cannot be individuated, or that cannot otherwise be remunerably integrated into Individuated Media companies' own services, will be at severe disadvantage.

Keywords: individuated media, mass media, media business model

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