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MARSHAL MCLUHAN'S TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM THEORY IN THE ARENA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: *McLuhan (1964) proposed that mediated technologies ensure culture diffusion in a society which in turn helps change human behavior. He states, "We shape our tools, and they in turn shape us." Most of the scholars in the field talked about radio and television etc. as mediated technologies but McLuhan perceived a bit differently by including numbers, games and money as mediated. Regarding numbers, he held that every individual in a theater enjoys all those others present. This creates a mass mind which let elites to establish a profile of the crowd. The phenomenon in turn homogenizes the masses that are easily influenced. McLuhan stated that games are media of interpersonal communication and extension of human social self. Games according to him "allow for people to simultaneously participate in an activity that is fun and that reflect who they are." To him money is power that facilitates access. It is money that empowers people to travel the world and serve as transmitter of information, knowledge and culture. These mediated tools according to McLuhan turn the world into a global village.*

The media of social networking exactly play the same role attributed by McLuhan with number, game, money along with traditional media of radio and television. Social Media (SM) users make use of identical applications and undertake almost similar activities that turn them into a homogeneous mass. Likewise, online profiles reflect identity features and most of them consume SM to have fun. SM connects people across cultures, religions, and boundaries and let them feel members of a single community. SM has not only converted the world into a small village but also shaped every aspect of human social life.

Key words: Marshal McLuhan; technological determinism; domain; social media.

JEL Classification: O35; O39; L82.

Introduction

Technological Determinism theory generally refers to the exploration of media's systems and mediated content's cultures in contemporary societies. The theory also takes into account the influences of media on the respective societies. This theoretical approach, however, associates greater role of technology (media) than mediated contents in terms of influencing society. Postman (2000) is believed to have refined the philosophy of Technological Determinism by suggesting that media producers and consumers shape cultures. According to Postman, people live in two environments - natural and mediated. Natural environment serves humans with air, water, trees and food etc. whereas, mediated environment serves individuals with "language, numbers, images, holograms, and all of the other symbols, techniques, and machinery" that make people what they are.

Application of Technological Determinism theory in this digital age focuses mainly on social media (SM), social mediated contents and its effects on human social, economic and political behavior. This new technology of SM has penetrated deep into human lives. People make use of this technology for social interaction with known and unknown people ((Boyd, Ellison 2007; Lenhart, Madden 2007) to increase their social capital (Putnam 2000). Political campaigns and affiliated endeavors are undertaken (Hardy, Scheufele 2005; Utz 2009; Park, Valenzuela, Kee 2009) and selling and buying are made through online technology of SM (Safko 2012).

Emergence of social networking sites (SNSs) in the latter part of 1990s has changed communication behavior of the people around the world. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007) SM spontaneously ensure one to one, one to many and many to many communications in the form of text messaging, photo sharing and video sharing. Innovations in these technologies from time to time have further paved way for advancement and development of communication facilities (Uricchio 2009). This technology has enabled people across borders and cultures to interact and talk to each other with such a speed and convenience that was not even imaginable a couple of decades ago. The mushroom growth of smart phones with attractive applications and interfaces and laptops with advanced specifications and facilities, computer video gaming, television, radio and wireless machines coupled with the integration of these into a single technology has tremendously changed the communication infrastructure. It would not be wrong to call it communication revolution. Interaction of the users with each other, sharing of information and exchange of ideas are the key features of this new digital technology (Martin, Erickson 2013).

1. Technological Determinism Theory

The theory of Technological Determinism or Media Ecology was conceived by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. According to this theory, the technology of mass media not only shapes attitudes and behavior of people but also bring a revolution in the mode of operation of a social system. The theory further proposes that functioning of a social fabric changes accordingly with emergence of every new technology. Basic principle of media ecology theory is that man survival on the globe is molded according to variations in the system of human communications. According to McLuhan (1964) growth of technologies of mass communication ensure culture diffusion in a society which in turn helps change human behavior. Here goes McLuhan famous quote "We shape our tools, and they in turn shape us" to fit in the discourse. West and Turner (2007) have quoted McLuhan to have stated that "we have a symbolic relationship with mediated technology; we create technology, and technology in turn re-creates who we are." The historical perspective of the theory proposes that revolutions in technology from time to time have brought corresponding changes in the societies.

2. Technological Determinism and SM

McLuhan (1964) branded human societies into tribal age, literate age, print age and electronic age. The diffusion of communication technologies helped modernize these societies at least one step forward. People in the tribal age marched towards literate age, literate age was transformed into print age and the print age arena was

promoted to the era of electronic communications. The living patterns of the people in their respective age were revolutionized accordingly. If McLuhan's continuum of marching of one stage of society to the next stage of society exist then we, of course, are witnessing another stage commonly termed as digital age. This new technology has brought abrupt changes in human lives. Since, Finnemann (2002) proposed that SM has not replaced other types of traditional mass media. Rather it has integrated all other forms of media like "electronic text, the telephone, radio, and television." The users of SNSs can read an electronic edition of every newspaper, they can make easy and almost free of cost phone calls, they can listen to each and every radio channel of the world with much ease and convenience and can watch any television channel of their choice. Unlike the mainstream media, SM platforms offer variety of contents that are contributed by the users themselves. Such contents may include reporting of local events, and happenings, and comments on various contents that are extracted from traditional mass media and uploaded online.

Traditional mass media allow for the lopsided vertical flow of contents with passive recipients at the other end. Information flow in the traditional media setting is directed from producers of the mediated messages to consumers of the same messages. In traditional mass media systems like radio and television, the users have no other option than to watch and listen to the contents presented by the media management except by changing the channel or switching off the system. The technology of SM, on the other hand, ensures horizontal flow of information with active users at the ultimate end. Information in the SM systems flows from consumers to consumers. The users of social mediated contents are also producers of the online stuff (Allan, Thorsen 2009). SM users have liberty to enjoy what and when they want to have and even to share the same with other users of the technology. It is not all over; the user of SM can generate their own contents and share the same with other users (Abdulahi *et al.* 2014).

3. Key Assumptions of Technological Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism theory frames three assumptions. Firstly, media instill every act in society. Secondly, media shape perceptions and organize human experiences. Thirdly, media link the world (West, Turner 2007).

The first assumption let the scholars to believe that people cannot shirk media since McLuhan included numbers, games and money along with traditional mass media of radio, television and movies as mediated. With regard to numbers, he held that every individual in a theater or playground enjoys the feelings of being among the masses. The feelings turn the crowed into a homogeneous mass which is easily influenced. McLuhan stated that games are media of interpersonal communication and extension of human social self. Games according to him "allow for people to simultaneously participate in an activity that is fun and that reflect who they are." McLuhan also proposed that money is power that facilitates access. It is money that empowers people to travel the world and serve as transmitter of information, knowledge and culture. He resembled money with language that connects miscellaneous segments of population such as formers, plumbers, physicians and engineers. These mediated tools according to McLuhan turn the world into a global village and shape every aspect of human life. He believed that society in turn influences technology in the passage to its evolution.

The media of social networking exactly play the same role attributed by McLuhan with number, game and money along with traditional media of movies, radio and television. Social Media (SM) users make use of uniform applications and undertake almost similar activities that turn them into a homogeneous mass. Likewise, online profiles reflect identity features and most of them consume SM to have fun. SM connects people across cultures, religions, and boundaries and let them feel members of a single community. SM not only converts the world into a small village but also shape every aspect of human social life.

Secondly, media shape perceptions and organize human experiences. McLuhan also believed that media are effective tools in shaping perceptions about the world. The powerful mediated messages let people to look at the world with the spectacles of the media. Positive portrayal of an issue, idea, movement or activity not only lead people to see positive aspects of the same but also start debating on the positive aspects of that issue. In the same manner, negative portrayal of an issue let people to watch, listen and read negative contents about the issue and even to start talking about the same negatives at every forum. For instance, media reports about moral break down in a society force people to watch contents on child or female kidnapping, drug abuse, and the like. People in their day to day talk begin to talk about moral degradation in society. These prevailing circumstances in turn direct individuals to live their lives accordingly and people in the respective society start looking at every stranger with suspicion (West, Turner 2007, 463). The same held true with respect to the use of online digital technologies. Stories on ATM fraud in Pakistan in the month of December2017 forced top management of National and Private commercial Banks in the country to take precautionary measures with respect to every online business transaction.

Thirdly, media turn the world into a great "political, economic, social and cultural system." McLuhan termed this global inter-connectedness as global village. This assumption of Technological Determinism theory is believed to be McLuhan's prediction of the emergence of social networking websites.

Keeping human needs, requirements, and capabilities in mind, producers of the digital technology strived to improve its various features and make it more useful for users of the contemporary world. According to Uricchio (2009) all forms of SNSs have their own logic for their use and offer their own reasons and terms and conditions for consumption of the same. Innovations have been made from time to time with respect to the advancement of technology and the varying and increasing demands of the users. The world has been witnessing the introduction of a different networking site with different features, functions and scope with every passing day. Uricchio (2009) noted that "The World Wide Web" was developed after the introduction of the "Mosaic" web browser and the "Pentium chip" was presented a couple of decades ago. Introduction of "networked computers" assisted by broadband cable services, "compression algorithms", and "cheap memory" have contributed a lot in improving the capacity of this technology in terms of memory and speed of transmitting information. Increase in the memory of technology enabled users to store lots of contents that have either been produced by the consumers or found floated online. Similarly, the speed of transmission has been raised to a position where the users can send dozens of terabyte data in a single click of a button.

Prior to the introduction of new digital media, traditional mass media which Uricchio (2009, 138) called as "Analogue Media" are meant to spread information without any participation of the consumers of such contents. But in this digital age of information dissemination, the newly introduced SM makes sure participation of the users in the process.

Castells (2001) in his book "The Internet Galaxy" states that "technological systems are socially produced and that social production is culturally informed." In other words, initially the culture of the people who developed information communication technology (ICT) greatly influenced the medium. The reason for shaping of the technology was that producers of the technology were actually the users of the same. The technology of internet is continuously changing and giving way to the invention of more sophisticated technologies like SNSs to meet modern market demands. The makeover of the early stage of the technology and the technology of the day in line with its use has been classified by Castells as 'producers as users of the technology' and 'consumers as users of the technology'. The use of internet by the producers as users contributed a lot in the development of the system, whereas, the consumers as users have no direct link with advancement of the digital technology. Their use of internet, however, has contributed to the emergence of new facilities in the system of digital technology (Castells 2001).

Inspired from the advent of satellite technologies, McLuhan (1964) thought of global connectedness of the entire cultures and societies and termed the phenomenon as "global village". His concept of "global village" proved to be a prediction of the role of SM that has shrunk the world far smaller than the village. This interconnectivity of the world through SNSs has now becomes a reality. The cross-cultural transmission of television and radio led McLuhan to call the world as global village where people can get information about each other irrespective of geographical boundaries. But this terminology of global village holds very much true when it comes into the arena of SM platforms. The people of different countries, regions and cultures interact with each other and communicate through instant messaging within no time. They can update and inform each other as much instantly as that of face to face settings. Such interconnectedness through SNSs according to Ansgard (2011) facilitates the process of globalization in number of ways. SNSs cross space and time limitations and let its users to adapt to a global context, regardless of region, religion, ethnicity, color, race and caste. Beside the fact that the users of SM are very much heterogeneous, they still interact with each other like a single community. It has been recognized that the bonding force of a community is the common interests. The common interest of the users of SM is the 'use of the technology.

Conclusion

In the perspective of Technological Determinism theory and in the light of existing research studies it has been assumed that ideologies, human communication behavior, family relationships, interaction with colleagues, teaching-learning settings, interaction with friends, pastime and means of amusement, and participation in socio-political engagements have been changed considerably by the use of this new technology. However, these wonderful innovations are yet to be the climax as Uricchio (2009) called it the tip of an iceberg. The world is witnessing only a hint of advancement in technology but still it has effectively contributed to some of the spheres of human lives. However, a few aspects of life are yet to be touched by the technology. In other words, the people have not yet seen the digital technology with full potential and magnitude.
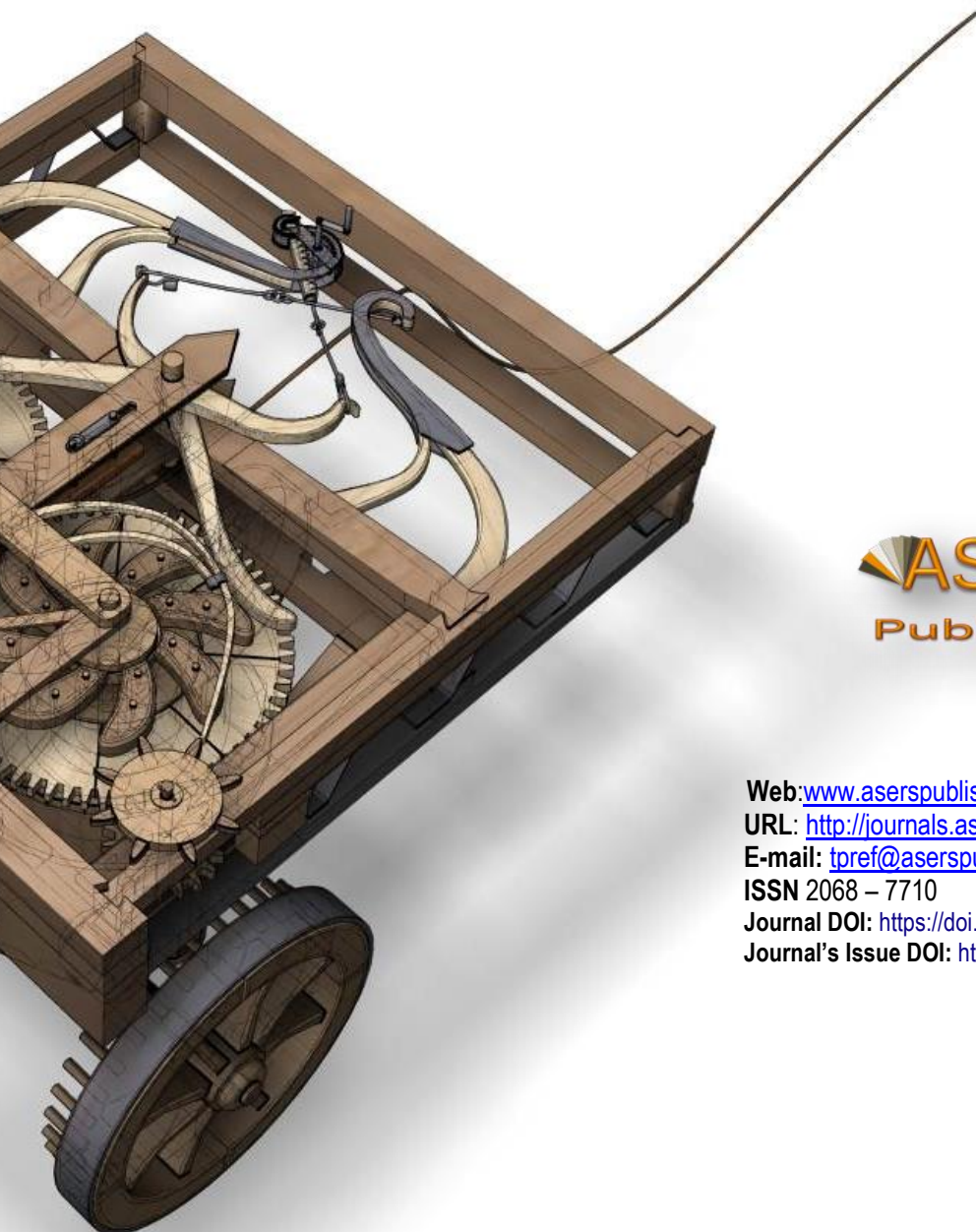
SM is overshadowing the importance of traditional media in terms of their services to society. Given this, some of the scholars have believed that this new media is superseding other form of electronic media like radio and television in their scope, functions and features.

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