

***Multimedia and Communication Curricula:
The Medium Vs the Message***

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Abstract

The multimedia technology is restructuring the field of communication in various ways. The prevalent nature of this new media invites flexibility which can make communication curricula accommodate a wide range of competencies including technical competency. I have argued in this paper that multimedia much like printing, radio, television and film are mainly the means whereby the content is delivered. Central to the multimedia is content and effects. Content requires perspective which can then be reproduced in texts and images while effects involves assessment of multimedia effects on society and culture. As such, the multimedia need to be approached from a mass communication perspective which preserves the identity of the field and provides a vital link between theory and practical application.

Introduction

The inherent dichotomy of medium and message in the field of communication is an old issue which in our opinion cannot be satisfactorily resolved even with the arrival of multimedia technology. The reason for this is the intermediary position that the field retains between communication media (the content) and communication technology (the medium). This is an old inquiry which questions whether the field of communication forms intellectual communicators endowed with broad theoretical knowledge of culture, society and history or technicians of communication who are equipped with practical skills to transmit the message via technologies of communication. The answer to this question is not a clear-cut type of revelation. This old-new controversy has recently resurfaced and made some communication educators like Robert Mchesney to postulate that the rise of recent technologies of communication such as Internet and Information Superhighway “place the future of communication research and education in US universities in jeopardy.” He adds that these developments “demand a restructuring or at least a rethinking of the very field of communication.” (1) Multimedia technology involves many predominant dimensions, economic, social, cultural, technological, global, etc. However, I specifically chose to examine recent trends in communication curricula and how some journalism educators and schools of communication around the world try to cope with the prevalent development in multimedia technology. ‘Multimedia’ is a term used to describe the new media which comparatively are not the same as mass media. The Internet Glossary defines multimedia as “term for any content that combines text, sound, graphics, and video. (2) This definition can be viewed from a mass communication perspective as a description which combines many of our senses (vision, hearing, etc.). This development seems to have restored what McLuhan termed long time ago the balance in our “sense-ratio.” The issues, however, is not much related to our sense perceptions as it is related to this new wave of interactive communication which has transformed the way people communicate, behave and conduct their business. Not only that multimedia accelerate the process of transmitting data documents and images, but the new media provide unprecedented accessibility and create a social multimedia cyberspace environment characterized by such new

communication phenomenon as newsgroup communication, virtual communities, etc. This controversial dichotomy is reflected both in attitudes of journalism educators and communication curricula across the globe, particularly in the US. Educators in communication do not have the same macro-level outlook as to how to deal with such development, particularly when the discipline of communication has historically been viewed as weak in theory. The recent report "Winds of Change" of the Freedom Forum in the US suggests that the recent technological development such as the multimedia revolution "has spread fear and confusion amongst the ranks of journalism educators. Many do not know which way to turn."⁽³⁾ Educators in communication seem to have at least two conceptions as to how to adopt communication curricula to multimedia environment. The report in question states that: "For some educators, the new multimedia herald the arrival of truly converged media, not only a distribution mix of audio, video and text, but also a combination mix of journalism, public relations, advertising and entertainment, with distinguished characteristics of each somewhat blurred ... For other educators and most journalists, the new media herald new ways to distribute messages, but with the same need as always for the practitioners and the public to know the difference between what is journalism and what is not."⁽⁴⁾ The report suggests that many schools agree that multimedia teachings should take place, but no clear vision is advanced as to how it should be done i.e., whether classes would be taught by teams of faculty member, each one an expert on a different medium or faculty would be retrained so each faculty member would become proficient in teaching how to prepare a story for all media, etc. The confusion that the report refers to is in our view a kind of struggle of adaptation associated with any new medium of communication. Historically, the invention of printing press, radio, film and TV raised similar questions. Early courses in the field, such as printing offered by Kansas State College as early as 1873, were technical. Later, it was realized that journalists and communicators in general need solid intellectual attainments to be able to function within a complex socio-political environment both locally and globally. As technology keeps changing and market pressure increases, communication curricula gradually lean towards these requirements and pressures. Robert McChesney argues that "nowhere are these pressures more apparent than in communication ... The pressures are doubly strong, therefore, to link up communication research and education to the masters of the corporate communication order, and to opt for what Paul Lazarsfeld (1941) termed 'the administrative' rather than 'the critical' path for scholarship."⁽⁵⁾ So far, no other McLuhan emerged to advocate a "media-determinism" perspective and suggest that the medium is still the message. However, there are as many enthusiasts of this new technology as there are skeptics. Journalism educators fall somewhere in between these polarities. Many journalism educators still subscribe to the main stream of journalism. Ronald Mc Danald of College of Communication, Boston University says "we embrace new technology [i.e.,] multimedia," but "we believe journalism must be taught separately, not become part of a communications mish-mash-a program that jumbles together all aspects of the communications and media worlds ... Journalism is special, it stands alone and is different, with vital role and proud history - and we are committed to teaching it as a separate discipline."⁽⁶⁾ A number of communication scholars seems to adapt an integrative approach. John J. Schulz, Acting Chair of the Department of Mass Communication, Advertising, and Public Relations, Boston University states that " our programs focus on the vital link between theory -- which can be applied to many problems and issues -- and practical application, which develops professionalism." He adds "we stress the very things the people in industry

tell us they most need from new graduates: a broad-based education coupled with clear thinking, concise writing and effective speaking skills.”(7) Similarly, Ronald Macdonald says that “a good journalist is characterized not only by technical and professional skills, but also by intellectual breadth and curiosity about the world.” He adds that their TV program is “built upon a solid foundation of liberal arts and requires production of creative work, study of business practices of the industry, and the study of both critical and social aspects of television.” (8) The University of Missouri School of Journalism, an old reputed institution, also seems to adhere to this integrative approach. The program emphasizes “strong liberal education blended with pragmatic learning experiences.” Specifically, the program emphasizes “the critical thinking skills demanded by journalism and related occupations. [the] media operations—a daily newspaper, magazine, commercial TV station and public radio station – challenge and deepen those skills in a professional environment.” (9).

Recent Trends in Communication Curricula (CC)

Many Departments of Communication seek to harness technology for appropriate use in communication and help prospect communicators become comfortable with digital media. We can practically identify many recent trends concerning academic efforts to adopt communication curricula to the new communication technologies. These include:

A. New Courses:

The Faculty of Communications of the University of Western Ontario opted for a special course simply called: Multimedia. The course description states that “students will be expected to learn software systems that incorporate text, graphics, still an full-motion video as well as journalistic techniques such as writing and research with the end objective to produce a multimedia presentation.” (10) The Graduate School of Media and Governance of Keio University in Japan offers a new course called Cyber-Gaming. The topics of the course include: Cyberspace, Virtual Community, Cybercafe, Cyburban Gaming, Multimedia and Edutainment, Media and Game Culture, Design of Gaming Space, Academic Association on Network, etc. The course description recognizes that it is difficult to define the meaning of a game, but such game is said to be characterized by the words like a rule, player, strategy, spade, score, punishment, fiction, fantasy, play, competition, discovery, and surprise. (11) The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Telecommunication at Arizona State University offers a graduate course on multimedia called: Cable Television and Telecommunication Systems. The rest of the program still subscribes to the main stream of journalism education with such courses as Communication Theories and Process, News Writing and Reporting, Public Relations Techniques, Mass Media and Society, Political Communication, International Communication, etc. (12) | The Department of Journalism of the University of North Texas offers a classical course called Microcomputer Applications in Journalism . The course content includes “on-line data applications for reporting, advertising, public relations and publications. Journalistic applications of project management, telecommunications and database publishing.” (13) The Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Southern California offers a variety of courses on multimedia both at the undergraduate and the graduate levels. These courses include Introduction to Communication Technology, Communication in the Virtual Group, The Culture of

the New Media, Information Management, Social Dynamic of Communication Technologies, Virtual Groups and Organizations, The Arts and New Media, Communication Law and New Technologies, Communication Technologies, Telephone-Data-Video Telecommunication System, etc. The content of these courses involves impact of these new communication technologies (cultural, social, political, and economic), issues and implications of these technologies, the basics or principles of multimedia and the technological concepts of multimedia. The content also involves the legal dimension of multimedia including computer regulations. The courses in questions put special emphasis on multimedia effects on society and culture. This concern, which dominated communication research of mass media, has now been transferred to the multimedia. Although research on such effects and the methods to be used for such research are relatively new, the direction of such process of inquiry is in our view encouraging and put the multimedia in line with mass communication perspective. The courses also address the basic issues of multimedia such communication processes, information maintenance, privacy and access, artificial intelligence, virtual communities, virtual reality, etc. The technical dimension of these courses embraces both basics of multimedia as computer communication networks , audio and video interactive technologies, etc. and the technological concepts such as frequency, electricity modulation, digital conversion, video telecommunication system, etc. The Columbia School of Journalism offers Basic New Media, Advanced New Media and Exploring New Media. The courses explore the conceptual background of the new media and provide “hands-on experience with the tools that create digital multimedia titles.” This experience includes “digital image editing, World Wide Web site creation, and interactive site design.” The courses also provide ways to explain complex social issues using advanced new media tools: “animation, guided chats, reader-customized stories, and interactive 3D.” Students learn how to produce their own web pages explaining issues of their own choosing. (14)

B. New Curricula:

The School of Design and Media (UK) offers a Master Degree in Hypermedia Studies. The program is designed to incorporate the hypermedia philosophy in all its dimension. The theory modules involve the history of convergence, contemporary debates in hypermedia and digital artisanship. The practical modules include interactive media design, virtual communities and specialist training in advanced hypermedia design skills for the Net, CD-roms, 3D modeling and virtual spaces. (15)

C. Centers for Multimedia: *Center for the New Media, Columbia University:*

The Center for the Media of Columbia University offers New Media Workshop where students “learn to report and create stories using multimedia tools and techniques.” The Center also offers Exploring New Media. This course provides students with “a conceptual map of the new media landscape.” Students review the latest technological trends and demonstrations as well as the cultural and commercial impact of new media. This process is conducted through a series of special guest visits, lectures and demonstrations. Furthermore, students are expected to view new media as a BEAT and “develop a sense of the scope, depth and limits of news coverage of new media technology, as well as the prospects for the future of new media.” (16)

Hypermedia Research Center:

The School of Design and Media in UK established the Hypermedia Research Center. The Center has been carrying out theoretical and practical work into digital technologies. (17)

D. Multimedia Laboratory:

The Center for the New Media of Columbia University established a News Laboratory which facilitates collaboration among various components of the new media industry. Students come from different disciplines: Journalism, Engineering, Computer Science, Business, International and Public Affairs, and Education. In the Laboratory, they all work to develop and test new media applications for journalism and storytelling and also see what the next generation of newsroom technology is likely to be and how it is likely to affect the way they work. Students from other fields work on applications appropriate to their related field of study (e.g., a student in business may develop a business plan for a content-based search engine for the World Wide Web).(18)

E. Joint Venture:

Most recently, the Journalism School at Missouri entered a long range partnership in media technology with the International Business Machines Corp. and gained more than \$2 million in the latest IBM computers and related hardware and software. In the wake of this new effort, the school has established the National Institute on Computer Assisted Reporting. (19)

F. Communication Classes on the Websites:

The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point offers communication classes of the WWW both On-Campus and Off-Campus. These courses include Film History (1940-Present), Global Communication and the Information Age, Interpersonal Communication on the Internet, Technology and Leadership, Desk Top Publishing, and Creative Problem Solving. (20)

G. Academic Communication Sites on the Internet:

Most Schools of Communication around the globe have established extensive presence on the Internet. Most of these are US schools, but there are others from Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. These Websites provide a healthy amount of educational resources for students and lecturers. The recent survey by the Institute For Learning Technologies (ILT) of Columbia shows that most colleges in the US already are connected to the Internet. Although most of the information that a WWW site provides already exist in published form, WWW still is another source of information through which an institution may contact potential contributors, prospective students, new faculty, etc. The survey found few academic institutions use hypermedia qualities that are the basics of multimedia technology such as photos, mail-to feature, clickable maps, and online applications. (21)

Academic communications sites around the world consist of major US

schools/colleges/departments of communication such as the reputed Graduate School of Journalism of Columbia University, Medill School of Journalism of Northwestern University, the Graduate School of Journalism of the University of California at Berkeley, School of Journalism of the University of Missouri, The Annenberg School of Communication of the University of Southern California, etc. The sites also include institutions outside the US such as the Graduate School of Journalism of the University of Western Ontario in Canada, the Graduate School of Media and Governance of Keio University in Japan, the Center for Media Resource in Hong Kong, etc. (22).

Research and Conceptual Analysis of Multimedia:

Recently, important theoretical and stimulating work on multimedia appeared. This particular academic effort involves a variety of valuable references such as Brook & Boal {1995} (23), Bollier {1993} (24), Fitch {1996} (25), Gilder {1994}(26), Negroponte {1995} (27), Rheingold {1993} (28), Sullivan & Detour {1994} (29), Talbot {1995} (30) and most particularly Toffler {1994} (31). Such materials can provide theoretical support for teaching multimedia from a mass communication perspective.

Reflections and Implications

These trends suggest that many approaches can be developed on how to incorporate multimedia in communication curricula. Most Departments of Communication, particularly in the US, seem to be somewhat reluctant to engage strenuously in developing special areas of specialization in multimedia. Most of these departments prefer to only offer some courses on multimedia. The exception to this general tendency is The Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Southern California which offers a variety of courses on multimedia both at the undergraduate and the graduate levels and The School of Design and Media in UK which offers a Master Degree in Hypermedia Studies. Many universities opt for a macro level approach by creating independent multimedia centers or laboratories which can be utilized by many related disciplines including the field of communication. Still, many departments of communication adopt the wait-and-see attitude to make sure that the move to make is in the right direction. It is probably too early to conceive a field of inquiry, within the field, which specialize only on multimedia like Print Media, Broadcasting and Film. While the technological rationale is energetically present, the content of such specialization has to be developed through research and accumulation of knowledge. It is probably very suitable to include multimedia within Broadcasting and thus have a new field called Broadcasting and Multimedia. After all, the two basic elements of multimedia, audio and video, are also the essence of broadcasting. Meanwhile, it is most appropriate to start multimedia programs at the graduate level for reasons that students at this level are expected to have the intellectual background necessary for using multimedia within a particular theoretical perspective. In addition, the multimedia, as a new branch of inquiry, requires empirical research which can be conducted at this level and from which knowledge can be generated at the undergraduate level of education in communication.

Multimedia and CC in Non-Western Contexts

Communication curricula in many Muslim countries still lag behind such technological development. Most departments of communication do not offer courses on multimedia. Many of these departments are not equipped with multimedia labs and do not have presence on the Internet. There are few exceptions to this rule. The Department of Mass Communication, Kuwait University offers a course called New Media Technology. The Department is equipped with many labs including Digital Media Lab and has a Homepage which provides links to such institutions as also Arabic Newspapers and Magazines, CNN Interactive, Communication World (University of Texas), Communication Schools on the Web, Entertainment Weekly Online, ESPNET SportsZone, International News Flow Study, Kuwait TV Channel 2, Time Magazine, The World Lecture Hall, etc. (32) The Department of Mass Communications of King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia offers one course on communication technology and its presence on the Internet is via University's Homepage.(33) The Department of Communication of the International Islamic University Malaysia is probably the second in the Muslim world to seek a multimedia lab. The multimedia environment in the country greatly favors and facilitates such development. The country of Malaysia is probably the first Muslim country to develop an ambitious program to use multimedia technology in business, education and development. The program, called Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), will support all sorts of multimedia and information technology with video conferencing functions and complete automation.

Theoretical Propositions

The recent trends show that multimedia technology is gradually affecting the nature of communication curricula. The followings are a number of conceptual propositions on how the inherent dynamic relationship between the field of communication and communication technologies needs to be supervised and structured.

A. Priority of Content Over Medium

Communication as a field of inquiry rests on both theoretical foundations and practical considerations. The practical aspect, however, should not overshadow the conceptual fundamentals which make this discipline a science of human society. The challenge of this discipline is not only how to reconcile content with technology but also how to adopt content to the requirements of communication technologies. Content provides perspective through which the communicator can understand his role, culture and mission. This perspective has its origin in history, culture and belief system. That is, the communicator needs the intellectual ability or what can be called ethical competence in order to handle and process the ever-changing social and technological environment. Technology is an efficient way (both in time and cost) to deliver content. It is imperative that today's communicators be conversant with communication technologies in order to master their environment and energetically face the challenges of the future. However, the acquisition of techniques needs to be within a cultural framework which provides perspective. Without perspective, the role of the communicator is reduced to certain applied formula that may not survive the constant process of change in the socio-technical milieu. The communicator is mostly a content expert. The technical skills of multimedia are to be subordinated to the content so that the content expertise channels what multimedia developers create and fashion as skills, software and products.

B. CC Need to Preserve Character and Personality

Communication as a discipline has been overwhelmed by recent technologies of communication. Many communication curricula are gearing toward the technical component of communication as a result of technological requirements and pressures. Some writers as Robert McChesney postulates that such technologies which he labels “the capitalist communication sector” will probably “lead to the demise of communication as a viable discipline.” He argues that this technical-market trend “takes communication away from what Innis ... termed the ‘university tradition,’ a source of honest, independent inquiry. These pressures in the Muslim context are yet to be felt due the undeveloped information-technology sector, but the ingredient of such pressures are there as these technologies become prevalent and global. As such, there is an urgent need to develop a constructive perspective which can integrate technology in communication curricula without compromising the theoretical and cultural assumptions which make this field a distinguished discipline in the social sciences. The field of communication, in our view, needs to deal with communication technologies from a mass communication perspective. That is, the emphasis need to be on content and effect of these technologies. The first dimension [the content] involves the use of production techniques such video and multimedia production to shape and model content initiated within a perspective. The second dimension involves research on multimedia end-users and the effect of multimedia content on different social categories including those of virtual communities.

C. Technology Needs To Be Effectively Incorporated

The future of the field is closely tied to communication technologies. As technology develops, communication curricula need to remain flexible and incorporate the new demands of communication technologies. At the practical level, this requires perpetual instruction (practice sessions and workshops) of communication educators and close association with the market sector. This training is necessary as the process of communicating, informing and educating is mostly mediated by technical skills. It is apparent that many communication scholars shy away from this technical experience and view this encountering as reducing the intellectual role played by the communication educator in building and shaping the minds of new generation of young journalists and communicators. Nonetheless, communication educators seem not to have other choices except to be friends with these technologies. The incorporation of multimedia in communication curricula requires theoretical and methodological considerations. This requires, in our opinion, a particular conception which views multimedia as mass communication. This is certainly the case of the Internet for example. The subject matter of communication educators would be the different contents of the Internet, the virtual communities, the end users of the Internet and their socio-demographic characteristics, implication of the Internet on power control, extension of public sphere, the opportunities for developing societies, etc. The Internet has its technical fundamentals. However, it would be quiet unwise to stretch the field of communication well beyond its subject matter and venture without perspective into areas of other related technical disciplines as Computer Science, Engineering and Information Technology (IT), etc. The accumulated experience of teaching Broadcasting and Film shows this inherent exigency. Schools of communication were more in line with forming graduates who can effectively communicate through these media than with producing technicians who fashion

media content in certain ways. The new media, however, pose more challenges than the previous traditional media in terms of content, scope and complexity.

D. The New Media Require Interdisciplinary Approach

Clearly, the incorporation of communication technologies involves not only traditional interdisciplinary approach between communication and different human sciences, but also a new stand which extends to technical sciences as computer science, engineering and IT. For this, there is a need to understand the language of these sciences. The same expectation applies to those in computer sciences. The recent process of convergence of broadcasting and telecommunication will certainly have implication on the field of communication and other related fields as well.

E. CC Need to be Critically Responsive to Business Communication

The market is an efficient domain which the validity of outputs can be measured and appreciated. Communication curricula due to the nature of the discipline, were more responsive to the needs of the market than most other sciences. However, the market world has many times complained that communication graduates lack relevant training and practical exposure. This criticism is to be given special consideration even though the case is always made that communication curricula provides broad knowledge adaptable to different changing situations.

Conclusion

Toward A Mass Communication Perspective Of Multimedia

Communication Curricula must aspire to excellence and need an educational vision that endures. This vision is to be combined with technical skills that enable graduates to participate constructively and effectively in the emerging communication environment. Multimedia are another technology which adds particular challenges to the field of communication. The challenge involves developing a content which reflect a cultural orientation and special skills required by this technology. Multimedia are actually carriers. They are means much like printing, radio and TV whereby the content is provided and not an end in themselves. As such, multimedia need to be treated as mass media. This mass communication perspective would focus on the same issues that characterized mass media of newspapers, radio, television and films. The multimedia are essentially the synthesis of the previous mass media. This approach will enhance the character of the field of communication and make cultural, social and economic contributions through constant close scrutiny of multimedia effects on society at large. Communication curricula in the Muslim context need to have this energetic commitment to the new demands of multimedia. This commitment, however, is to be exercised within a cultural framework which preserves the identity of the content. Multimedia offer many opportunities for creative production and participation. At the large scale, multimedia and computer networks provide the infrastructure for intercultural communication whereby many cultures have the potential to contribute to this interactive cyberspace and not be excluded and as a result suffer the consequence of a particular global culture. This historical opportunity is to be ceased with new perspective that does not fall back of the previous experience of mass media where the content was mostly the product of Western media industry. The

constructive use of multimedia can hopefully reduce many stereotypes associated with the way the Muslim society and culture is projected in world media and in addition may create certain balance in the international communication flow.

Notes

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