

Mass Media Hype and the ‘Long tail’ of Globalisation: A North Korean Example

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Abstract

This article comments on the contemporary manifestations and implications of mass media hype in the Internet age, with a particular application to conditions of post-industrial journalism. Newsworthy events can take on the characteristics of a ‘long-tail’ with a global distribution. Such a ‘long-tail’ of media hyper-activity can occlude ‘secondary effects’ including aporias in representation and media presence online. An example is discussed from Internet news representation of North Korean militarisation. In this context, concepts of censorship, cultivation and pseudo-event remain as relevant as ever, despite – and perhaps even more so because of the proliferation of available information in post-industrial journalism. While the article affirms that there are advantages in the digitalisation of journalism in the post-industrial era, issues of gate-keeping can be seen to be compromised in aspects of content dissemination, audience interpretation and media availability.

Introduction

Mass media communication is the transmission of signal usually from a single source to a large audience. It is transmitted by a media such as Television, radio, (e)book or (e) newspaper or Internet. Social media is a form of active participant (one to one; one to many) networked mass-media. Such a communication tool is ubiquitous in the developed world, giving rise to the ‘knowledge society’ and liberating vast amounts of information for education and entertainment but it is not without ‘side-effects.’ The concept of the media creation of the ‘mean world’ perception among audiences and possible intergenerational influence have meant that the uses and effects of media are at best ambiguous, normally only fleetingly uplifting, and often seen as divisive or diversionary. The term ‘mean world syndrome’ was invented by George Gerbner [1] and describes a phenomenon in which the violence of mass media content makes the audience perceive the world to be more adverse than it is, it is a form of ‘confirmation bias.’ There are no such things as ‘neutral’ mass media. Increasingly the global reach of mass media – television, radio, some forms of Internet – has meant that newsworthy events have a long tail; the portion of a large audience of reception that is distant from the head or central part of the story. Within this context the phenomenon of mass media hype, or intensified and exaggerated publicity in the media over an issue is characterised by the magnitude and intensity of the coverage of a particular issue and may produce complex and undifferentiated intended and unintended effects. Such effects may include aporias and occlusions in representation which may or may not obscure issues of real-world urgency. The long-tail produced by media hype can hide unintended or even ‘camouflaged’ issues; it can point to absences that are generated in response to media hype, or to the cessation of familiar media content over the short term. Through the ‘long-tail’ effect of audience perception (or more precisely the divergence of initial trigger issue and the later incidents of narration and the manner of their cessation), the gatekeeping mechanism of ‘newsworthiness’ may be compromised.

Audience cultivation

The cultivation of audiences by the mass media leads to the suspension or endorsement of certain representations of heuristic and peripheral information processing. The sensationalism of media, scaremongering, the bad-world syndrome, may serve to condition media watchers and consumers into feelings of helplessness,

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abandonment, irrelevance, or even trauma [1]. Relatedly, media have been held responsible for cultivating the audience’s materialism or even trivialising values that protect citizenry over intergenerational time-spans. In this way media can be seen as having a cyclical impact on consumer value and behaviours. For example, Chau-Kiu and Chan argue that “[m]aterialism and low moral value make people define the world as mean, inhuman and fierce” [4]. A self-confirming bias is established in which the frequency, vividness, and recency of mass media messaging stimulate their retrieval from memory and through the cultivation effect produce the conditions of heightened sensitivity to negative news that Gerbner [1] describes. This self-confirming bias can lead to interesting effects that may be occluded by the long-tail of media attention. The originator of the idea of the long-tail, Chris Anderson, in a book of the same title [4], argued for a form of accentuated Pareto [5] effect (80% of effects arise from 20% of causes) online, featuring large numbers of niche content items [6]. In digital media the asynchronous platform of online distribution adds to the prolificacy of static media sources and items, such as found in print media, and also introduces a dynamic of faster dissemination of news items. But audience expectations of the pattern of media representation of news items in the long-tail of distribution can make the observance of market conditions less apparent. This is evidenced in the discussion of the ‘North-Korean’ example in the present article.

Despite and perhaps because of this, there is little current open debate or critical reflection on mass media audience conditioning because the effects can be subtle and prolonged. Discussion may also be open to the same critique as that being used to describe the media, that is, a kind of participation in the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ of media manipulation in which both consumer and producer acknowledge each other’s influence, within a narrative of increasing information decay. The ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ involves a lack of free-flowing

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information between parties and the possibilities for non-optimisation of its use. This metaphor is also relevant for an open society in as much as citizen journalism while accentuating the 'immediacy' of reporting lacks editorial consistency and is 'subjective,' leading to 'information decay' because of the lack of contextual corroboration. For example some forms of social media can mirror news items produced from commercial news outlets, while generating little in themselves that is newsworthy, obscuring rather than verifying information that has previously had editorial context. On the other hand media can also be seen as a force of enlightenment, supplementing forms of education and contributing to progress by disseminating ideas and information, providing enjoyment and exposing political corruption [7]. The ratio of censored items (understood as being news items that do not receive balanced perspective or coverage) and 'pseudo-event' will be higher in post-industrial journalism because of the loosening of the gatekeeping effect of editorial verification that has ensued with the rise of social media and citizen-journalism and the increasingly decentralisation and mobility of news reporting. This can be measured by examining the relationship between the publics' comprehensibility of an issue in relation to its media sources, and comparing and contrasting the understanding of an issue in relation to its media source.

Media Conditions

Thus while it could be said that the mass media are characterised by an undifferentiated aggregate of disordered and sometimes darkly reflective images of mass society [7], media themselves rely upon many effects that are both sensory and narrational, including devices of communication medium usage such as spectacle, simplification, and exaggeration. Furthermore media are forms of meta-information – they are part of the power and socioeconomic system that they report on, and as media are themselves formed by series of words and images, stories, rhetoric and sensory impressions all intended to gain attention and influence. Indeed, the concept of truth may itself be 'mediated,' that is represented, disguised or limited in various ways, particularly under conditions of censorship. Although the logic of the market should dictate that information can be updated and corroborated by new and better information, in fact the relationship between veracity and information decay is not as well understood in the era of post-industrial journalism as it was under centralised news dissemination, due to the exponential increase in the manufacture of digital information data. (In 2007 for the first time more digital data was created than storage in which to host it – estimated at approximately 264 exabytes, [8] for example). Furthermore, the proliferation of Television and radio channels in the satellite, cable and broadband era has brought a plethora of information alternatives, increased mobility and decentralisation of media reporting, but as Bernstein [9] suggests, not necessarily "better information ... [rather] increased quantity of information ... without any consistent improvement in quality". This in turn may lead to 'degraded' time, decision-making and investment decisions [9]. It is also apparent that we are in an era of 'post-industrial' journalism in which proximity to the medium of news transmission is, with mobile communication technologies, no-longer of over-riding concern [10]. This has added new editing challenged exacerbated by citizen journalism that is proliferated within social media dissemination.

Media Conditions

As far as audience reception and consumption are concerned, information needs to be paid for in some way (by act of transfer) and there is also an opportunity cost in deciphering it both in a business

sense (acting on business intelligence) and in a semantic sense (involving the creation of meaning or the maintenance of a world-view) [9]. There is also a trade-off between the time needed to digest information and the incremental benefit derived from it [9]; thus the effort involved in sorting out sense from nonsense has to compete with the stimulatory pleasure of the next burst of mediated information perceived. From the perspective of information release, a 'long-tail' of media hype might be expected to taper once the newsworthiness of an item becomes less critical -- taper but not cease altogether, and certainly not along with the medium of dissemination!

The North Korean example

Take a relatively recent happenstance from the Internet, for example. There is a day in mid-March 2013 when North Korea disappeared from the Internet [11]. The background to this pseudo-event was the continuing North Korean rhetoric about nuclear arms, a build-up of diplomatic tension in Asia and military tension along the South Korean border. The American air force responded by practising dummy bombing raids over the Korean peninsula but also by carefully taking the Minuteman missile off its scheduled test, broadcast on (inter) national radio. On May 13 news reports about North Korea were minimal, press reports were minimal, and on May 14 the only visible information about the presence of North Korea on the Internet was a short piece from the Japanese press saying a diplomat had been sent to North Korea but that the Japanese Government no longer knew where he was [12]. Even the satellite imagery of North Korea on the Internet showed an area with no light, but surrounding South Korea and China as comparatively luminescent, attributable to the lack of power infrastructure development. Two days later the Korean leader reappeared on national television but the apparent North Korean belligerence had eased in the Western media [13].

In its media effect the disappearance of North Korea for one day from the Internet in mid-May 2013 is a 'staged event' belonging to a particular kind of conditioned media logic which has reference to the predominant modes of news coverage, in which familiar formats introduce certain categories of event or 'non-event' [7]. This event is so-called 'anti-noise' in mass media hype. It is noisy precisely because of its deafening silence, because as consumers of Internet news items we pay next-to-nothing to hear nothing about the status of North Korea in one day mid-May – we have over-invested in its nothingness – either the Korean leader would re-emerge in the public eye and life would go on as normal in late May 2013, or it wouldn't.

In the event life went on 'almost as normal,' in North Korea and the disruption to the North Korean internet was short-lived in 2013. But it was repeated on 22 December 2014 [14], as reported in both the *New York Times* and by the *BBC* the following day. The *BBC* pointed out that the tech-savvy North Koreans are proliferate mobile phone users (1 in 12 of the population) but that many of its peoples are blocked from using the World Wide Web. North Korean's can access 'innocuous topics' [15] but can't access websites outside North Korea. Only the trusted elite, commercial and military agents have such access. But such access as there was in the North Korean system was brought down in 2013 and again 2014 probably by cyber-attack, not that any government has claimed responsibility. The only route for internet into North Korea is via China but sources argue the message of internet disruption might be one of temporary geopolitical 'vulnerability'.

Implications

As Boorstin has observed, those who relate the news, the reporters, need to differentiate between events and pseudo-events [16] as much as do news consumers. However, there are also sequences of events presented in patterns, so-called 'pseudo-pattern-events,' which are newsworthy stages of hyped mass-media productions made to resemble events, or newsworthy events presented in sequence so as to create the effect of a causal link. In mass media hype then there is a feeling of self-inflating of events and an ambiguity about "covering vs. creating and about cause vs. impact" [17]. Media hype also has a tendency to "transform single cases to general social problems and mobilize social outrage" even when that outrage is inspired by a lack of knowledge [2]. However, the trigger event and the chain of narrative incidents may diverge in the 'longtail' of audience reception. Consequently, in instances of mass media hype (particularly when audiences are looking for a news item which has not yet been aired) the perception that the news item is the result of someone else's systematic reasoning about a problem [18] is temporarily suspended, the cue and the cognitive effort are disproportional – gatekeeping trust is swept aside. Occlusions are then more or less obvious, because the long-tail has signalled the rise in newsworthiness and its sudden absence is noteworthy (where it might not have been to such an extent in asynchronous print-based sources). Post-industrial journalism might correspondingly 'prime' its audiences for pro-longed anxiety over un-reported items.

One interesting outcome of the North Korean 'pseudo-event' of 2013 was that became a 'real event' in 2014, with international media reporting a brief 'black-out' of North Korea's Internet system. However, by early 2016, the DPRK's regime in Pyongyang had modified its nuclear testing news media rhetoric to one of the forward anticipation of repeated satellite launching through long-range rockets. That the two activities continue to be reported side-by-side is still troubling to North Korea's international political critics. The original and secondary 'disappearance' of North Korean internet is unusual because it was a sudden cessation and did not involve a 'tapering tail' of post-hyper-active news reportage.

A related phenomenon in current practices of media censorship (on a continuum with de-representation) is a 'sound-bite.' A 'sound bite' is a short phrase or sentence that captures the essence of a speech or message. The term was popularised in the 1970s amongst political campaigns. It is a short clip of speech or music taken from a longer piece, and standing in the place of a longer segment in a news media item. 'Sound bites' are controversial in journalism ethics because if the context of a 'sound bite' is not clearly defined its meaning can be misleading or confusing. Sound-bite editing, whereby selected contextual elements are censored, cropped (reduced in size or sub-edited), or dropped altogether from a media item, which has the result of foregrounding only specific (often emotive and sensationalised) comments without description of their background. This is a relatively new phenomenon as a consequence of digitalisation of news media. While it may be part of the "magnifying impact" digitalization has upon structural imbalances in the production, circulation, and accessibility of information" [19] it is a form of unethical practice which has adverse effects on audiences' perceptions of the value or importance of media news items. Sound-bite journalism is sensationalist, and may spread misperceptions of alarm and relativise the truth value of media items, destabilising knowledge and perspective on current newsworthy events. This is part of the concept of information overload, which is a symptom of the proliferation of information sources and a pace of

reception beyond processing time, and may result in the decontextualisation of information from its source – a tweet of a 140 digital characters may not contain a thorough story, for example. As such media in whatever channel (online, radio or Television) are providing not just an economy of symbols but also conditioning of social behaviour. While there may be value in applying value judgments to media items, about weather irregularities due to climate change, for example, for educational purposes, and thereby eliciting a response to climate change issues, this value can be eroded if the media item is inaccurate, de-contextualised or forces wildly interpretative meaning constructions. Perhaps this is also related to Ramonet's [20] assertion that 'seeing is understanding,' meaning the mediated society that consumes images blames the receiver of information for practising the choice of interpretation, as he or she can become meaningfully informed on his or her own.

Increasingly, either by subsuming within a media conglomerate or by the immediacy (but also the subjectivity) of citizen-journalism, security in the accessibility, reliability and credibility of journalistic information can be brought into question. A media outlet may rush to publication (in a print or digital medium) with a story on the basis of partial or incomplete information from a tweet. Although interactivity and collaboration have increased in some areas of the global information network and there are more mechanisms for open social participation, this generally has not led to an improvement in the quality of information available. Whilst one can argue that the media plays a role in maintaining "vital links and connections necessary for a cohesive social order" it does so without much thought to the effect in any localised sense, (much as water will flow down a hill instead of up it) [19]. And although giant media conglomerates, dominate the market and culture of media (such as the Murdoch Group, AOL-Time Warner, Microsoft and Google) deregulation has also weakened the objectivity of the media and its relation to truth value (through an accentuation of multiple 'subjectivities' of mobile and citizen journalism).

Consequently, the era of the citizen journalist adds further challenges to the assigned professional role of the journalist in any democracy. The importance of state sovereignty as an arbitrator in aversion of 'truth' which the nation affirms cannot be underestimated if not from an economic perspective but a scientific one in the preservation of agreed standard(s) of truth-value and ethical reporting. As García de Madariaga [19] states, "the objectivity and the role of the media as monitors of power are less valuable in a society which is increasingly subject to the dictates of commercial rationality and which turns most journalists into mere disseminators of consent" (p. 186). On the other hand the relationship of the media with systems of 'power' is less than clear cut – truth value and objectivity tend to transcend their sources. It is also humbling to note that despite the increased vaunting of knowledge and progress brought about by the advances of technology and the informed society, only about one-sixth of the world's population have 'access' to this network [19]. Thus, not only does it become an issue of the have and have nots (of access and/or ownership); of connectivity with developed technology, but also the epistemological issues of using information to give people knowledge -- the relevancy of news information is also of geopolitical importance -- its announcements and its absences.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests with the work presented in this manuscript.

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