



COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,
Nico Carpentier**

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Friends, not foes: Integrating structuralist and agentic perspectives on media consumption

Alyona Khaptsova, Ruben Vandenplas

Abstract

Various disciplines strive to answer the question of how users select the media that they use. Extensive research has been approaching the issue from different, sometimes competing angles, resulting in an estrangement between the fields. This chapter reviews past findings on media selection processes in light of the structure-agency debate and aims to highlight the intersections between audience research on media use and selection, and findings on social cognition, confirmation bias, and selective media exposure as a potential direction for future research.

This chapter bridges the two strands by emphasizing their complementary nature and integrates them into a single theoretical network. It argues that the balance between structure and agency in media selection is contingent upon a 3-layered model of analysis, including: parameters of structures, situations, and individuals. In doing so, the current chapter strives to move away from approaching the relation between structure and agency as a linear process or dichotomy, opting instead to describe the interrelation of both concepts as a circular process, rooting the argument within the current convergence of media and proliferation of algorithms. We conclude by emphasizing the need to further explore these conditioning factors in future research.

Keywords: structure-agency debate, media consumption, personalization era

1. Introduction

Everyday life is overloaded with information; the contemporary media market offers an infinite selection of programming that can satisfy the audience's every whim in terms of content and format. However, attending and processing all available information is beyond human capacities. The idea that people's perception is selective was articulated in as early works as those of William James (1890). Since the beginning of the 20th century, research has started to shed a light on how selectivity functions within media related practices, and which motivations inform it.

Human-media interaction represents behavior of individuals within their information environments, which means that both characteristics of individuals and those of their environments affect the resulting behavior. The question which of the two forces is the primary source of influence has different answers in the disciplines that traditionally prioritize either structure (e.g. sociology, structuralist theory) or agency (e.g. psychology, cognitive science, cultural studies). Taking either of the perspectives as a guiding framework enabled researchers to shed light on how structure affects agents and how agents act within structures. This has laid the foundation for research exploring the possible middle-ground of the structure-agency debate, such as structuration theory, which critiqued the "*lack of a theory of action in the social sciences*", and situated human agency first and foremost in specific social and geographical contexts (Giddens, 1979). Today's personalization era empowers users to freely choose their information diet (Stroud, 2008; Jenkins, 2004; Balbi, 2017; Barra & Scaglioni, 2017) and at the same time creates an informational overload that restricts users' consumption to echo chambers or even results in the refusal of new information (Garrett, 2009; Picone, 2013; Anderson, 2018). The way in which users are empowered to make more conscious and agentic decisions in their media diets, coupled with how current technologies (e.g. customization algorithms) create structures, suggests an interdependence of structure and agency. This has rekindled the salience of investigating the nature of agency and structure today. More specifically, this paper aims to demonstrate that the interaction between structure and agency transcends the linear models described by previous researchers. Building on the discussions in the following sections, we will outline how practices of contemporary media consumption suggest a circular process, where agency engenders structure, and structures informs agency.

2. The structure - agency dualism in social sciences

The dualism between structure and agency is one of the most prominent dichotomies in the social sciences, and the interaction and priority of one over the other is

the subject of chronic debate. While structure is often described as a constellation of rules and resources, which of themselves have attained a level of autonomy that allows them to guide the actions of individuals (Sewell, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Walsh, 1998), agentic theories envision individuals to be the authors of their own fates that consciously navigate and select among these structures to suit their needs (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Walsh, 1998; Hall, 2014). In other words: is it structure that engenders the behavior of individuals, or do individuals have the power to consciously act out of their own volition (Walsh, 1998)?

While some prominent theories in media studies have chosen to apply themselves to a single side of the debate (Loisen, Joye, & Verstraeten 2016; Hall, 2014), others have opted to seek a middle ground (Giddens, 1984; Gutiérrez & Calabrese Barton, 2015). However, even more theories focus on the daily practices of users, thus overcoming the highly theoretical morass of the structure-agency dichotomy altogether (Layder, 2005). In this chapter, we will draw from such theories in order to highlight complementary and interdependent layers of analysis that any exploration of media use would profit from taking into account.

2.1. Structuralist perspectives on media consumption

In order to further elaborate on our argument on the interrelated nature of agency and structure when considering the media selection of users today, we propose the recently introduced concept of media repertoires as a theoretical entry point. This concept can be seen as an answer of audience researchers to the increased convergence of media and the mobility of audiences today. Media repertoires are constellations of all the different media devices, platforms, and content that a given person uses on a regular basis. Within the constellation, all of the various media components are linked together in such a way that they inform the media that a person chooses and uses. In this sense, the media constellation (or repertoire) informs and *structures* the media consumption of users. The media selection of a certain user, in other words, does not occur in isolation, devoid of other media influences, rather, the selection process of users is informed by the relations of the medium in question to all other components within the user's media repertoire (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Kim, 2016; Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017).

The media repertoire approach thus provides a reiteration of the structure-agency duality within current audience research, by highlighting their function as a structure which regulates the agency of the media user. While it draws inspiration from the very agentic perspectives on media selection offered by the Uses

& Gratifications approach, it envelops this agency in a more structuralist package which betrays a theoretical lineage between the media repertoire approach and Giddens' structuration theory which equally positions itself in the middle ground of the structure-agency debate (Giddens, 1984; Palmgreen, 1984; Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; Schröder, 2011). This theoretical lineage becomes even more clear through the more recent elaboration of media repertoires in the form of media ensembles, which operationalize the way in which users draw from the media used by different communicative figurations they belong to (such as their family, friends, colleagues, etc.) when constructing their own personal repertoires (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017).

The triple articulation theory complements the media repertoire research by highlighting that media should not be approached solely as texts and objects (cf. double articulation: Livingstone, 2007). Instead, the theory proposes to equally examine the specific socio-spatial context in which media use takes place as a separate *third articulation* of media that impacts both their meaning and use (Courtois, Verdegem, & De Marez, 2013). In this sense, theories of articulation highlight a tendency of current audience research to reemphasize the effects of structure.

Triple articulation theory thus takes up the call put forward by Giddens, bringing back more attention to the specific ways in which users 'domesticate' media according to their physicality, content, and the specific socio-spatial context of use. Moreover, it balances out recent tendencies in audience research to shift towards prioritizing the structural parameters (i.e. media repertoires and ensembles) and their influence on media use and selection. While placing users at the centre in their explorations of media use and selection processes, media repertoire theory seems to emphasize the context in which media use takes place, and rarely seems to engage with characteristics of users such as their goals, identities and beliefs, or the ways in which they actively renegotiate meaning (cfr. articulation and domestication theory). However, we argue that an account of individual characteristics, combined with structural and situational parameters, is necessary in order to explore the interdependency of structure and agency. Especially so in times of personalized media.

2.2. *Agentic perspective on media consumption*

The proponents of the agentic views on human-media interaction, in contrast, focus on individuals and their characteristics as a driving force of media consumption. Past studies see people, their needs, and goals central to this process, whereas the media are instruments for satisfying those goals or needs. From that

perspective, all information can be classified in relation to the individuals' identities, beliefs or needs as relevant/irrelevant and supporting/threatening. Although all the diversity of information available to people can technically undergo this classification, processing it is beyond human capacities. The two broad theoretical accounts—information-processing and motivational—seek to unveil how selectivity functions.

2.2.1. Agency as a side effect of information processing

Information-processing theories describe the mechanics of interaction with information and sense-making. The construct which helps to navigate through complex social and physical worlds are cognitive schemata (Bartlett, 1932/1995; Fiske & Linville, 1980). They represent organized units of knowledge about different objects, situations, and relationships between them. Schemata reduce cognitive load which individuals would experience if they process all incoming stimuli as if they were unique. Development of schemata starts in the early childhood and continues throughout the life. New information, when it adds to one's knowledge, updates and specifies the most relevant schema in order to keep one's reactions to the environment optimal (Bartlett, 1932/1995; Fiske & Linville, 1980).

The process of updating is not constant: once schemata have shown themselves useful in everyday life, they start resisting revisions. Moreover, they switch to the role of gatekeepers, which devalue any evidence contradicting the schema (Axelrod, 1973). This mechanism helps to reduce cognitive load even more and translates into need for consistency (Festinger, 1957; Gawronski & Brannon, 2016). This transition shows how the construct that was initially informed by the environment internalizes and becomes a rather stable characteristic of an individual which moderates environmental influence on behavior. Hence, with the switch of schemata's functions from specification and revision to evaluation and filtering comes the shift of the forces from structure to agency.

Another sign of agency in information consumption is the hierarchical structure of one's preferences in media contents. The interest priorities and their differences across individuals arise from the variation in individual characteristics: identities, attitudes and beliefs, or goals and needs (Hart, Albarracin, Eagly, Brenchan, Lindberg, & Merrill, 2009; Bolsen & Lepper, 2013). While subjective importance of those characteristics defines the degree of relevance of the information to oneself (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005), knowledge about them (self-schemata) categorizes incoming information in relation to one's own position (Markus, 1977). Although self-schemata can shed a light on what individual preferences may look like, they are not sufficient to predict actual exposure.

2.2.2. *Agency as motivations to interaction with the media*

Motivational theories, which go hand in hand with the Uses and Gratifications theory, in their strive to explain why people use information, distinguish three abstract types of motivations: (1) defence motivation, when people search for information in order to confirm their own position; (2) accuracy motivation which guides search for information in decision making; and (3) motivation for cognitive economy, when people prefer information that is easier to process (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010; Fischer, 2011).

Defence motivation activates when incoming information contradicts one's important beliefs or challenges decisions or social identity. Situation of inconsistency causes cognitive dissonance which people experience as negative arousal (Festinger, 1957). To reduce dissonance, people can use one of the three strategies, which equally give the sense of approval. The first strategy is selective approach: people seek only supporting information (Hart et al., 2009). Another strategy is selective avoidance. When avoiding information selectively, people do not show active interest in supporting evidence, instead they deliberately avoid exposure to threatening information (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). The third strategy, on the contrary, involves active exposure to threatening information in order to refute it (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004). Yet, this motivation does not get activated if there is nothing to defend.

People also use the media in order to get prepared for making a decision or use it as an instrument in goal pursuit. Because people typically want to make the best possible (not necessarily rational) decision, they are motivated to put some effort in the preparatory steps. That translates into so-called balanced exposure: when all arguments have the same value and receive equal attention (Hart et al., 2009).

Cognitive economy guides the search when people are certain in the correctness of their preliminary position (Fischer, 2011). In this case, people prefer information which is easy for comprehension; for example, something familiar or consonant to their own opinion (D'Alessio, 2015). Interestingly, at the behavioural level both defence and cognitive economy motivations look similar. The interplay between different motivations is conditional upon both individual and situational parameters.

Overall, media studies, psychology, and cognitive science provide, together, a profound theoretical background for further explorations of human-media interaction in a dynamic digital world. While research inspired by a structuralist worldview has described the forces creating and transforming the media environments people live in, studies prioritizing agency have modelled processes and mechanisms underlying media consumption. Yet, the fluid nature of human cognition, society, and the media makes it counterproductive to maintain the traditional separation of these disciplines.

3. Interdependence of structure and agency in media consumption

Previous studies investigated how the patterns of media consumption vary across individuals, situations, and structures:

3.1 Parameters of structures

The way in which structures affect media users may differ according to the specific characteristics or parameters of these structures. For instance, while the composition of media ensembles may differ greatly according to the communicative figurations they belong to, they nevertheless restrict the access of users to media devices and content. In this sense, the constellation of configurations users belong to offers a pool of sources from which users construct their own personal media repertoires. One example of such moderation would be the content of the feed on Facebook, which is unique for each user and depends on the composition of their network of friends. It follows that certain media ensembles may not only engender agency by offering access to a pool of media content and/or devices from which users may construct a personal media repertoire but may equally restrict users by functioning similarly to echo chambers (Dylko, 2015). The latter is especially likely in polarized environments, which question correctness of users' beliefs and activate defence motivation in media consumption (Tsang, 2017; Fischer, Kastenmüller, Greitemeyer, Fischer, Frey, & Crelley, 2011).

The media ensembles do not distribute media equally amongst all members of the communicative figuration. The access of individuals to media within the ensemble equally corresponds to the flow and distribution of power within the communicative figuration. Depending on the position of users within the figuration, they will be able to convert power into access to media (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017). Moreover, the surge of algorithms which curate the media exposure of users today might urge researchers to draw inspiration from Actor-Network theory to equally consider nonhuman actors as a part of current communicative figurations (Murdoch, 1997; Latour, 2005).

Mapping the theory of capital (Bourdieu, 2008) onto media ensembles, we can see how the transaction between communicative figurations (social capital) and media ensembles (cultural capital) betrays the cracks in the binary opposition between structure and agency. While the accumulation and transmission of capitals essentially shows the contours of structure that restricts the agency of users in media practices, it is the user's agency that allows them to essentially convert these capitals.

3.2. *Parameters of situations*

Situations in which media consumption takes place are often fluid and unpredictable. Nevertheless, past studies attempted to model the daily practices or situations of users, such as information consumption while multitasking. In this situation, users engage in different processes and attend to different types of information simultaneously, which may result in cognitive overload that decreases users' ability to evaluate information in relation to their own position and makes them less selective (Jang, 2014) and more suggestible (Gilbert, 1991). The opposite effect on confirmatory selectivity has limited, both real and perceived, access to information. The sense of scarcity pushes users to use "the best" available evidence, which tends to coincide with their preliminary positions (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schilz-Hardt, 2005).

Although past studies examined short-term effects of the two conditions on selectivity, the consequences of multitasking and scarcity, when they become a daily routine, are underinvestigated. The constant distraction may enable structures to introduce new information without the latter being critically inspected by users. In turn, scarcity and the pressure to make decisions pushes users to refer to their own knowledge and experience, including newly received information, which consolidates those experiences even more. As a result, users may become more vulnerable and dependent on their current repertoires, while maintaining an illusion of their own agency.

Routines and habits represent a special interest when exploring the interplay of structure and agency, as they may help to grasp the dynamics of schemata development and their function within users' media repertoires and subsequent transformations. When people repeatedly choose to expose themselves to a certain type of information, their preference for consistency and confidence in that choice grows (Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). As a result, not only like-minded content, but also habitual practices provide a sense of consistency, as contents become tied to sources and devices.

Disruptions in the refuge of habits leads to distress (Silverstone, 1993), which may trigger defence motivation in order to restore the status quo. This again puts the opposition between structure and agency to the test. Through routine use, media practices become a structure that steers the behavior of users; however, as indicated by Wilk (2009), users will at times choose to enforce consistency in (media) routines in order to avoid discomfort. Hence, structure is not only in part formed through the agency of users, making it habitual and unconscious, but at times users strategically invoke the structure (Wilk, 2009).

3.3. *Parameters of users*

Past research identified two types of individual-level characteristics that affect media consumption. One of them is importance of and confidence in one's own identities, attitudes, beliefs, or goals. The more importance people give to some of them, the more likely incoming information would activate defence motivation, resulting in confirmatory exposure (Hart et al., 2009) and to the potential repertoire's homogenisation.

Other individual-level characteristics, affecting the way people interact with information, are: the need for cognition and the need for closure, which define how well people tolerate uncertainty in their lives. The need for cognition drives curiosity and increases the chances that unfamiliar contents and new sources will be selected by a user (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). In contrast, the need for closure drives a desire to reduce the uncertainty through finding an ultimate answer to a question as soon as possible (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Thus, satisfaction of the need will include avoidance of the unfamiliar. These antagonistic needs affect how likely new information would enrich users. That, in turn, defines how transparent the borders of one's repertoire are and how rapidly the repertoire can change. These findings suggest that individual characteristics not only navigate selectivity within media environments, but also actively transform or expand those environments.

Past research dealing with the conditioning effects caused by variations in parameters of structures, situations, and individuals often investigated them in isolation from one another. We argue, future research should account for the specific compositions of the parameters and their interaction with one another in order to unveil the specific mechanisms of media use and selection.

4. Conclusions

This chapter aimed to highlight the interdependence of the agentic and structuralist perspectives on media use. This interdependence finds two reflections: first, contemporary media environments, while being structures, are often formed by the past activity of the users through mechanisms of personalization and algorithms of customization. Second, the agentic component, like identities or beliefs of users, develops within and under the influence of the environments people reside in, and hence represent the internalized structures which inform user behaviour. Both implicitly emphasize the temporal dimension of media use and the fact that consumption is a process. Ethnographic or phenomenological approach, more strongly rooted in an analysis of daily practice, might prove useful in highlighting the entanglement of structure and agency mentioned above (see: Schatzki, 2001).

This focus on situating media use in daily practices highlights the interactions between the conditioning factors of media use which correspond to the three layers of analysis described in this chapter. We argue that affording more attention to the *parameters of situations*, brings us closer to the main arguments of theories that emphasize the interaction and interdependency of structure and agency, rather than trapping both in a binary opposition. Giddens, in particular, argued that “*time-space relations are inherent in the constitution of all social interaction*” (Giddens, 1979); a call that seems to have been taken up by those that subscribe to theories of double and triple articulation of media (Livingstone, 2007; Courtois et al., 2013). We build upon the argument by reiterating that media should not only be researched as texts, but equally objects in a specific socio-spatial context, the meanings of which are defined in relation to individual beliefs and strategies of users.

We thus, similar to structuration theorists, seek to evade any binary opposition between structure and agency by proposing that the interdependency of both can be seen as a circular process. Particularly salient in times of personalization and customization through algorithms, we argue that agency engenders structure, and structure, in turn by being internalized, informs and regulates the agency of individuals.

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Biographies

Alyona Khaptsova is a PhD fellow at BIGSSS, where she investigates how value priorities of people guide their attention to and interpretation of media information in context of the current socio-political situation of Russia. Social psychologist by training, she applies theories and methodology of her native field to research questions traditionally asked by sociologists and communications scholars.

khaptsova@bigsss-bremen.de

Ruben Vandenplas joined the research group imec-SMIT-VUB in 2016 where he got the opportunity to work on a wide variety of subjects including support structures for the Flemish videogame

industry. A year later, he took the opportunity to start a PhD in media studies exploring the media repertoires of Flemish users in an age of convergence and mediatization, and how these are connected to their daily lives.

Ruben.Vandenplas@vub.be