

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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In Praise of the Passive Media

François Heinderyckx

Predictions about future developments in the area of media and communication tend to be radical and to announce revolutionary discontinuities. The hype is, in most cases, part of a strategy to attract attention - no one seems interested in lukewarm analysis of what lies ahead. As a result, the dominant voices are over-emphasising 'the end of' a number of current realities and the 'advent of' something completely different, and either very exciting, or utterly frightening. These prophecies leave very little space, if any, for doubt. They are, for the most part, not laying out possible trends, but announcing the future state of reality. The changes described (often in great detail) are framed as exogenous phenomena that largely escape our control, similar to climate change or the depleting reserves of oil. Moreover, these assertive predictions are deeply imbedded in a techno-deterministic scheme, which obsessively transforms any emerging technology into something that will unavoidably be adopted on a massive scale and will bring radical change in its wake. The initial round of such predictions is usually launched by the industry, in the hope that presenting a particular innovation as a game-changer that will be overwhelmingly adopted will prepare the market for the new products and services to come. It will create favourable conditions for take-up when it becomes available, and even create some anticipation.

Innovation in the area of information and communication technologies is particularly prone to radical prophecies with these types of spectacular trajectories. Looking back at the vast majority of predictions in this area over the past thirty years or so is disconcerting and often amusing. The domain of e-business, e-commerce and e-government is particularly subject to drastic claims that fail to materialise in real life: the end of shops and stores (why bother if you can order online?), the end of offices (so much more efficient to telework from home), even the end of corruption and opaque governance (make everything available online and transparency will empower citizens to exert full democratic control). Prophecies are also remarkably cyclical: changes are announced, later found to be

inaccurate, then a few years later reiterated, either with no reference to the earlier predictions (futurology is focused on the future and as a result tends to suffer from selective amnesia) or with explicit reference to earlier predictions, describing them as simply premature.

Media are a particular case in point. Anyone researching media history will tell you that the invention and take-up of each new medium was invariably seen as causing, soon after, the end of existing media. Who would want to listen to the radio when television adds moving pictures to the experience? However, all these doomsday predictions were proved unfounded. A new medium does impact the media ecosystem, sometimes significantly, but so far the successive 'new media' have combined and recombined more than they have substituted. Of course, the fact that so far new media have not completely killed off existing media does not set any kind of rule. It is just, at this point, a recurrent observation that should at least encourage experts speculating on the future to exert some caution. But many do not.

One of the areas in which contentious predictions recur relates to the alleged antagonism between 'passive' and 'interactive' media. These discussions generally take for granted that passive means outdated, is associated with legacy media inherited from an era when media were confined to a passive mode by relying on the crude technology of the time. In other words, the assumption is that legacy media are passive not by choice, but because they could not, at the time they were conceived, be anything else. Just like pre-antibiotics medicine could only do so much to fight infections.

I wish to argue that these presumptions are unfounded and misleading. If we accept that the industry itself is perpetuating this way of looking at media, then it is actually deceiving itself into making incorrect choices in product development and marketing. The presumption that the masses crave for interactivity and feel nothing but frustration while using passive media leads to a number of fundamental derived conjectures that aggravate our misrepresentation of the situation.

Describing traditional media as 'passive' is confusing and abusive, particularly in a context where this is seen as derogatory. First and foremost, it is not the *media* which are supposedly passive, but their *audience*. Though speaking of 'passive audience media' might seem cumbersome, it would at least match the signified reality. Moreover, none of the existing forms

of traditional media is passively received by its audience. Reading a newspaper, for example, is anything but passive: scanning headlines, flipping pages, deciding what to read and what to skip, going back and forth, and possibly writing to the editor, all constitute active ways of receiving media content.

But advocates of the end of passive media do not so much contrast the passive with the active. Instead, they contrast the legacy 'passive' media with the new 'interactive' media. This choice of terminology is, in all likelihood, a key source of confusion and misunderstanding. Interactivity is a notoriously tricky term. In the context of media, it is usually associated with the shift from the one-way communication of the broadcasting model to a two-way model where the audience is at long last given the opportunity to communicate back. The notion of feedback came as a first attempt to model the capacity given to members of the audience to communicate back to a particular medium and, by doing so, potentially to influence that medium and the content it would broadcast subsequently. Early examples of such modelling include Wilbur Schramm's 'inferential feedback' from the audience to the media (Schramm, 1954), and were part of a larger movement promoting an active role for the audience. These models constituted the backbone of the functionalist approach to media studies, which challenged competing views that portrayed an audience that was passive and thus vulnerable to manipulation by means of mass media exposure.

Audience members always had the capacity to feed back directly (letters to the editor, phone in) or indirectly (buying one particular newspaper less often or watching a different channel). But these means of action by the audience in respect of the media either required some effort (e.g. writing a letter) or were so indirect that they required some complex process of interpretation on the part of the media. Digital technologies brought a range of feedback channels which, technically, are part of the same infrastructure as the means of broadcasting. Digital media offer the ghost of a two-way communication system, but in an utterly unbalanced way.

As a first example, anyone reading a newspaper article on a website can generally post a comment. Not only are the numbers of people making such comments very few as compared to the overall readership, they are generally not interacting with the medium, the author or even the editorial team. Although, in the early days of news websites, readers were encouraged to write to the author (just a click and one could e-mail), most "com-

ments" sections are now more of a bar-room where comments are read and sometimes commented on in turn by other readers. Even if there is usually some level of moderation (essentially to avoid abusive language), the audience is not so much interacting with the medium as it is interacting with itself, and within a very small group too.

As a second example of the so-called interactivity of the digital media, audiences can make themselves heard during television or radio programmes: asking questions, making comments or voting is made very simple and encouraged by means of coloured buttons on the remote control, mobile phone texting, e-mailing, micro-blogging or social networks.

These few examples reveal the wide range of realities that are usually described as 'interactivity'. These forms of interactivity can be grouped in different categories based on the three traditions of interactivity research identified by McMillan (2002): human-to-human interaction, human-to-documents interaction, and human-to-system interaction (derived from Szuprowicz, 1995).

The 'human-to-human' tradition can be transposed into the 'audience-to-audience' interaction, describing situations where members of the audience communicate and interact with one another. Discussion forums, groups on social networks, fan clubs and micro-blogging posts are all examples of such interactions. Though the numbers can be impressive, it is generally the case that only a very small proportion of the audience of any particular medium or content will engage in such activities.

The 'user-to-document' strand of interactions could be subdivided into two groups. First, the 'audience-to-editors' interaction relates to any direct communication or action by a member of the audience aimed at individuals identified as producers or editors or anyone accountable for particular media content. This is the digital expansion of the letter to the editor: e-mails, online surveys, comment boxes, polls of all kinds, micro-blogging. This interaction is still at the level of human-to-human, although it might in many cases be human-to-institution. In addition, in many cases these new channels are made available in order to promote the perception of openness to suggestions, critiques and comments from the audience. Whether anyone is really listening is often questionable. This could be seen not so much as a shift from one-way towards two-way communication, but rather towards two-opposite-direction-one-way communication. It is not a one-way street being enlarged to allow two-way communication, but a

second one-way street generally built in parallel to the first, going in the opposite direction, and much, much narrower. Second, a significant array of 'audience-to-content' interaction has developed whereby the audience is increasingly in a position to contribute or even to offer content that can become part of the flow of content shared by the media. One can vote for contenders or make choices for the next episode of some fiction, one can send pictures or news material to the newsroom. Here again, nothing is completely new, except that it has become much easier, faster and more frequent. The very notion of user-generated content (UGC) did not exist in the pre-digital age, although it was already possible for anyone to send in photos or films or documents. The content created by ordinary members of the audience can either be fed into the output of the media (co-creation) or, in most cases, just into dedicated segments of the online platforms of these media, or possibly be circulated by the user, who can circumvent the media by sharing content on social platforms and other online structures designed to easily share and circulate content.

The 'user-to-system' tradition could be transposed into 'audience-to-media' interaction where 'media' is understood as the physical reality of the media, the objects enabling the audience to access content. Even the earliest media formats offered significant interactive features. The newspaper reader has always enjoyed the capacity to turn pages back and forth, to scan headlines and decide what to read and what to skip, to start reading then skip to another section, all of which can be seen as early examples of audience-to-media interaction. Interestingly, the newspaper is very much unchanged in that respect, even though it is now available in other formats that allow new ways of interaction. Television, though much more recent, has evolved significantly over time. One of the key steps in increased interactivity was the advent of the remote control, which, along with the growing number of channels available, increased the level of interaction, though at the most basic but crucial level of switching channels. Later came videotext/teletext, then video recorders, and with digital television came time-shifted viewing and video-on-demand. These particular instances of interaction are limited to an increased flexibility in terms of 'when', 'how' and 'where' one can access content. In the case of radio and television, it is a decisive step to free these media from their linear nature. This is often seen as an improvement, because linearity is seen as a structural drawback of broadcast media. Therefore, the development and the take-up of these new features, because they could free the audience from the linearity of the media, are said to cause the demise of radio and television as we know them.

Overall, the so-called interactive features associated with media, be it at the level of hardware or of content, are given prominent visibility in the institutional and promotional discourse of media outlets. They are, above all, a sign of modernity. The pace of change and the short life cycle of information and communication technologies have dragged the entire media industry along. Media outlets feel compelled to announce new features and new possibilities, often just hopping on the back of the latest trendy innovation. This is mostly done in a reactive and opportunistic manner. Media seem to consider that they have to have a presence in and make use of just about any popular platform and technology. The drawback of such an approach is the lack of medium- or long-term strategy. The industry is under the influence of technology, while it would be expected to be a driving force in innovations that should serve their long-term goals. Interactivity should not be an end, but a means to an end. In a number of cases, media outlets are even seen as impeding new features, particularly when innovation conflicts with business models. Issues related to rights and intellectual property constitute a major source of such conflicts. News aggregators and specialised search engines have clashed with newspaper publishers in the courts. Web-based catch-up television is increasingly made impossible across national borders.

Interactive features are also helping media reshape their relationship with their audience. They enhance a sense of proximity and accessibility. Not only can audience members feed back, they are strongly encouraged to do so. Media organisations want to show that they are accessible and open and that they take their audience seriously. New buzzwords carefully selected by strategic marketing crews are spreading like viruses among media. Old-fashioned expressions like 'feedback', 'write' or even 'communicate' are eclipsed by sophisticated, yet undefined concepts such as 'participation', 'conversation' or the ubiquitous 'engagement'. Media employees are to 'engage with the audience', which involves discussing, involving and listening. But, of course, this can backfire when the audience follows up on the invitation only to find that no one is (really) listening. When people take the time to communicate, to send a message, a suggestion or even some content, and receive, in return, either a generic acknowledgement of receipt, or nothing at all, they feel neglected, snubbed, ignored, deceived or even humiliated. As a result, the audience will feel not only distance, but some level of hostility towards the medium. As such, many of these vectors of interactivity are designed not so much to interact, but just to drive up traffic on the web-site or on all existing platforms, often in a desperate attempt, at last, to generate significant revenues from

advertising and from premium-rate phone-ins and text messaging.

Because everything interactive is presumably connoted positively, media outlets not only promote the many opportunities they offer in that area, they also boast about how popular these features are. Numbers of members or supporters on social media, numbers of votes received during a contest, numbers of micro-blog postings during a particular programme. Those numbers are very difficult for the audience to interpret. Because they are large numbers, they are presumably impressive and provide implicit evidence of the massive success of the interactive feature, and of the media outlet. But they can also be completely misleading. When considered in relation to the overall size of the audience of a particular medium or content, the statistics of interactive features are much less impressive. They are even less impressive when one considers not the number of postings or messages, but the actual number of individuals involved, which is invariably much lower, given that those who engage do so repeatedly. In any case, it appears that those audience members who choose to take up the interactive features form a very small minority. And even within this vocal minority, one can question just how engaged one should be considered to be after, for example, merely clicking a 'like' button on a social network page.

This does not mean that the phenomenon is not very significant or that these features are a failure, or that there will not be more participation at a later stage (this is all still very new). But it means that we must resist the temptation to exaggerate and generalise. We must rebuff those who claim that the audience is now actively receiving media content, enthusiastically embracing every opportunity to interact, and shifting towards a mode of consumption based on co-construction and all-out online social interaction. This is simply untrue. The issue, then, is whether these announcements are just premature, whether it is just a matter of time before these trends, which affect only a fringe of early adopters, gradually become widespread; or will the hype of interactivity soon plateau near its current level of adoption, while the rest of the audience remains unconcerned? Are we facing a generational shift in practice, or will the enthusiasm remain steadfastly confined to a vocal minority? In public debates, questioning the advent of ever more interactive media has become iconoclastic. It means breaking a taboo and siding with technophobic conservatives. It is denying the obvious and the inevitable. There is no room left for debate in this area.

One way to balance the debate is to identify arguments and realities which support the idea of a healthy future for the not-so-interactive media, to find evidence of the resilience of the passive media. First, we must acknowledge the fact that not everyone is interested in adding interactivity to his or her media experience. Not now, not ever, or perhaps very occasionally, and only for specific aims. In fact, the relative 'passivity' of media reception is most likely what many find appealing. Likewise, a sizable audience is not disturbed by the 'linearity' of legacy media, and is in fact very attached to it. The end of the linear media is generally seen as a major benefit of digital and interactive technologies. At long last, audiences will be freed from the crippling curse of linearity by being granted access to the content of their choosing, at a time of their choosing, using the device of their choosing. What one wants, when and where one wants it. And a little bit more, given that the arsenal of modern media includes a number of ways to reach out to 'users' to anticipate their needs. Media will find you to 'push' content to you or to notify you, wherever you are. This constant solicitation is part of the interactivity ecosystem, and, here again, it is assumed that it is everybody's dream come true.

The virtues of linearity are utterly and unfairly overlooked. Linear media, because they are offered at a particular moment and in a carefully prepared sequence, require some discipline and some concentration on the part of the audience. In turn, they limit distractions and encourage, or at least allow, attention, immersion even, and precious opportunities for contemplation. Linear media are also more likely to foster loyalty in an audience that enters into a pattern of regular, scheduled exposure. Moreover, simultaneous exposure to the same media content by large populations provides the audience with a specific experience. This can be seen when viewers take pleasure in watching their favourite movie on television, even if they have it on DVD and could watch it anytime. This simultaneity is also crucial in the ceremonial occurrences that accompany all 'media events', as described by Dayan and Katz (1992).

The presumption that people are desperate to free themselves from the tyranny of the linear media is reminiscent of the predictions, made in the 1990s, that the rise of thematic television channels would inevitably hasten the demise of general-interest channels. Why would anyone put up with channels juggling with a range of content trying to appeal to the larger population and its diverging tastes and expectations, when one could soon switch to a handful of thematic channels that, combined, could so pleasantly match one's own tastes and interests? Legacy general-interest

television stations would soon be drained of their audiences and would be dissolved in a mosaic of narrowly specialized channels. Twenty years on, the television landscape has evolved considerably along with viewers' patterns of consumption, but the original general-interest channels are still there, and though most have lost significant market shares, they are still major players. They have managed to continue producing content that is consensual enough. Moreover, their alleged weakness, namely to offer a mix of diverse content for diverse tastes, has turned out to be a strength. A large number of viewers enjoy the eclecticism of the programming. They enjoy the comfort of finding different genres in one place. And again, they might very well enjoy receiving it in a linear and passive fashion. They appreciate the full service of a one-stop shop, without the bells and whistles of engagement and interactivity.

The tablet computer is the latest addition to the media outfit. It is spreading through households at just the time when the television industry is announcing the advent of the connected television set, combining the linear flows from the regular channels with video-on-demand, web-based content and even your own content (home videos and photos). One screen fits all. But in the meantime, the tablet is profiling itself as a second screen that, combined with the television set, will provide a whole new enhanced experience, consisting of additional content and, naturally, a range of forms of interaction. Prophecies announcing that one connected screen will replace everything else, while other prophecies simultaneously announce that the future is made up of two screens where there used to be one, show the level of uncertainty and contradictions that characterizes the evolution of the media technologies and their appropriation by the audience.

The passive media should not be pronounced dead just yet. At the very least, they can be seen as senior members of a growing family of technologies and uses. In that context, interactivity should not be seen as an irresistible trend that drains the passive media and leads to their ruin. Once again, the media ecosystem is welcoming new species, causing some imbalance, triggering some adjustments, but not necessarily causing the extinction of all other species.

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