A survey of new media

Among the audience

The era of mass media is giving way to one of personal and participatory media, says Andreas Kluth. That will profoundly change both the media industry and society as a whole

Apr 20th 2006

THE next big thing in 1448 was a technology called "movable type", invented for commercial use by Johannes Gutenberg, a goldsmith from Mainz (although the Chinese had thought of it first). The clever idea was to cast individual letters (type) and then compose (move) these to make up printable pages. This promised to disrupt the mainstream media of the day—the work of monks who were manually transcribing texts or carving entire pages into wood blocks for printing. By 1455 Mr Gutenberg, having lined up venture capital from a rich compatriot, Johannes Fust, was churning out bibles and soon also papal indulgences (slips of paper that rich people bought to reduce their time in purgatory). The start-up had momentum, but its costs ran out of control and Mr Gutenberg defaulted. Mr Fust foreclosed, and a little bubble popped.

Even so, within decades movable type spread across Europe, turbo-charging an information age called the Renaissance. Martin Luther, irked by those indulgences, used printing presses to produce bibles and other texts in German. Others followed suit, and vernaculars rose as Latin declined, preparing Europe for nation-states. Religious and aristocratic elites first tried to stop, then control, then co-opt the new medium. In the centuries that followed, social and legal systems adjusted (with copyright laws, for instance) and books, newspapers and magazines began to circulate widely. The age of mass media had arrived. Two more technological breakthroughs—radio and television—brought it to its zenith, which it probably reached around 1958, when most adult Americans simultaneously turned on their television sets to watch "I Love Lucy".

Second incarnation

In 2001, five-and-a-half centuries after Mr Gutenberg's first bible, "Movable Type" was invented again. Ben and Mena Trott, high-school sweethearts who became husband and wife, had been laid off during the dotcom bust and found themselves in San Francisco with ample spare time. Ms Trott started blogging—ie, posting to her online journal, Dollarshort—about "stupid little anecdotes from my childhood". For reasons that elude her, Dollarshort became very popular, and the Trotts decided to build a better "blogging tool", which they called Movable Type. "Likening it to the printing press seemed like a natural thing because it was clearly revolutionary; it was not meant to be arrogant or grandiose," says Ms Trott to the approving nod of Mr Trott, who is extremely shy and rarely talks. Movable Type is now the software of choice for celebrity bloggers.

These two incarnations of movable type make convenient (and very approximate) historical book-ends. They bracket the era of mass media that is familiar to everybody today. The second Movable Type, however, also marks the beginning of a very gradual transition to a new era, which might be called the age of personal or participatory media. This culture is already familiar to teenagers and twenty-somethings, especially in rich countries. Most older people, if they are aware of the transition at all, find it puzzling.

Calling it the "internet era" is not helpful. By way of infrastructure, full-scale participatory media presume not so much the availability of the (decades-old) internet as of widespread, "always-on", broadband access to it. So far, this exists only in South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan, whereas America and other large media markets are several years behind. Indeed, even today's
broadband infrastructure was built for the previous era, not the coming one. Almost everywhere, download speeds (from the internet to the user) are many times faster than upload speeds (from user to network). This is because the corporate giants that built these pipes assumed that the internet would simply be another distribution pipe for themselves or their partners in the media industry. Even today, they can barely conceive of a scenario in which users might put as much into the network as they take out.

The age of participation

Exactly this, however, is starting to happen. Last November, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 57% of American teenagers create content for the internet—from text to pictures, music and video. In this new-media culture, says Paul Saffo, a director at the Institute for the Future in California, people no longer passively “consume” media (and thus advertising, its main revenue source) but actively participate in them, which usually means creating content, in whatever form and on whatever scale. This does not have to mean that “people write their own newspaper”, says Jeremy Zawodny, a prominent blogger and software engineer at Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com/), an internet portal. “It could be as simple as rating the restaurants they went to or the movie they saw,” or as sophisticated as shooting a home video.

This has profound implications for traditional business models in the media industry, which are based on aggregating large passive audiences and holding them captive during advertising interruptions. In the new-media era, audiences will occasionally be large, but often small, and usually tiny. Instead of a few large capital-rich media giants competing with one another for these audiences, it will be small firms and individuals competing or, more often, collaborating. Some will be making money from the content they create; others will not and will not mind, because they have other motives. “People creating stuff to build their own reputations” are at one end of this spectrum, says Philip Evans at Boston Consulting Group, and one-man superbrands such as Steven Spielberg at the other.

As with the media revolution of 1448, the wider implications for society will become visible gradually over a period of decades. With participatory media, the boundaries between audiences and creators become blurred and often invisible. In the words of David Sifry, the founder of Technorati, a search engine for blogs, one-to-many “lectures” (ie, from media companies to their audiences) are transformed into “conversations” among “the people formerly known as the audience”. This changes the tone of public discussions. The mainstream media, says David Weinberger, a blogger, author and fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Centre, “don't get how subversive it is to take institutions and turn them into conversations”. That is because institutions are closed, assume a hierarchy and have trouble admitting fallibility, he says, whereas conversations are open-ended, assume equality and eagerly concede fallibility.

Today's media revolution, like others before it, is announcing itself with a new and strange vocabulary. In the early 20th century, Charles Prestwich Scott, the editor, publisher and owner of the *Manchester Guardian* (and thus part of his era's mainstream media), was aghast at the word “television”, which to him was “half Greek, half Latin: no good can come of it.” Mr Scott's equivalents today confront even stranger neologisms. Merriam-Webster, a publisher of dictionaries, had “blog” as its word of the year in 2004, and the New Oxford American Dictionary picked “podcast” in 2005. “Wikis”, “vlogs”, “metaverses” and “folksonomies” (all to be explained later in this survey) may be next.

Word count

“These words! The inability of the English language to express these new things is distressing,” says Barry Diller, 64, who fits the description “media mogul”. Over the decades, Mr Diller has run two big Hollywood film studios and launched America's fourth broadcast-television network, FOX
Broadcasting. More recently, he has made a valiant effort to get his mind around the internet, with mixed results, and is now the boss of IAC/InterActiveCorp, a conglomerate with about 60 online brands. Mr Diller concedes that "all of the distribution methods get thrown up in the air, and how they land is, well, still up in the air." Yet Mr Diller is confident that participation can never be a proper basis for the media industry. "Self-publishing by someone of average talent is not very interesting," he says. "Talent is the new limited resource."

"What an ignoramus!" says Jerry Michalski, with some exasperation. He advises companies on the uses of new media tools. "Look around and there's tons of great stuff from rank amateurs," he says. "Diller is assuming that there's a finite amount of talent and that he can corner it. He's completely wrong." Not everything in the "blogosphere" is poetry, not every audio "podcast" is a symphony, not every video "vlog" would do well at Sundance, and not every entry on Wikipedia (http://wikipedia.org/), the free and collaborative online encyclopedia, is 100% correct, concedes Mr Michalski. But exactly the same could be said about newspapers, radio, television and the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

What is new is that young people today, and most people in future, will be happy to decide for themselves what is credible or worthwhile and what is not. They will have plenty of help. Sometimes they will rely on human editors of their choosing; at other times they will rely on collective intelligence in the form of new filtering and collaboration technologies that are now being developed. "The old media model was: there is one source of truth. The new media model is: there are multiple sources of truth, and we will sort it out," says Joe Kraus, the founder of JotSpot, which makes software for wikis.

The obvious benefit of this media revolution will be what Mr Saffo of the Institute for the Future calls a "Cambrian explosion" of creativity: a flowering of expressive diversity on the scale of the eponymous proliferation of biological species 530m years ago. "We are entering an age of cultural richness and abundant choice that we've never seen before in history. Peer production is the most powerful industrial force of our time," says Chris Anderson, editor of Wired magazine and author of a forthcoming book called "The Long Tail", about which more later. (Mr Anderson used to work for The Economist.)

At the same time, adds Mr Saffo, "revolutions tend to suck for ordinary people." Indeed, many people in the traditional media are pessimistic about the rise of a participatory culture, either because they believe it threatens the business model that they have grown used to, or because they feel it threatens public discourse, civility and even democracy.

This survey will examine the main kinds of new media and their likely long-term effects both on media companies and on society at large. In so doing, it will be careful to heed a warning from Harvard's Mr Weinberger: "The mainstream media are in a good position to get things wrong." The observer, after all, is part of the observation—a product of institutional media values even if he tries to apply the new rules of conversation. This points to the very heart of the coming era of participatory media. It must be understood, says Mr Weinberger, "not as a publishing phenomenon but as a social phenomenon". This is illustrated perfectly by blogging, the subject of the next article.

Special reports
A survey of new media

What sort of revolution?
Both good and bad—but it's too early to say in what proportions

Apr 20th 2006

AS A rule, some people, such as Jacobins, tend to be more enthusiastic about revolutions than others, such as monarchs. Another fairly reliable rule is that revolutions abrupt enough to be associated with a single year (1642, 1789, 1848, 1917) tend to cause trouble but rarely bring lasting change. By contrast, revolutions gradual enough to be associated with a name (Renaissance, Reformation, Industrial Revolution) often do have enduring effects. A third rule, or hypothesis, might be that revolutions seem never to be entirely for the better or the worse, but somehow manage to combine both.

This survey has argued that society is in the early phases of what appears to be a media revolution on the scale of that launched by Gutenberg in 1448. This invites comparisons. There are Jacobins and monarchs to be found in both revolutions. In the first, the Jacobins were, by turns, printers, publishers, Protestants and writers; in today's revolution, the Jacobins tend to be those bloggers, vloggers and podcasters that bay for the blood of the odious "MSM" (mainstream media). As to monarchs, the first revolution had popes, monasteries and the real thing; today's revolution has, well, the MSM. Both revolutions are firmly in the category of gradualist, name-not-year revolutions.

That leaves benefits and evils. Gutenberg's revolution undoubtedly had enormous democratising effects. It enabled entire populations to read the Bible in their own language, liberating them from Latinate clergies that had kept them in superstitious serfdom. Further on in the revolution, people got news from far-flung corners of the world; one of the things that impressed Alexis de Tocqueville during his travels through America in 1831 was that even frontier families in remote Michigan had weekly newspapers delivered to their doorsteps. And the dramatically lower cost of disseminating the written word allowed many more people to express themselves creatively.

Each of these benefits also seems to have had a dark side. The availability of religious texts in the vernacular led to literalist and fundamentalist movements, and indirectly to religious wars. The surge of textual expression produced not only classics but also pornography and propaganda. Printing presses reproduced "Mein Kampf" just as accurately as the Gospels.

Hell or heaven?

Against this backdrop, the big thinkers about today's media revolution tend to veer towards extremes of optimism or pessimism. Often the alignments are surprising. For instance, Michael Moritz, the venture capitalist who became famous for spotting both Yahoo! and Google, has a strongly pessimist streak. He worries about “amplification of the internet soapbox” and imagines what role user-generated media would have played in “1931 in Munich, how easy it would have been to broadcast the message; I think the Nazis would have got power quicker.”

Paul Saffo, a futurologist and one of the world's most enthusiastic technophiles, also looks at the downside. "Each of us can create our own personal-media walled garden that surrounds us with comforting, confirming information and utterly shuts out anything that conflicts with our world view,” he says. “This is social dynamite” and could lead to “the erosion of the intellectual
commons holding society together...We risk huddling into tribes defined by shared prejudices.”

Now for the optimists: Lee Rainie, the director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a research foundation, believes that “people will become not less but more aware of differing arguments as they become heavier internet users,” because contradictory views are just a hyperlink away. A survey by Pew appears to confirm this view. Mr Anderson of “The Long Tail” says that “opinion is a marketplace, and marketplaces work when you have liquidity.” Liquidity is exactly what participatory media provide.

Some people worry about what the new media will do not only to democracy but also to brains, thoughts, grammar and attention spans. These concerns usually arise out of encounters with teenagers in their native habitat—ie, in front of screens with several simultaneous instant-messaging “threads” (“cu2nite bfz4evr”—“see you tonight and best friends forever”), besides iTunes and a video game running in the background, blogs in the foreground, and homework in the small window to the bottom right.

Other people are not worried at all. Steven Johnson, the author of “Everything Bad is Good for You”, argues that the very things about new-media culture that scare older generations actually make younger generations smarter, because participatory media train kids from an early age to sift through and discard clutter, thus “enhancing our cognitive abilities, not dumbing them down”.

Linda Stone, a former executive at both Apple Computer and Microsoft and now a consultant, argues that the affliction of “continuous partial attention” is in fact a hallmark of the era that is now ending, not the one that is starting. For the past two decades, Ms Stone thinks, many people have felt overwhelmed and anxious, constantly afraid that they could miss out on social opportunities if they concentrate on any one thing. This is now producing its own backlash, Ms Stone argues, because as people “long for protection and meaningful connections, quality over quantity”, they are “discovering the joy of focusing”.

Many new-media companies understand this, she says. Just as Google calms the chaos of the web with a clean white page, other companies are working on the filtering technologies that could—counter-intuitively, perhaps—make the era of participatory media more serene than the era of mass media.

The honest conclusion, of course, is that nobody knows whether the era of participatory media will, on balance, be good or bad. As with most revolutions, it is a question of emphasis. Generally speaking, people who have faith in democracy welcome participatory media, whereas people who have reservations will be nostalgic for the top-down certainties of the mass media. Joseph de Maistre, a conservative who lived through the French Revolution, famously said that “every country has the government it deserves.” In the coming era, more than ever before, every society will get the media it deserves.

Special reports