**Politics and Democracy in the Fourth Phase of the Digital Sphere: Time to Reconsider Powerful Effects Theories?**

Twenty-five years after the arrival of the internet in its World Wide Web format, the existence of strong connections between the unique characteristics of the ever-changing digital space and overall societal changes, particularly in the political-communication arena, is no longer disputed. The present article seeks to distinguish between four phases of political communications in the digital sphere in the given timeframe – from the mid-1990s and up until today. We focus on the fourth phase, the most explicit manifestation of which can be seen, we would like to claim, in Donald Trump’s ascendance to the presidency of the United States in the 2016 election. Within the confines of the article, we will present arguments supporting the hypothesis that we currently find ourselves on the threshold of a new phase. We will examine its characteristics through careful observation in real time, but also as a continuation of the evolutionary process. We will attempt to show that the shifts taking place in this current phase may warrant a reexamination by communication scholars to early media theories that have long since been abandoned. By looking at phenomena such as “fake news,” we shall argue that the political actors involved are well aware of the direct and long-term effects the content they produce has on their audiences, content that is distributed with more efficiency and sophistication than ever before, through digital means.

Evolution of Politics and Democracy in the Digital Sphere

In terms of their deep impact on various aspects of politics and democracy, the twenty-five years that have passed since the World Wide Web entered our lives can be divided into four phases. These phases will be described in the present chapter.

*Phase One – The Age of Innocence*

Disregarding the long military and academic history of the internet’s development from the end of the 1960s, the first phase that the present article wishes to discuss begins with the breakthrough of the World Wide Web into our lives in the mid-1990s; this was the moment when the internet became a popular medium in widespread public use. At the same time, this period saw the tentative beginnings of elected officials and candidates using this new medium, especially in the U.S. It was a short-lived period that ended a few years later, as the end of the century. At that point, the accrued experience led to significant shifts in perception in terms of the potential macro-societal influence of the internet, and political use of the internet intensified and became more sophisticated.

This first period, which in hindsight may be called ““the age of innocence”,” was characterized by quasi-messianic perceptions of the kind of effects the internet could have on society (perceptions that were already prevalent in certain circles even before the internet became a widespread medium). Researchers, theorists, leaders, and other shapers of public opinion, enthusiastically proclaimed that the remedy for most of the ills of Western democracy had finally been found and that the internet would be a kind of Messiah that would herald a return to direct democracy, and would empower citizens and diminish the gaps between them and their elected officials (Bimber, 1999). Reminiscing about those early days in which the internet emerged as a wide-spread medium, Wellman (2004) writes: “The internet was seen as a bright light, shining above everyday concerns. It was a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to transform the world. Communication dominated the internet, by asynchronous email and discussion lists and by synchronous instant messaging and chat groups. All were supposedly connected to all, without boundaries of time and space” (p. 124).

Wellman is critical of the theoreticians and opinion leaders of the era who were certain that the internet’s arrival as a mass communication medium was the equivalent of the re-creation of the world. He accuses them of euphoric thinking and a lack of perspective, which he goes so far as to call provincial. In his opinion, most of the utopian voices that emerged at this time perceived the internet as a completely egalitarian global space; the view fails to consider the non-egalitarian distribution of political, economic and cultural forces that would soon try to harness this new medium to the benefit of their agenda. The basic assumption was that the digital sphere instituted a radical change in the balance of power between citizens and consumers on the one hand, and between politicians and capitalists on the other. The internet, so reasoned popular opinion leaders, had unprecedented potential to empower the little people, and that the user base as a whole had had equal opportunities to express oneself and to hear and be heard. The public space proposed by Habermas (1989) could finally become a reality in the most ideal way imaginable.

The liberal approach perceives the media as the central institution of free speech in the public sphere, one that mediates between the people and their government and protects them from it (Curran, 1991). On the face of things, the rise of digital media was supposed to boost this trend and strengthen the side of the people within the network of relationship between them, the media, and the government. In the digital sphere, the author (the journalist/broadcaster) is no longer the sole authority; he, along with his views and the data he provides are subjected to constant critique on by online users. Digital communication is two-sided and more symmetrical, a fact that decentralizes the power structure between formal content creators and the online public. Cyberspace was therefore perceived as an alternative to the old, institutional media, at a time when public faith in in institutional media was particularly low in most Western countries (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001, Dahlgren, 2005). The big media outlets were accused of failing to protect public interest, of having dangerous ties with tycoons and government leaders, of moral corruption, and of wielding excessive power at the expense of the basic democratic rights and needs of the people. If those who were supposed to serve as professional, reliable mediators between the electorate and their elected officials, between political reality and the citizens’ reality, had failed at their task, it seemed better to turn to an alternative arena where information flows freely. In such a space, elected officials and the electorate could communicate without the need for mediation.

In actuality, in the first years of the internet’s existence as a mass medium, it appears that no significant development occurred in terms of the use of the digital sphere for political gain is concerned (Davis, 1999; Lipinski & Nedderniep, 2004). Public officials and candidates of the era fit into one of two groups: those who chose to ignore the new medium, or treat it as a marginal factor that was irrelevant to the world of “serious” politics, and those who showed a cautious interest in it, making early forays into using the internet, mainly to set up websites and contact potential voters via email. Alongside the suspicion and hesitation that have always characterized the predominant reaction to any new medium, during those first years, the rates of use and exposure among the public were relatively low, and therefore ostensibly didn’t justify a real incorporation of the digital sphere into political action and marketing strategies. On the question of the political and democratic significance that ought to be attributed to the internet’s penetration of the political-communication arena at the time, Margolis and Resnik (2000) stated that: “There is an extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life off the Net” (p.14).

*Phase Two – The Age of Disillusionment*

The second phase, which took place in the transition from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, can be called “the age of disillusionment”. During this time, use of the internet in most Western countries expanded, and became more commonplace and more integrated in everyday tasks (Wellman, 2004). This period is characterized by a feeling of disappointment in the “Messiah of democracy” and the gradual dissipation of the utopian hopes placed upon it. In their stead emerged a much soberer and more critical viewpoint concerning the internet’s potential contribution to the rehabilitation of Western democracy, which called to make intelligent use of the medium’s unique qualities while acknowledging its limitations (Colman, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005). After the internet had been around for a few years, it turned out, contrary to earlier expectations, that the web failed to make a real difference to the power structures in society and to the operational patterns of the political system, nor did it do anything to strengthen the foundations of democracy in the West in any significant way (Dahlgren, 2005; David, 1999).Websites, online forums and email correspondence did enable voters to get closer than ever to their elected officials and candidates. However, this proved disappointing when it came to giving those same voters real, far-reaching influence over top-level decision-making processes or election results.

Some prominent theoreticians, such as Dahlgren (2005), pointed to the vigorous activity of extra-parliamentary political players in the digital space, yet had enough foresight to warn that this common public space was liable to fracture and to being abandoned in favor of smaller, gated spaces, digital ghettoes of sorts that do not communicate with each other. Some, such as Kaye and Johnson (2005), who saw the activity of citizens in the online arena as a blessing, stated that: “Indeed, in many ways, internet users appear to be model citizens” (p. 57). Colman (2005), in discussing the potential the internet has for improving the relationship between elected officials and their constituents, explains that an effective use of the web, both by voters and the politicians they elect, can lead to an ideal state that is not “direct democracy” (the likes of which the first utopian proponents of the internet envisioned) but that is also not the continuation of the status-quo Western democracy of the 20th century, with its multitude of flaws. Colman calls this intermediate state “direct representation” – a democracy in which elected officials continue to serve in parliament and in the government as decision-makers on behalf of their constituents, but at the same time make sure to maintain constant contact with the public, to receive feedback, requests, and ideas, and to respond directly, effectively and attentively. Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) also view the internet as a significant player in the sphere of political media, despite its limitations. In their analysis, even though the internet cannot be considered a holistic solution to the social and political ills of the West, it may contribute greatly to strengthening the democratic system and to improving the patterns of behavior in the political-communication arena – but only if it is used wisely and appropriately. Thus, for example, they posit that, since the starting point of the internet user is that of an active “surfer” of the web, there is reason to assume that this kind of activity can encourage consumption of critical media or even political activism. At the same time, Blumler and Gurevitch take care to warn, albeit indirectly, of the potential misuse or even abuse that politicians and their staff members may make of the internet, once they discover this direct line of communication to voters that bypasses the establishment media. Nevertheless, they see the internet as a positive force for change, which may reformulate the interactions between citizens, elected officials, and the press:

In short, the internet allows direct communication between citizens and politicians, enabling both to bypass the media. Here, then, may lie the internet’s greatest potential for change. It could introduce into the political communication environment a different set of qualities from those that predominate today, perhaps even constraining the mainstream media to take account of what people are receiving over the internet in their own coverage of politics. Politicians could be expected to offer more solid back-up to their policy ideas. And political journalists could be expected to concentrate less on process and more on substance. After widespread new media diffusion, the relations of politicians, audiences and the ‘old media’ may not be quite the same as before.” (p. 6-7)

Despite the warnings that Blumler and Gurevitch issue about the growing use of the internet by politicians looking to further their agendas, much of their apprehension is focused on market forces, particularly established media channels, whose expanding presence on the web was starting to replicate “external” power structures in the depths of cyberspace.

It is in the course of this second phase that politicians in the U.S., Great Britain, and other Western countries (beyond the initial handful of pioneers and forward thinkers) discovered the virtues of the internet and adopted it quite broadly as an important tool. The amount of resources dedicated to making the internet an integral part of every political campaign increased alongside the steady rise in the percentage of Western citizens connected to the internet (Bichard, 2006; Bimber & Davis, 2003; Fiedler, 2008). At this stage, most of these resources were allotted to operating websites and attractive blogs for the purpose of disseminating information, recruiting activists and donations, and to send a general message that the candidate is keeping with the times (Bichard, 2006; Cornfield et. al, 2005; Davis, 2005). In addition to the websites, elected officials and candidates continued to send email messages to mailing lists of potential voters, respond to e-mails from citizens and social groups, and sometimes even participate in organized chats with interested parties.

At the same time, the traditional press continued to address the challenges posed by cyberspace – the birth of online journalism, the flourishing of blogs, which presented a new, alternative model of civic journalism, and, of course, channels of direct communication between citizens and politicians (Bichard, 2006; Deuze, 1999, 2003; Deuze & Marjoribanks, 2009). Nevertheless, the power of the traditional media, including that of the Western press, was still palpable. Representatives of the traditional press learned to harness the internet for their professional needs and turn a seemingly bitter opponent into a significant tool (Elishar-Malka, 2005; Maeir, 2000; Garrison, 2000). Moreover, most politicians continued to seek the attention of the veteran media and aspire to influence its coverage patterns. The websites and blogs that were put in place on their behalf were perceived not only as direct channels of communication with voters, but also, and more importantly, as a platform for transmitting messages and information to prominent journalists as a way of indirectly influencing the traditional media (Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004; Elishar-Malka, 2005).

*Phase Three – The Golden Age of Social Networks*

The third phase begins in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century and ends in the middle of the second decade. This is the era of social networking, the era of Web 2.0 in the political-communication arena, as well as all other psychological-social-cultural-economic aspects of life. The flourishing of online social networks led to the revival of optimistic approaches which echoed some of the utopian voices of the first phase. Among the central questions raised during those years was whether the new “online society” had the potential to change the balance of power between citizens and government. Couldry (2012) argues that this is a complex issue and the least one can do in examining these relationships is distinguish between several stages, among which it is possible for only some to be fully realized: the emergence of new forms of politics as allowed by the networks, long-term changes in the political elites, the development of new political processes and only eventually greater democratization. Dutton (2008) dubs the concept of the social web and its users with the term “Fifth Estate”: “The Fifth Estate’s network of networks can enable political movements to be orchestrated among opinion leaders and political activists in ‘internet time,’ which can be far quicker than real-world time. This provides a novel means for holding politicians and mainstream institutions accountable through the online interaction between ever-changing networks of individuals, who form and re-form continuously depending on the issue that is generating the particular network” (p. 8).

In fact, according to this approach, citizens in democratic countries at the time were becoming an actor parallel to other institutions. The term “Fifth Estate” describes a situation in which individual web users have a real role in holding government institutions accountable thanks to the ability to search for information, the use of online social networks, content creation and responsiveness, all of which bypass traditional mass media (Dubois & Dutton, 2013). However, an examination of the processes actually taking place on the web, such as the percentage of contributions and active participation of its users, reveals a more pessimistic picture.

Curran (2012) claims that although the internet serves as an effective and cheap tool for communications and coordination of citizen activism, it has not revitalized democracy; thus, many of the early revolutionary predictions about it have failed. A more radical position is one expressed by Keen (2007), who claims that the shallow and amateurish content of Web 2.0 overshadows the professional and reliable content that its users create or that is made available to them. According to Keen, cyberspace is mainly concerned with self-publicity rather than with the quality of disseminated information, and thus makes it difficult to distinguish between truth and lies, and reality and imagination, because rumors and subjectivity replace credibility and objectivity.

During this phase, politicians relocated most of their communication efforts to the social networks, primarily Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Erikson, 2008; Johnson, 2012). Online social media quickly became a major tool for candidates and elected officials. However, at the same time, it posed new and tougher challenges than before: smartphones had become an inseparable part of the lives of most Western citizens, and with their capabilities of photography and rapid dissemination of visual materials on social networks, they had managed to change the media-political-public agenda, to embarrass certain politicians and damage their standing, sometimes irreversibly (Spaeth, 2009; Penney, 2017). Thus, many public officials and candidates have had to deal with a loss of control over the stream of information and the total erasure of the line separating their private and public lives. This includes the possibility of very rapid distribution of content filmed by citizens and activists, including embarrassing and revealing moments, some of which had taken place at private events that were supposedly removed from the watchful eyes of the media. That being said, we must not underestimate the contribution that social media has made to furthering politicians’ agendas during the phase in question. Spaeth (2009) points out that in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Barak Obama mobilized social networks for his campaign to reach and even activate his potential constituency. This was the first presidential election in which voters wanted to take an active part in the various campaigns and donate their own materials to their favorite candidates. The civic desire to actively contribute to the campaigns had been identified by many of their managers who then learned how to channel this desire to enhance political marketing efforts prior to the election (Stromer-Galley, 2014; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Penney, 2017).

Fiedler (2008) also recognizes the changes taking place in the media arena towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century – some of them positive and encouraging, others alarming and dangerous:

Whether a Web-shaped political environment is a step forward or a step backward for American democracy is the overarching question… There is ample evidence suggesting that a political environment controlled by the Internet would be de-civilizing – extremist voices having sway, unchecked rumors racing about, speed supplanting reflection as journalistic values, to list a few. But there is also evidence pointing toward a more optimistic future, one that Alexis de Tocqueville saw when he visited a fledgling America more than 165 years ago. The Web provides everyone with a way to actively engage in the electoral process; it empowers everyone to research issues; it enables them to join others to work toward a goal; it gives a voice to those who previously were only passive consumers. (p. 60)

The third phase saw a further weakening of the establishment press: the competition presented by online media, the continued loss of trust, the phenomenon of citizen-journalists, and the emergence of direct communication between constituents and their elected officials, among other factors, continued to erode the status and financial independence of many communication outlets (Spaeth, 2009). Nevertheless, even during this period, most Western politicians continued to invest considerable resources in the broad and respectable platform provided by the establishment press, and mobilizing the tools provided by the digital sphere to attract the attention of journalists and indirectly influence the political-communication agenda in its classical sense. And yet, the entry of social networks into the political-communication arena posed more severe threats than in the past, this time not only to the traditional press, but also to the online establishment press. Many Westerners switched to a social network–mediated consumption of news; direct channels of political communication were becoming more attractive and popular than in the past (Penney, 2017).

*Phase Four – The Conquest of Cyberspace*

In the fourth phase of the internet, we have witnessed the conquest of the digital space by politicians and candidates. This includes bending the rules of the game and manipulating the characteristics of the digital space to meet their specific needs, at the expense of the public good and at the expense of democracy. The absence of the press, at first pushed out, among other reason, due to sharp public criticism of its functioning, is more palpable than ever. We have been left on our own, citizens mired in confusion, facing a well-oiled and sophisticated mechanism that has exploited the space that was initially created for us. This mechanism attacks and weakens us in order to gain power, even at the expense of the surrounding frameworks and of democratic ethos.

The watershed moment marking the end of the third phase and the beginning of the fourth is the rise to power of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and his turning his personal Twitter account into a primary channel of communication and a highly efficient tool. Politicians such as Trump have learned to exploit channels of direct contact with citizens in order to influence them in far-reaching ways. In doing so, they have also propagated highly effective public de-legitimization of the traditional media, and have succeeded in significantly weakening their standing in the arena. They have created a space where they can communicate directly with their constituents, apart from critical elements, and flood them with false information that serves their interests. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s use of his Facebook account has also grown during these years, in the pursuit of the exact same goal – maintaining a direct channel of communication with voters and other followers. Such a channel enables politicians to dictate an agenda, to influence the worldview of many of their followers, to offer their own alternative versions of political reality, and to undermine the credibility and public image of the traditional media.

The criticism voiced by theoreticians, opinion makers, and public leaders during the second phase of the internet sounds naive and unrealistic in light of the changes taking place before our eyes in the fourth phase. While second-phase criticism focused mainly on the fruitless messianic hopes that had been invested in the internet and the difficulties in realizing its democratic potential, in the current fourth phase this criticism can almost be seen as “rich people’s problems” and make us nostalgic for that lost age of apparent innocence. The utopian thought that the internet, and later on the social networks, would empower citizens and reduce the gaps in power and influence between them and elected officials, has proven utterly unrealistic. Not only did the politicians identify the new weapon offered by the digital sphere, not only did they snatch it out of the public’s hands, but at this present stage they are pointing it directly at them. In addressing the scope of the phenomenon, which greatly intensified during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Penney (2017) posits that “the labor of ‘citizen marketers’ in circulating persuasive media content is paramount” (p. 403). He singles out the Bernie Sanders campaign as an example of phenomenally successful political marketing using sophisticated social media strategies, chief among them the bifurcation of the campaign into an official component and an unofficial one where the rules of the game were much more flexible and the role of citizens actively spreading content was especially significant. Penney (2017) pays special attention to the informal uses of social media, some of which were expressions of grass-roots civic initiatives. However, a worrisome portion of these uses exemplified a new trend that typifies the fourth phase – top-down dictated use of the tools provided by social media in order to spread information that does not meet the ethical standards of professional journalism. Stromer-Galley (2014) sees the above-mentioned phenomenon as particularly disconcerting because it is the direct result of political factions and campaign managers taking advantage of innocent citizens’ enthusiasm and keenness to help. At the end of the day, this phenomenon helps promote top-down dictated agendas rather than independent grass-roots initiatives.

We propose that the present, fourth phase, is characterized by the following four central phenomena:

1. Politicians’ use of their personal social media accounts becomes their main sphere for political-communication sphere and for gaining millions of followers.
2. The establishment media, in its traditional or online forms, comes under relentless attack and becomes the target of de-legitimization campaigns, which amount to a call to the public to abandon them in favor of the direct communication channels between voters and candidates or public officials.
3. Campaign management organizations making more sophisticated uses of Big Data, for instance, by deploying enthusiastic citizens to spread well-orchestrated political messages in the guise of personal expression, while constantly trying to evade establishment media.
4. The intentional weakening of the establishment press accompanied, ironically, by a rejection of most of the ethical standards to which the mainstream media claims to adhere, chief among them the insistence on reliable, objective, neutral information. Even though one cannot realistically expect interested political parties to disseminate neutral information, this involves the conscious choice to spread false, sometimes utterly fabricated information through ever-more sophisticated and efficient rapid distribution channels. In the digital sphere, this has become the new norm, the standard and common practice among politicians and agents acting on their behalf.

In the context of these characteristics, we shall now examine the phenomenon of “fake news.”

**The Use of Micro Media to Create Fake News**

What is the secret to the success of “fake news”? Why do web-users not reject it, even after initial trust in it has failed? Information that is considered fake news can bypass gatekeepers because it offers something fast, immediate, and alternative. The process by which a newspaper editorial staff was qualified as “staff” is disappearing. It is irrelevant in the digital age. A system of checks and balances has been collapsing because there is no longer a process, and no filters or gatekeepers; after all, if something is distributed or uploaded, it is information. The only way to verify what is real and what is fake is to activate automatic logarithms to sift through the enormous amounts of information on a network. A system that does not allow for filtering and editing within a specific timeframe would not be capable of doing this. It seems that the explanation for the success of fake news lies in some of the important characteristics of internet use. While, in terms of the fourth estate, mass media can be characterized as a relatively homogeneous agent that has mutual interests and relationships of checks and balances with the other estates, the fifth estate (web users) undermines the balance of power and grants considerable advantages to both citizens and digital technocrats; however, it involves no guidelines or practices, no accountability for content, no guiding hand, and no philosophy of “social responsibility” (Dutton, 2009).

*Bottom-up Information Flow (Bottom-up Approach)*

Much of the content on the web is not created or produced by traditional mechanisms of information generation. Every web user is a potential content creator. Thus, there is a greater willingness to accept content whose sources are unknown or unclear. The transfer of content between web users currently occurs in an environment wherein the right of every user to create and distribute content is considered legitimate.

*Decentralization*

The architecture of the web results in a loss of control and centralization. Information that was previously transferred hierarchically, or that was easy to navigate and control, is now subject to other effects and web behaviors that, by their very nature, operate according to different criteria that are more suited to “networks” and less subject to the influence of social agents. Concepts such as “going viral,” memes, and the adoption of innovations and ideas, spread in diverse ways and not necessarily from a single locus of control. Is the net interested in truth? The net does not give its blessing to a single truth; by its nature it offers alternatives. On each central branch, one can find parallel branches and bypasses to private channels that are secret and invisible.

*Remix Culture*

According to Jenkins (2006), in today’s convergence culture, production, sharing, and distribution are not the domain of a lone source but a mixture of sources. Thus, visual and textual content produced and shared on the net is often subject to editing by various sources. The duplication and alteration of content is commonplace. Textual or visual news content may undergo changes as it is transferred over the net. Wikipedia, for example, has a vision of shared editing and, during an event, it is common to see jointly-written news emerging. Reference to sources like Twitter or blogs has become widespread. In times of crisis, gatekeepers fail and there is no opportunity to verify and cross-reference sources.

Given that the work routine involved in producing new media is around-the-clock, there are no editions or deadlines, editorial departments do not close, and there is no opportunity to decide what should be included and what should be left out. All that is relevant is what is immediate and urgent. There are only fragments of information, all of them “breaking,” all of them “important,” and thus in this hour of crisis more and more of them become unfiltered news. News reports are not sufficiently edited, or there is insufficient verification of real and false claims, since there “not enough time” or “no capacity,” given the rate at which news is breaking, for discretion to be exercised. Thus, reports include truth and fabrication, and a platform for the emergence of fake news is created.

*Automatic Dissemination and Low Investment in Editing Information*

Phenomena like clicktivism and slacktivism emphasize the relative cognitive laziness of web users who choose to share messages (or “like” them) without making the cognitive-emotional investment required for an in-depth reading or an actual response. In this way, the ease with which unchecked or false messages are transmitted increases. Traditional media like newspapers, radio, or television share a certain “logic” affected by technologies and work routines. For example, in traditional media, deadlines and space limitations dictated and continue to dictate the style of headlines and sub-headers. They (the headlines) are not necessarily a product of the content, but a construct that has developed because traditional media requires order (beginning/middle/end), and they are adapted to a general audience and are not personalized. The internet does not need to operate according to this “logic.” The net is dynamic. Headlines can be “organized” afresh at any moment and according to the personal preferences of the user. Thus, a newspaper tweeting via its Twitter account a sentence or article with continuous updates on a rolling news story can later turn this into an article that is a collection of tweets or comments. Does this not affect reporting? Common sense suggests that writing on Facebook or Twitter impacts the manner of reporting. If these are the foundations and roots on which contemporary journalists base longer reports, then gradually we can expect profound changes in the structure of reporting as well.

**Reconsidering Abandoned Media Theories**

“Magic bullet” and “Hypodermic needle” were metaphors used by researchers to describe the powerful, direct, and omnipotent influence of the media on the public, during the first decades of communication research (mainly the ’’’1930s and 1940s). Over the years, these powerful and direct effects approaches have been replaced by softer theories attributing limited influence to mass media (xxx). Despite additional changes in the theory and practices of mass communication research along the years, and especially since the beginning of the new media phase, at the end of the 20th century, those old-fashioned metaphors have never been reconsidered.

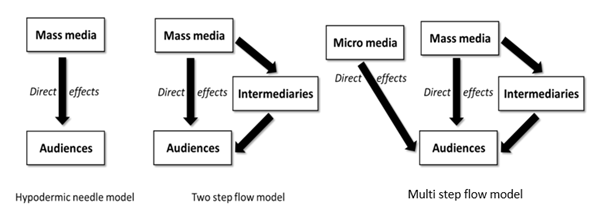
Ironically enough, in today’s media environment, and in some of the main features of political communication in the current “Trump Era,” one can identify signs that indicate the possibility that we should reexamine the abandoned “hypodermic needle” approaches. The immediate context is the ways in which politicians use online social networks to create direct connections with potential voters, as well as with other audiences. As part of the direct outreach strategies, some of these politicians—among them U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu—accuse the traditional media of spreading false information, “fake news,” while they disseminate information, the veracity of which is controversial. In this way, these leaders manage to beat a fast and direct path for themselves to the worlds of their voters: traditional agents are being accused of biases and a lack of professionalism to the point of undermining their legitimacy, and a clear call is made for voters to switch to information channels provided by the politicians themselves. At the same time, these same elements work to supply these direct media channels with “alternative” news stories that put themselves in a positive light.

**Major Shifts in Communication and Media Theory**

The gloomy vision of media effects that characterized the first decades of communication research, had been replaced towards the midst of the 20th century by new theories that no longer accepted the idea of a direct influence, coming from an omnipotent media, and directed at an extremely passive audience. The models that led to this semi-paradigmatic shift include the two-step flow model (Katz, 1957), which sought to indicate the purported existence of an intermediary component between the mass media as sender to the public as receiver. The direct and powerful messages underwent a process of natural and deliberate selection via opinion leaders, as well as a filtering process by the various media for the various needs of the recipients. The media had positioned itself as a social agent, one of many so that even if its impact was important, it was nonetheless limited.

According to Weimann (2017), the 1960s and 1970s were a golden age for research into two-step flow communication and the central role played by opinion leaders, across a wide range of topics in media studies and other research fields. Although research employing the two-step model continued to constitute the focus of many studies, Weimann points to the need to move to a more complex model of “multi-stage flow.” Such a model is more compatible with the convergence of mass media and interpersonal communications that has taken place in new media. Jensen (2010) also suggests that the two-step model must be reimagined in the light of digital media, which allows for a “three-stage flow of communication” including the transfer of information from one-to-one, from one-to-many, and from many-to-many. Stansberry (2017) summarizes the concept of switching to a multi-step model thus: “Instead of the top-down communication process assumed by existing models of communication flow, information in online networks appears to flow into and across communities from many different sources, and opinion leaders appear to act as both content filters and communication facilitators”(p. 6).

Even towards the last quarter of the 20th century, when media researchers once again tended to attribute a strong influence to the media, early theoretical concepts remained outside the picture and were considered simplistic, extremist, and irrelevant to the socio-cultural-political reality of the Western democratic world. The existence of a heterogeneous media audience, which was aware of its needs and less prone to manipulation than in the past, was beyond doubt. Likewise, the recognition that widespread interpersonal communications occurred alongside mass media was not discarded, even though the perception of the status of these interpersonal networks, as well as their role in interaction with the mass media, had undergone considerable changes (Laughey, 2007). Figure 1 briefly describes the various models of information flow. The central argument of this paper relates to the multi-step model and the possibility that information flow from micro media (e.g., tweets on Twitter and posts on Facebook by politicians) may often have a direct effect on audiences.



*Figure 1: Models of Information Flow*

*Source: Elishar-Malka & Ariel, in process*

The transition to a digital communications environment, the penetration of new media into our lives, and more importantly, the era of Web 2.0 and online social networks, were expected to intensify this trend, and perhaps even to re-herald the golden age of theories that attributed only a limited effect to mass media. Some of the main features of the Web 2.0 ecosystem – multichannel environments, individual customization, content consumed by shifting time or medium according to user preference, the transformation of the media audience into an active user public, and so on – seem to point to a social media reality in which the power of the recipient is growing at the expense of the sender. Nevertheless, could it be that the contemporary digital media revolution and the removal of rigid distinctions between sender and recipient are akin to a golem turning on its maker? Could it be that the image of the “little people,” the passive media consumer of old, as enjoying the new status of a full partner in the creation of content, and selective consumption, does not accurately reflect today’s reality, or at least, does not reflect the whole picture?

The phenomenon of fake news is an effective example of the potential transition to a direct and powerful influence of senders on their audiences. We do not intend to argue that the hypodermic needle theory deserves to be re-adopted in its entirety. Certain elements of it, for example, the attribution of uniform effects on the recipient public, and the perception of said public as a passive audience, do not stand the test of reality: the audience of web users, followers, and Twitter users is by its nature active, and the differences between usage patterns and content uploaded by various users are evident. Other components, such as the attribution of influences at the micro and short-term levels, deserve thorough analysis in future work. It seems that, at this stage, most research attention should be directed to the issue of powerful and direct effects, since in the online space, and perhaps even outside it, there may be direct injections of information from powerful sources to weaker audiences who have no real ability to counter these messages.

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