# Disruptive Technologies, Innovation and Global Redesign:

## Emerging Implications

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Chapter 19

# Rethinking Mass Communication Theories in the Internet Era

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines three classical theories of mass communication to support a hypothesis suggesting that in the age of Internet, these theories are fast becoming extraneous. Theories to be analysed are the cultivation, agenda-setting, and media systems dependence theories. By interviewing over 100 university students based at Amsterdam University College, the authors hope to establish their media behaviours and practices, effectively verifying or disproving the argument that Web technology is masterminding a new revolution, which is uncharacteristically making these theories null and void.*

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new media technologies has been celebrated and equally censured world over. Indeed, new media has expansively altered the way information is shared, providing an unsurpassed platform for interactive communication. To this end, media deterministic theorists including Marshall McLuhan have solidly maintained that

media, backed by technological advancement, carries an exponentially increasing impact on societies. McLuhan's 'medium is the message' thesis robustly backed this claim. Some theories of mass communication on the other hand have offered simplistic explanation that enlightens us on media's dominating impact on the social order. However, the advent of new technologies such as blogging, we concluded, stood in the way of an aptly gasconading two-way relationship between mass media and media audiences. Armed with

empirical data obtained through questionnaire interviews with Netherlands-based University students, we were keen on carefully excogitating the media dominance discourse.

Post-World War theories of mass communication such as the magic bullet theory have historically dominated media effects studies. While this theory was specifically left out of this study for reasons clearly spelt out later in the research, we question whether other theories' traditional assumption that mass media has a compelling influence on the passive mass audience can be corroborated. The magic bullet theory, Burger argues, sought to confirm the media's ability to powerfully 'shoot' or 'inject' messages designed to trigger a desired response. Radio and television ubiquity coupled with Hitler's rise to power paved way for the theory's overall acceptance. But with the upsurge of the Internet, citizens have more alternative sources of news, thereby proving the theory and indeed others such as the media dependence, agenda-setting and cultivation theories have a less lasting effect on the audiences. Our research thus probed the ostensibly overpowering impact of the mass media from a theoretical perspective based on a hypothesis that stated new media technologies have inordinately reduced media supremacy. The methodology part presents arguments for using questionnaires as a primary data collection methodology. The next part introduces the reader to the three theories of mass communication that were comprehensively examined in this study. That part will be followed by a discussion of research findings.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research interviews attempt to ascertain the meaning of people's experiences on a particular subject (Steinar Kvale, 1996, p. 15). Interviews also enable researchers to acquire information that they otherwise cannot obtain by observation alone. (Arthur Asa Burger, 2000,

p. 111). On the contrary, structured interview questionnaires or surveys can also quantitatively help determine or estimate future events. As noted above, this research sought to establish the influence of mass communication theories in a digitalized contemporary Western society. Despite our notable belief that mass media has a near-permanent capability to influence audiences, we were also convinced the advent of the Internet has notably weakened this invincibility. Questionnaire interviews were thus used in a mixed method study to verify our hypothesis thanks to their ability to use large sample sizes for generating generalisable results. Our central aim was to get accurate audience beliefs and attitudes on the use of Internet as a source of news, the results of which were then analysed to establish whether they contradicted or supported the notion that mass communication theories are fast losing their influence in the digital era.

## Data Collection

A Web-based questionnaire was our prime data collection tool. Several factors were considered before deciding to administer questionnaires. Since our aim was to get a large sample size, we were convinced questionnaires would inexpensively reach out to a bigger audience. Concerned a low response rate would have an appalling effect on the research, we were certain the use of a questionnaire would help us reach our targets. Other factors, including scholarly-suggested views on the convenient use of questionnaires and the possibility of getting accurate and honesty reflections also persuaded us to use questionnaires. (Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, Keith Morrison, 2000, p. 245 to 264) We chose to use unstructured questionnaires because based on experience, they tend to potentially provoke a true reflection of the participants' opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings on a particular subject. Also, as Beri argues, unstructured questionnaires facilitate the informal conducting an in-depth interview. (GC

Beri, 2008, p.108). Our questions were both structured and unstructured in nature, allowing us to numerically present the findings.

All 110 research participants, who participated in the online survey, are students at Amsterdam University College, an international liberal arts college jointly owned by the University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam. Electing a random sample, which is effectively based on the assumption that every person in the population is equally likely represented, we figured interviewing students at a global-centered university would help us attain a big-sized sample. We were also seeking results that did not merely echo Dutch audience sentiments. Nearly half of the participants were Dutch students, however. Other respondents came from fifteen different nationalities including the Germany, United States, Britain, France and Belgium. Apart from demographic attributes, respondents were voluntarily asked to verify, among several issues, their media sources, how frequent they used them, their use of alternative media sources such as blogs, their political affiliation and the extent to which different media sources shaped their political standpoints. Ten of the respondents participated in a face-to-face interview session, which sought to verify the rationality behind their responses.

## Justification and Criticism

Not only does quantitative enquiry rely on deductive and particularistic characteristics but in several circumstances also stipulate the development and inclusion of an unambiguous hypothesis that can be tested empirically on a specific set of data (Chava Frankfort-Nachmias & David Nachmias, 1992 p. 16-45). The fact that hypothesis testing is a common characteristic of quantitative research boded well with our investigation aims. Additionally, it is widely accepted among media scholars that surveys can play an important role in a quantitative-led investigation with some even arguing they are the primary method of quantitative research. (Joe

R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, Gideon Sjoberg, 1991 p. 226 or David E. McNabb, 2008 p. 149).

Others like Kuhn believe in embedding qualitative methodologies in quantitative research, asserting there are no separate distinctions between the two. (Thomas S. Kuhn, 1961, p.162). Criticism of quantitative research has for years tracked its association with the positivist and epistemological paradigm which argues that the only authentic knowledge should be based on sense experience and positive verification. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), for instance viewed science as the only valuable and acceptable solution to valid problem-solving knowledge. Through his critical rationalism theory, Karl Popper also advanced empirical falsifiability. Such a supposition has largely been disputed by proponents of qualitative enquiry including Bryman, who is convinced by viewing society from a statistical point of view, quantitative research underestimate or ignore the impact and role of change in social studies. (Alan Bryman, 1988, p. 45-65). Bryman's argument explains why we attempted to use both qualitative and quantitative aspects of research methodology.

Ben Beiske, quoting Judith Bell, asserts that when properly administered, questionnaires can prove to be a reliable method to obtain quantitative data about people's attitudes, values and experiences and past behaviors (Ben Beiske, 2002, p. 4). Additionally, apart from hypothesizing that online questionnaire interviews and surveys are likely to rise with the Internet ubiquity continuing to gather momentum. (Jon Curwin, Roger Slater, 2008, p. 64.), the authors conclude that self-administered questionnaires reduce the problem of interviewer bias. Indeed, the availability of software packages such as survey monkey has helped quicken the researcher's resolve to obtain information.

We also used the said software for collecting data and in our experience, gathering data from respondents wasn't a mammoth task. McNabb also credits questionnaires for their flexibility, saying they can be "custom designed to meet objectives of any type of research project," p. 149. McNabb's

seven-step model for questionnaire design was also used in this research, initially identifying the information we needed before picking our data-gathering methods. Other elements included elucidating specific data analysis techniques, choosing question type and wording as well as logically organizing the questions and revising our questions.

As noted above, quantitative methods, including multi-purpose questionnaires use mathematical and statistical techniques to collect and analyse research data, ensuring impartiality, generalisability and reliability. Our research findings, we concluded, were based on a systematically-verifiable method, which enabled us to virtually trace all the information we need in connection with the respondents. Criticism of questionnaire interviews has largely centered on perceived response rate problems. Evidently, lower educational and literacy levels plays a key role in such circumstances. Since all participants came from an academic institution, we did not experience such difficulties. In fact, our response rate was considerably high. Specifically targeting the statistical-based analysis of questionnaire interviews, (Farran 1990, p. 91-103) questions their authenticity, arguing they do not represent but construct social reality. Reinforcing that view, Graham focuses on the historically origins of survey methodology, criticising it for being a 19th C ideology, which is unsuitable to the modern day world. These criticisms were not compatible with our findings, which critiqued modalities and perfected the use of questionnaire surveys as a reliable method of gathering data.

## Theories: An Overview

A wide range of communication theories are concerned with mass media's influence on their audiences, asserting both limited and powerful effects (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p. 263-266). Early theories of mass communication, later collectively referred to as "(magic) bullet" or "hypodermic needle" theory (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985), predicted strong and direct impacts of mass media messages on all audience members (Severin & Tankard, 2010, pp. 262-263). However, this view is today perceived as "naive and simplistic" (p. 263).

Later theories were devised in reaction to the unsatisfactory nature of this early concept and posit different ways in which media influences society. Media system dependence theory is based on the uses and gratifications approach and describes how media come to gain influence over audiences. It ties into agenda-setting theory, which assumes that the powerful position of the media enables them to influence what members of the audience think about, although not how. Cultivation theory, on the contrary, asserts an impact of media on attitudes held by members of the audience.

Classical media effects theories, such as the cultivation, agenda-setting, and media systems dependence theories, were developed to examine the media landscape of the second half of the 20th century. They are fine-tuned to the American mass media landscape dominated by (initially few) mainstream television channels: centralized outfits broadcasting similar messages to a broad audience. The Internet, and in particular social media, has begun to disrupt this order, and thus proves a challenge to common media effects theories.

## Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory has been devised in reaction to the unprecedented centrality of television in Western, and particularly American, culture during the second half of the 20th century. It assumes that "television virtually monopolizes and subsumes other sources of information, ideas, and consciousness" (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p. 268). This monopoly leads to cultivation, i.e. the creation of "a common worldview, common roles, and common values" (ibid.) among the audience.

Gerbner and Gross (1976) posit that television has developed into a "common symbolic environment" which binds diverse communities

together, socializing its audience into "standardized roles and behaviours". "Its function is, in a word, enculturation" (p. 175). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) argue that "[t]he repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment", thus replacing other factors such as religion in becoming "the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history" (p. 17-18). Eventually, the authors claim that television is to modern societies what religion was in earlier times (ibid.).

Cultivation theory in its most basic form suggests that exposure to television in the long term subtly "cultivates" viewers' perceptions of reality. It "cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources", argue Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986, p. 17). The impact of television is thus not seen as "targeted and specific effects" (Miller, 2005, p. 282), but rather "in terms of the cumulative impact it has on the way we see the world in which we live" (ibid.). This cultivation can have an impact even on light viewers of TV, as the impact on heavy viewers influences the entire culture.

In its original form, put forward by Gerbner and Gross (1976) and developed in response to a long-term research program, cultivation theory essentially claimed "uniform and across-the-board effects of television on all heavy viewers" (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p. 269). Later, Gerbner et al. (1980) revised the theory to include the concepts of mainstreaming and resonance. Television viewing is seen to interact with other factors, meaning that certain effects, such as higher perceived levels of crime in society, might only occur in some subgroups of heavy viewers, while being absent in others (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p. 269).

Cultivation theory is based on the prevalence of television as a mass medium in Western countries, and particularly the USA. This has led to claims that the emergence of the Internet will invalidate its presumptions, as social media break

the hegemony of television. In particular, Johnson (2010) claims that "the Internet throws into doubt the notion that audiences are passive", a notion on which he assumes cultivation theory depends. Schrock (2009) even sees television increasingly being replaced by the Internet, argueing that "individuals who enter adolescence today in the United States will likely grow up an immersive media environment, but one based on the Internet more than television".

Morgan and Shanahan (2010, p. 350) have countered claims that Internet-based media invalidate cultivation theory, arguing that online video platforms such as YouTube and Hulu, while enabling greater user choice in programming, serve to increase overall exposure to television. They cast doubt on the dawning of a social media-based "new folk culture", which Lessig (2002) and others have predicted, stating that "a world in which everyone is producer, distributor, and consumer of messages seems far-fetched" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 350). The authors conclude that "[a]s long as there are popular storytelling systems and purveyors of widely shared messages, Gerbner's main ideas are likely to persist."

## Agenda-Setting Theory

Most theories of mass communication are concerned with the ability of mass media to change audiences' attitudes. Agenda-setting theory, in contrast, focuses on the ability of mass media to direct the attention of audiences on particular issues. It is strongly influenced by the observation that mass media do not simply mirror reality (Funkhouser, 1973). As Cohen (1963, p. 13) concluded about the power of the press, "[i]t may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

McCombs and Shaw (1972) were the first to systematically study agenda setting, and found a strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different issues by the media and their per-

ceived salience and importance among members of the audience. Later evidence gives some support to claims of a causal relationship (e.g. Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982). More recently, McCombs (1992, p. 820) has expanded the conceptualization of the theory to include second-level agenda setting, which is concerned with sub issues of individual points of an agenda. As a consequence, he concludes that "the news not only tells us what to think; it also tells us how to think about it."

The impact of agenda-setting is not uniform, and several studies have identified characteristics of issues, audience members, and media representation which influence the magnitude of the effect. Zucker (1978) has claimed that agenda-setting pertains primarily to unobtrusive issues, as less direct experience means that the public will have to rely on media reports for information. Yagade and Dozier (1990) found that there is a relationship between media and public agendas for concrete issues, such as energy, but not for abstract ones, such as the nuclear arms race. Weaver (1977) also claims a difference across members of the audience, which he conceptualizes as "need for orientation", made up of the relevance of an information to the individual, and their degree of uncertainty regarding the issue. Some evidence suggests that higher need for orientation correlates with a stronger agenda-setting effect of mass media. Kiousis (2004) has also fragmented the definition of media salience into three dimensions, attention, prominence, and valence, which all inform the impact of agenda-setting.

Agenda-setting theory is based on the function of mass media as gatekeepers, yet various scholars (e.g. Shirky, 2008) have argued that this function is bound to regress in the age of social media. Even before the emergence of blogs and social networks, Negroponte (1995) predicted that using the Internet people would set their own agendas instead of relying on the professional filtering provided by mass media. Consequently,

Williams and Delli Carpini (2004, p. 1225) find that "mainstream journalism [has] lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda" due to the rise of the increasingly diverse "new media environment", including social media.

As social media potentially enable everybody to become a media publisher (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008), some attention has shifted to intermedia agenda setting. Messner and Watson DiStaso (2008) found that blogs heavily rely on traditional media as sources, but that these in turn also become more open to using blogs as sources themselves. From similar observations, Meraz (2009, p. 701) concludes that "traditional media agenda setting is now just one force among many competing influences". In this situation, Johnson (2009) argues, agenda building theory, which incorporates the influence of media alongside that of government and the public in explaining the salience of issues, is more useful than the more limited agenda-setting theory.

## Media System Dependence Theory

Dependency theory is an extension of the uses and gratifications approach (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). It does not perceive the audience as passive, but instead argues that its members are goal-driven and actively use media as an information system (Ball-Rokeach & Jung, 2009). However, dependency theory does not ignore the persuasive impact of media (Baran, 2010). Consequently, it takes an ecological view of dependency, examining factors both at the micro level of media consumers and the macro level of media producers (Ball-Rokeach & Jung, 2009) to posit that "the nature of media influence is a function of the tripartite interactions among the societal system, media system, and audience" (Sun et al., 2001).

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) suggest that goal-driven media selection will result in dependence on particular media. They argue that a medium will be the more important to an

individual, the more they rely on the medium for pursuing their goals. The authors categorized these needs into three dimensions, including making sense of the world, interacting with others, and entertainment. Dependency might be stronger if media satisfy several needs, as Rossi (2002) points out that "[i]f a person finds a medium that provides them with several functions that are central to their desires, they will be more inclined to continue to use that particular medium in the future".

As Ball-Rokeach and Jung (2009) suggest, "we can understand media effects as the outcome of dependency relations where consumers require access to information resources controlled by the media system to achieve their everyday goals, whereas the media system does not really require access to resources controlled by anyone consumer in order to achieve its economic and political goals." Consequently, Sun et al. (2001) have argued that the more alternatives an individual can choose from, the lesser is their dependency on any specific medium and its subsequent influence.

Media system dependency theory understands the media system as intricately linked to the societal system and the audience. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) have termed a change in any of these parts which subsequently impacts the whole system a "ripple effect", and Foster (2009) argues that the emergence of the Internet causes a "digital ripple effect". He finds that "[t]he concept of scarce information resources noted by Ball-Rokeach is becoming obsolete" as media's previously asymmetric power of audiences is partly reversed, requiring an update of media system dependency theory.

The Internet might create new gratifications and new motivations for media use (Angleman, 2000), an issue that concerns the uses and gratifications approach underlying media system dependency theory. In particular, even before the rise of social media, interactivity was suggested as a distinctly new motivation for Internet use (Kuehn, 1993; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Ko, 2002).

## Research Findings

Less than one quarter, 23.6%, of all students who participated in our survey watch television on a daily basis and 30.2% watch television less than once a month. Additionally, 68,8% of all participants stated that they are "not at all" or "not very much" depended on television regarding their news consumption. Subsequently, only few students feel that content broadcasted via televisions is shaping their political opinion. However, 69.7% of all asked students are of the opinion that television offers up to date information and ascribe to television stations high credibility as almost half of all students (46.5%) feel that television offers reliable information. Although television still seems to have the reputation of being a credible source of news, it does not seem to play a major role in students' use of media. The outcome of our survey shows that Severin and Tankard's (2010, p. 268) idea of television monopolizing and subsuming other sources of information can be considered out-dated.

Nevertheless, content created by television stations is being consumed via video sharing platforms by 57.7% of all asked students. Hence, as Morgan and Shanahan (2010, p. 350) argue, Internet does not hinder content created by television stations to be viewed. Asked for the reasoning why the students do not watch content via television but online, they state that the acquisition cost of a television are too high. Monetary reasons however cannot be considered the only explanation of why students prefer video sharing platforms to television. The timelessness of video sharing platforms, being able to choose when to watch the content and the wider choice the Internet offers, seem to be the main reasons why students prefer video sharing platforms over televisions. Students make use of a mix of different media sources; social networks, online newspapers and other online media are more frequently used than television. Hence, if cultivation does occur, it does not only occur through televisions but many

different media sources. Thus one could assume that the cultivation theory in its classical sense, in the line of Gerbner and Gross (1976) can be considered obsolete.

As the cultivation theory emerged in the second half of the 20th century, television was relatively new and only offered a limited range of programs. Our survey shows that although today, television and other media offer almost unlimited choice of sources, students only seem to make use of very few. 91% of all asked students watch less than five different television stations. However our study does not investigate whether different students watch different television channels.

The reasoning behind their deliberate choice of only watching such a limited range of stations lies within the limited diversity of television stations. According to the interviewed students, television stations and programs are very alike and less than five different stations do easily cover the whole range of programs according to them. Hence, the small diversity within the television landscape does resample to a certain extent the situation in the second half of the 20th century. Today, students have a variety of different media sources to their disposal and do not exclusively use television as their source of information does make Gerbner and Gross' (1976) theories extraneous. Whether the television stations that are being watched, do more or less transmit the same values as Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue, has to be further researched. Media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch who owns a broad variety of television stations and other media platforms seem to have a great influence on values being transmitted.

As Gerbner and Gross (1976) posit, television binds communities together and standardizes roles and behaviour. While our survey does not examine the behaviour of students shaped by television, it does show that content created by television stations does shape "a bit" or "very much" what 53,7% of all asked students talk about with their peers. Hence we can assume that television content, although maybe not directly perceived via

televisions, does have an impact on the daily life of students. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) theories go too far and are certainly to some extend out-dated. However, based on our survey we can conclude that content created by television stations does have a major influence and still reaches a broad audience amongst students, whether and if so to what extend it does have a cumulative impact as Miller (2005, p. 282) claims, has to be subject of further research.

## Agenda-Setting Theory

Amongst the students, which participated in the survey the vast majority does never create content on online platforms apart from social networks. While it might be true that blogs and traditional media outlets are increasingly interrelated (Messner & Watson DiStaso, 2008), European students do not seem to be transforming from content consumers to content producers, but rather are still consumers of content created by traditional media outlets.

The conducted survey shows that traditional media still is the predominant source for students regarding their choice of media and it's not becoming less important through the emergence of the Internet. Although students seem to use a variety of media sources, including traditional and new media, it seems that traditional media can still be considered the most influencing media source. 96,3% of all asked students use social networks and 80,7% read online newspapers several times a week. 82,6% of the students make use of online newspapers to inform themselves about current issues several times a week, while only 59,2% use social networks to acquire news. Hence, online newspapers are the predominant sources of news for students. This can also be observed as the majority of students are of the opinion that they are "very much" dependent on online newspapers. New media sources such as Blogs and social networks are not seen as utterly necessary for the students' news consumption,

only 5.6% of all students feel that they are "very much" dependent on blogs for example.

The vast majority of the students (88,5%) feel that online newspaper offer up to date information and over 50% of the students believe online newspapers are reliable sources of information. Most online newspapers are pendants of traditional newspapers and they cater similar content. The interviewed students are of the opinion that online newspapers are more likely to react to new developments, thus are more up to date than their pendants but enjoy the same reputation and are thus seen as reliable sources. Online Newspaper can be seen as part of the traditional media as they do not differ much from their offline pendants. Consequently, traditional mass media is still very important regarding news distribution amongst students and can thus set the agenda.

Exactly 81,3% of all students say that they decide what to read, watch, or listen to, based on content created by traditional media and these traditional media outlets also seem to shape what students talk about with their peers. 84,1% of the students for example agree that online newspapers shape the content of conversations students have with their peers. Subsequently, traditional media such as television, newspaper and radio sets the agenda for its consumers. Cohen's (1963, p. 13) conclusion, that traditional mass media is successful in shaping its consumers agenda is thus being supported by the survey.

Although internet offers unlimited access to a vast diversity of media sources, the study also confirms McCombs' (1992, p. 820) second-level agenda setting theory, as most students (76,2%) seem to agree that newspapers shape their political opinion "a bit" or "very much", likewise do 70,3% of all students feel that their political opinion is shaped by online newspapers and as aforementioned it seems like other traditional media such as television have a significant impact on the formation of the students' political opinion as well. Alternative sources such as blogs do not seem to be of much influence regarding the stu-

dents' political opinion, as only 4.9% say they are "very much" influenced by them. Only very few students read blogs as they feel that blogs lack reputation and thus are not as credible, only 5,6% of all asked students are of the opinion that blogs offer reliable information. The students feel that if blog authors would become more prominent and known, they might be willing to read more blogs, however, today they rather trust the more established traditional media.

The conducted survey does not support Williams and Carpini's argument. Although 48,6% of the students read articles that are suggested to them via social networks by their peers, traditional media still seem to determine what content students consume, as 81,3% of all students feel that whatever is offered on television, in newspapers and on radio determine what they watch, read and listen to. Hence traditional gatekeepers are not being replaced with a social filter among the students that participated in the survey. A reason might be as some students suggested, that all kinds of different media outlets always seem to be referring to content created by traditional media. Subsequently, if a blog or another new media source publishes something it most of the time deals with events that have been dealt with by traditional media already. Thus, the content students ultimately talk about is content that originated within traditional media.

## Media System Dependency Theory

Our survey does not support the ecological view of dependency as argued by Ball-Rokeach and Jung (2009). Our survey and the outcome of the conducted interviews with students seem to confirm Angleman's (2000) theory. As Kuehn (1993) argued, interactivity seems to be a striving force behind the usage of Internet. Social networks serve as a platform where students can stay in contact with each other and suggest articles to their peers. Our survey shows that about 48% of the students

read, watch or listen to media content suggested by their peers. [simon 1]

Although Internet provides sheer unlimited access to numerous sources, it seems that students still only use very few. Hence, that would mean that they are less dependent on one particular source. Although our survey does not compare the situation before and after the emergence of the Internet, it shows however, that students still consider themselves to be heavily dependent on traditional media as their primary source for news. Most students, 61,5%, use online newspapers to inform themselves about current issues. The second most used source for news seems to be social networks (36.9%). Other media like TV, Radio and Blogs are rarely used.

The overwhelming majority of all students that participated in our survey, namely 93.5%, use Social Networks daily, followed by 55.0% of all asked students who read online newspapers on a daily basis. Blogs are rarely used, 42,9% say they read blogs less than once a month.

In all media, most students use less than five different sources, in other words, they do not use the full capacity that these media outlets offer; 64,6% of all asked students say they use less than five different online newspapers to inform themselves about their news consumption. Students seem to be less dependent on a particular medium, as they can use Internet for example as a substitute for newspapers or television.

## CONCLUSION

This paper critiqued whether classical media theories, such as the cultivation, agenda-setting, and media system dependency theories, are applicable to the media landscape of the Internet age, using interviews with European students to measure the extent to which these theories have been affected by the digitalisation of the media. The great majority of all students make use of social media and other online services such as online

newspapers. Television and radio are rarely used. However, the findings of our survey suggested that traditional media is still highly important for students news consumption. The content created by these news providers is being consumed via online platforms such as video sharing platforms. Traditional media seems to have the reputation of being reliable and up to date amongst students. It shapes the students' conversations, has a profound impact on their political opinion and influences their choice of media content. Furthermore, students do not make use of the full diversity that traditional media but especially Internet offers, as the majority uses less than five different channels within each medium. Most students do not create content online apart from on social networks. These networks are being used to stay in contact with peers and as an online agenda rather than as source of news.

In an increasingly diverse media environment, theories that were devised to fit a media landscape dominated by an oligopoly of broadcasters seem to lose their explanatory power. Cultivation theory, in particular, relies heavily on the dominance of a few television channels, which is no longer a given. Similarly, the wide range of media channels accessible via the Internet makes agenda-setting theory less applicable, and the emergence of social media with its alleged "prosumer" culture has shifted the focus to intermedia agenda setting. However, our study also shows that few students in Germany and the Netherlands create content online. Media system dependency theory, which understands media as interrelated with social structures and audience needs, remains useful, but needs to be augmented to accommodate the decreasing power of traditional media.

The Internet and social media have been hailed for bringing fundamental change to the media landscape by empowering their users to access more sources than ever before and by enabling them to become content creators themselves. However, our study concluded that European students rarely use these opportunities to their

full degree. Nevertheless, many classical media theories devised in the age of television seem outdated, and others need to be enhanced to take into account structural changes the Internet and social media have brought to the media landscape.

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