

POLYMEDIA

Date : September 3, 2010

Mirca Madianou (Univ. of Cambridge) and Daniel Miller (UCL)

Academics should be very wary of neologisms that most often lead to esoteric obfuscation and confusion. But occasionally there is an overwhelming argument that something in the world has changed beyond recognition and beyond the capacity and semantics of language, such that the only effective way to clearly convey it is through this strategy. For this we make no apology for inventing the word 'polymedia'. The basic argument is quite simple. Until very recently most people wishing to communicate at a distance had a limited choice of media, and as a result they had to pay considerable attention to the cost and to the constraints imposed by the particular media they that were available to them for that communication. When transnational communication was mainly limited to letters and the sending of voice-recorded cassette tapes, then our evidence is that users were very conscious of the propensities of the media themselves in shaping their communications, as is evident, for example, in the extensive time lag between sending and receiving letters.

In recent times, and for many people around the world this means the last year or two, (although we recognise for many other people this is still not yet the case) have finally reached a state where there exists a genuine proliferation of possibilities when it comes to communication between separated persons. Furthermore once the costs of the equipment and payment plan is spoken for, such as a computer, the ISP subscription or an annual phone plan, then the costs of any individual act communication itself becomes largely inconsequential. For almost any reader of this blog, but also for a typical school aged individual of a middle class income in pretty much any town anywhere, there may now exist a choice of mobile phone and internet based platforms such as voice calls, texting, email, instant messaging (IM), blogs, VOIP with or without webcam, photo and video sharing and social networking sites all readily available. New forms such as video messaging are on the horizon. We suggest that in such a situation the primary concern shifts from an emphasis on the constraints and affordances vis a vis a particular medium to an emphasis upon the social and emotional consequences of choosing between a plurality of media. The mere situation of polymedia changes the relationship between communication technology and society. The word polymedia seems to us more appropriate than alternative terms. Multimedia is now established as the term for situations, such as the use of webcam in videocalling, where several different forms of media are being used simultaneously and in direct relationship to each other. It would therefore be confusing to use that word for this proliferation of media. Polymedia might seem closer to terms such as multi-channel or multi-platform. But all such terms are based on an idea of hierarchy within media, that assume we can know what is properly a platform or a channel. One of the other effects of these recent developments is that users do not distinguish between such layering, or hierarchies. Various different devices are used in various combinations, so that Skype may be through a smartphone, or IM embedded within Facebook. So such terms have become themselves a source of confusion rather than clarity. We therefore need a term that simply describes this new state of the world, and the prefix 'poly' from the Greek for many or much,

seems entirely appropriate. So we do not apologise for inventing the word polymedia which we hope will become standardised.

The basis for this development is fieldwork we have carried out in the Philippines and Trinidad. The work in the Philippines has concentrated on the relationships between mothers working in the UK and their left behind children in the Philippines. This will culminate in a forthcoming book, Madianou, M. and Miller, D. Technologies of love: migration and the polymedia revolution, and associated journal papers. Much of this is concerned with the way those at both sides of the communication utilise the entire range of possibilities and the parameters of difference in order to try and control the nature of that communication, for example to avoid argument, allow time to consider a response, express love and feel a sense of authenticity to content. Our work in Trinidad provides a comparative dimension regarding communication between transnational families in the UK and Trinidad and there is also a separate book just focusing on Facebook (Miller, D. Tales from Facebook, forthcoming Polity, January 2011).

The revelation of polymedia is obviously not simply a response to our own work. We can see parallel discussion in a wide range of recent publications. One such trajectory comes from sustained work on mediation in media studies associated with writings by Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone, Roger Silverstone, Lilie Chouliaraki, Mirca Madianou and others. There is also the relationship between media theorised by Bolter and Grusin in their 2000 publication Remediation. Then within the more technical field come studies of media convergence in functionality and studies by Broadbent and others on the implications of this within family communication. The first proper and extremely helpful textbook in this area was recently published as Personal Connections in the Digital Age by Nancy Baym (2010) based on research in a number of disciplines. She highlights seven key parameters of difference, properties that may be shared or make for significant contrasts between each of these media. These are: interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach and mobility. She then employs these parameters of difference to consider a wide range of facets of human communication including the degree to which we see media as more or less authentic in comparison to face-to-face interaction, the sense of community, identity, gender, veracity and the self.

In contrast to this wide-angle view is the tight focus of a recently published book The Breakup 2.0 by the anthropologist Illana Gershon (2010). By examining which media people employ when breaking up a relationship, Gershon provides considerable and persuasive documentation of how people mistakenly presume what their partners intend by such choices and the various misunderstandings that follow. Chapter three of her book is a particularly good example of this perspective on the multiplicity of contemporary media. Gershon brings her own analytical terms to the table such as 'idioms of practice' based on 'media ideologies'. Her informants can be outraged almost as much by someone dumping them through an inappropriate, what they see as inhuman media, as the fact that they are being dumped.

In our own research we are as impressed by the speed at which normativity and standardisation of expectation can form around new media, as Gershon is impressed by continued heterogeneity. Within a few months many people seem to have clear ideas about the implications of some new iteration of Facebook, or a combination of skype and webcam. In fact both these processes are important aspects of polymedia. What we would argue all these research has in common is this

sense that the proliferation of new media and the movement of costs from foreground to background, as they become less prohibitive constitutes an unprecedented media ecology which also makes the social and moral aspects of media choice increasingly significant at the expense of the technological constraints and affordances. For these reasons we propose the adoption of a new term – polymedia.