



SOCIOLOGY,  
MEDIA AND  
JOURNALISM  
IN CHINA

# Social Media in China

Wenbo Kuang



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PART I

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Theoretical Foundations of New  
Media's Public Opinions



## CHAPTER 1

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# An Introduction to New Media

Looking back over human communication's history, we can easily see the historic role of the development of information technology as a lever for progress. A great transformation of information communication always follows an innovation in information technology. Each transformation exerts an immeasurable influence on people's political, economic, cultural and social lives and promotes the advancement of human civilization. Information technology has powerfully transformed people's production and daily lives, mainly as a result of changes in the modes of information communication. Within the history of human communication, which, up to now, can be divided into three stages—respectively, oral communication, typographic communication and electronic communication, every leap from the previous stage to the following one was achieved as a result of the revolutionary progress of information technology. The advance of computer-network technology, particularly the development of the Internet, laid the latest foundation for the development of information communication.

### 1.1 WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF “NEW MEDIA”?

Within industry and academia, as yet, no consensus has been reached on the exact definition of “New Media.”

### 1.1.1 *The Concept of New Media*

The term New Media first emerged in 1967 in a commodity development plan prepared by P. Goldmark, the Director of the CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) American Institute of Technology. Later, E. Rostow, the Chairman of the US President's Special Committee on Communication, mentioned New Media several times in his 1969 report to President Richard Nixon. The term New Media spread rapidly over America and has since expanded to the whole world.

Experts throughout the world hold different opinions on the definition of new media. In the early stage, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined "new media" as the on-line media. Similarly, the term new media was also defined as "the media for information communication with digital technology as the basis and the network as the carrier."<sup>1</sup>

Jiang Hong and Xu Jian from Shanghai Jiao Tong University defined new media from the perspectives of connotation and denotation. According to them, in terms of connotation, "new media" refers to the new type of media established based on the digital technology that emerged in the social information communication sector thanks to the great progress of science and technology in the late twentieth century and enables the wider range, faster speed and more diversified methods of information communication, which is vastly different from the traditional media. Regarding denotation, the new media consist of the fiber-optic cable communication network, the cable TV network, teletext, the computer communication network, the large-scale computer database communication system, the direct broadcast satellite system, the Internet, the short message service (SMS), the multimedia information interactive platform, the multimedia technology broadcasting network, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Huang Shengmin from the Communication University of China considers Internet protocol television (IPTV), terrestrial mobile TV and mobile TV as the three major parts of the new media.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tao Dan, Zhang Haoda, *New Media and On-line Advertising*, Page 3, Beijing, Science Publishing, 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Jiang Hong, Xu Jian, *Introduction to New Media*, Page 14, Shanghai, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Guo Yabing, Huang Shengmin, Wang Lanzhu, *Report on Development of Digital New Media in China*, Page 1, Beijing, Communication University of China Press, 2006.

Gong Chengbo holds that portal sites, search engines, virtual communities, e-mails, Internet literature and on-line games all belong to new media.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, we believe that the biggest issue in the definition of new media lies in the too extensive range and the logical confusion.

Some people believe that the new media also include a few new communication approaches that arose in the recent decade due to technology improvements or a few channels and carriers that have existed for a long time without their value in communication being discovered.<sup>5</sup> They include the mobile TV, IPTV, webcast, blog, podcast, office-building TV, vehicle mobile TV, the fiber-optic cable communication network, the urban two-way transmission cable TV network, high-definition TV (HDTV), the Internet, SMS, the digital magazine, the digital newspaper, digital broadcasting, digital TV, digital movie and touch media in the list of new media. In addition to the too-wide range, this definition is also exposed to logical confusion by putting all these media on a par with each other, since the sum of the subclasses should be equal to the parent class and subclasses should be mutually exclusive as per the logic of classification. Currently, many people make logical mistakes when defining the connotation and denotation of new media.

#### *1.1.1.1 Interaction Is the Essential Characteristic of New Media*

Though commonly known as “new media,” the complete expression should be “digital interactive new media.” That is to say, the “new media” are technically digital and are highly interactive from the perspective of communication characteristics. “Digitalization” and “interaction” constitute fundamental characteristics of the new media. Being a non-linear form of communication, the new media may have information sending synchronous or asynchronous with information receiving. For example, office-building media and vehicle mobile TV do not fall into the category of “new media.”

As a relative concept, the connotation of “new media” will always develop along with the progress of communication technology. However, from the perspective of the history of human communication, it should be

<sup>4</sup> Gong Chengbo, *Introduction to New Media*, Page 1, Beijing, China Radio & television Publishing House, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Xiaoning, *Research on Policies and Regulations on New Media of Radio and TV*, Page 16–35, Beijing, China Legal Publishing House, 2001.

confined to a certain era and indicate “the new for today” but not “the new for yesterday” or “the new for tomorrow.” The new media should not be defined by the standard of “the new for yesterday,” as radio and TV, which emerged in the early twentieth century, are traditional media now though they were new at that time. It also shall not be defined by “the new for tomorrow,” otherwise there is no new media now.

Moreover, the international standard should be applied as the criterion for the “new” in “new media.” Some media forms that appear to be “new” to Chinese people have actually been in existence for many years in developed countries and, therefore, are not considered as new media—an example would be vehicle mobile TV.

The concept of “digital media” is not recommended, since here “digital” could refer to the digital production process. If so, many more media would be listed as digital media.

Compared to traditional media, new media are characterized by immediacy, openness, individuation, audience-segmentation, massive information, low-cost global communication, quick search, integrativeness and so on. However, the essential features of new media lie in its digital technology and interactive communication.

In traditional media, the communicator and audience were clearly positioned—the communicator distributed information and the audience accepted information passively without a way to express their views, whether positive or negative. By contrast, the new media create a fuzzy boundary between the communicator and the audience, where the audience no longer consumes information passively, but engages in information exchange with the communicator and may even play a part as a communicator.

The magazine *Online* once defined “new media” as “communications for all, by all.” The traditional media divided the world into two camps, communicators and audiences, when people were writers or readers, broadcasters or viewers, performers or appreciators. New media, on the contrary, offer everyone the opportunity to listen and talk and realize unprecedented interaction. Therefore, the concept of “audience” is not now used in new-media research—it is recommended to replace the word “audience” with “user.”

Judging the current various forms of new media by the interaction criterion, we can see that some so-called “new media” are actually “traditional media that are new,” typically represented by vehicle mobile TV, outdoor media, and office-building TV.

Vehicle mobile TV and outdoor media are simply traditional media that have recently appeared in China, as they show no interaction, the essential characteristic of new media. Vehicle mobile TV has no interaction with users at all. Instead, it exists in an enclosed space, where users have no choice but to accept the information without the option to change the channel or shield the advertisement; and users have to watch it as they move, independent of their will.

Office-building TV transmits through cable. As with traditional radio and TV, it is characterized by a wide audience, great timeliness, rich and visual content, voluntary acceptance, sequential acceptance and fleetingness. Office-building TV can and should be considered as cable radio or closed-circuit radio based on its transmission mode, and mainly displays advertisements. Someone spending time in a very boring space (such as waiting for an elevator) would rather watch advertisements, which leads to the psychological coercion utilized by office-building TV. Thus, the information transmission by office-building TV exhibits strong audience passivity and goes against two essential characteristics of new media—users' initiative and interaction.

#### *1.1.1.2 Which Media Should Not Fall into the Category of New Media?*

Academia has reached a consensus that the print media and the traditional analog radio and TV are traditional media. However, does this mean that all other media forms can be considered as “new media?”

In the author's opinion, not all media forms that newly appear are new media. For example, bicycles and even people's foreheads are used as advertisement media; and these cannot be considered as new media but can only be called the traditional media that are new.

Then, how about digital TV? Digital TV is a kind of TV where the digital TV signal is applied to every link from the studio to transmission and reception, or where all signals of the system are transmitted through a binary data stream composed of numeric strings of 0 and 1. Compared to analog TV, it features smaller signal loss and better reception.

However, the digital TV popular in China now only increases the number of TV channels and improves definition, but still lacks interaction. For example, the video-on-demand service has not yet been popularized.

Hence, currently, in my view, digital TV is not a kind of new media. However, as with the mobile phone, TV constantly evolves following technical developments and may become a type of computer in the future. By then, digital TV provided with interaction will become a member of new media.

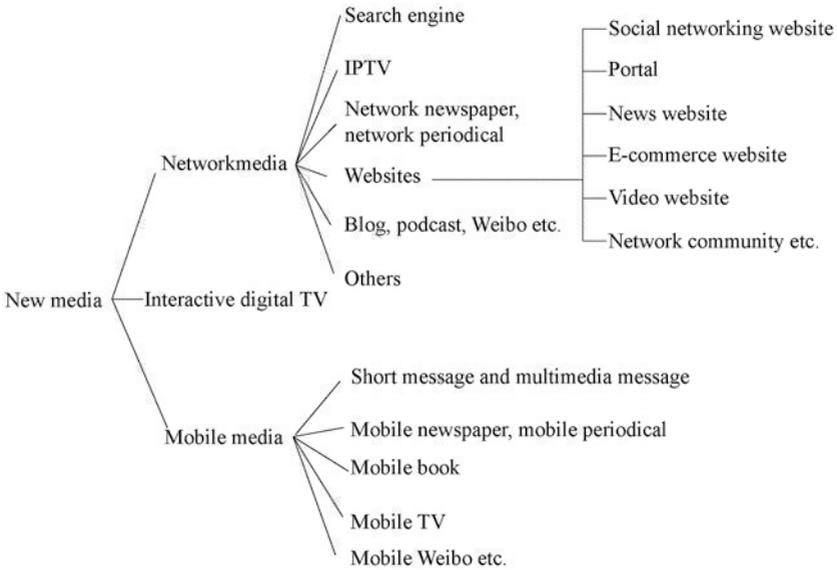


Fig. 1.1 The extension of new media

The extension of new media is listed in Fig. 1.1. It should be noted that the extension will expand along with the technical development.

The new media, the focus of media development in the future, points out this inexorable trend and direction for development of media communication.

1.1.1.3 *Scientific Definition of New Media: The Carrier that Communicates Information by Means of Computers*

The current new media consist of the Internet and mobile media, since only these feature real interaction. While the Internet is the product of computer technology development, mobile phones nowadays are no longer just hand-held phones, but are mini-computers provided with communication functions.

In the early stage of the mobile phone—the age of the first-generation (1G) mobile phone—it was only used as a hand-held phone and had no function to communicate news.

Looking back on the development of the mobile phone, it can be seen that the mobile phone has followed a trend towards a lighter design, more

functions and a lower cost. Currently, the 3G, 4G, 5G... NG mobile phones are no longer just hand-held phones, but are mini-computers provided with communication functions. The central processing units (CPUs) of mobile phones have started to apply “multi-core” functionality.

The smart phone constitutes the mainstream of mobile phone development nowadays, and shows two essential characteristics, the CPU as the hardware and the operating system as the software.

Like the CPU of a computer, the CPU of a mobile phone functions as the central control system of the whole mobile phone as well as the control center of the logic. The microprocessor monitors the whole mobile phone by operating software in the memory and using the database in the memory.

The development of the mobile phone processor shows great similarities with processor progress in the PC industry, both from the single-core to the multi-core, but multi-core smart phones arrived more quickly than expected. The smart phone with its computer functions has become the mainstream of mobile communication.

In conclusion, the new media can be defined as the carrier that communicates information by means of computers (or digital equipment featuring essential characteristics of computers).

### *1.1.2 Relevant Concepts*

Concepts closely associated with the new media include network communication, network media and mobile media.

What is meant by network communication? The network communication refers to the human information (including news, knowledge etc.) communication through computer networks. Information exposed to network communication is stored in the optical or magnetic or other storage media in digital form, communicated at a high speed through computer networks and read and used by computers or similar devices. Network communication realizes information dissemination, exchange and utilization based on computer networks, thus achieving the goal of social and cultural communication.

The computer networks included here have a broad range, including not only the popular Internet, but also the mobile communication network based on computer network technologies and modern communication technologies as well as the next-generation high-speed Internet. The network communication shall not be confined to the current Internet communication.