Chapter 2
We the New Media: The Disruption of Social Media in Interpersonal and Collective Communication

Miguel del Fresno
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Spain

ABSTRACT

The Internet have led to the emergence of a new communication ecosystem that is not restricted to the online context and in which professional and social media intersect and cohabitate to compete for the attention of audiences. This ecosystem occurs in cyberspace; a placeless space where new forms of power, influence, control, and management of collective perceptions have developed. These emerging macro social platforms are giving rise to a new paradox: people need social media to express their opinions and creativity, while the major platforms tend to view users as products. A new model is presented to describe and explain this new communication ecosystem that has put an end to the mediating exclusivity of professional media and maximizes collective interpersonal communication on one and the same social continuum. It is a new interpersonal and collective communication ecosystem whose deep logic is necessary to understand and in which academics must compete.

INTRODUCTION

Communication can be understood as the act of sharing “meaning through the exchange of information”, which is defined “by the technology of communication, the characteristics of the senders and receivers of information, their cultural codes of reference and protocols of communication, and the scope of the communication process” (Castells, 2009, p. 88). Communication is also defined as “a binding force in social relationships without at the same time being visible or having tangible and permanent forms… within a given structure of relationships and have consequences for this structure without being readily open to observation” (McQuail & Windahl, 1993, p. 4). Communication is therefore a property of col-
lective interpersonal action rather than of those who engage in it, although anyone may be a potential communicative agent.

The *Era de la información* (the Information Age) (Castells, 2001), or the *Société de l’information* (the Information Society) (Mattelart, 2003), is characterized by the social changes that have occurred since the late twentieth century as a result of the evolution of digital information and communication technologies as well as the emergence of a social network structure that has affected all areas of human activity on a global scale. Social changes brought about by technological innovations have always given rise to “changes in the order of interpersonal relationships” (del-Fresno, 2011a, p. 20). The uninterrupted technological spans have been presented as a gradual extension of our senses. As McLuhan (1964) stated, “we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned” (p. 3), thus leading to the growing technologization of reality (Virilio, 1991). This means that new media and technologies are transforming not only the “how” of communication, but the “meaning” of what is being communicated.

The Internet is one of the most disruptive technological phenomena for communication in history, especially collective interpersonal communication. The Internet, even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, is the result of decisions taken regarding its architecture and code in the early 1990s. Indeed, “the first generation of these architectures was built by a noncommercial sector—researchers and hackers, focused upon building a network” (Lessig, 2009, p. 7). As William Mitchell (1996) put it, the “code is cyberspace’s law” (p. 111) or as Joel Reidenberg (1998) called it, “Lex Informatica” or “control of code is power” (Lessig, 2009, p. 79). As regards the social media in particular, the code is “the unavoidable boundary around which no detour exists in order to participate fully in modern life. It is ubiquitous” (Berry & Pawlik, 2008, p. 58).

The code has a performative function because it is the condition for allowing communication on the Internet, and the means by which the expressive capacities of people are enhanced or restricted, and which facilitates, or not, the diversity of communicative practices in cyberspace. Thanks to the Internet, the previous communication ecosystem has been reabsorbed and a new one comprised of numerous and diverse players (both professionals and non-professionals) has emerged that enables the constant production and exchange of exponential amounts of data and information anytime and anywhere.

Early on, it was anticipated that this phenomenon would be a collective problem in the form of information overload (Toffler, 1970; Toffler & Toffler, 1994; Lewis, 1999) or an accident: “the damage caused by the explosion of unlimited information” will be “the great accident of the future, the one that comes after the succession of accidents that was specific to the industrial age” (Virilio, 1995, para. 14), where each technology entails its own accident. It is estimated that, thanks to technological development, more information was available in the second half of the twentieth century than ever before in the history of humankind (Feather, 2008) and that the Internet has played a key role in information overload since its entry into society (Swash, 1998).

Following the expansion of the Internet at the global scale, there emerged a “new form of interactive communication, characterized by the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real time or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting depending on the purpose” (Castells 2009, p. 55), what Castells referred to as mass self-communication. It is, at one and the same time, “mass self-communication because it can potentially reach a global audience” and “self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content… is self-selected” (Castells, 2009, p. 55). This process “has broadened the collective interpersonal com-