The Internet as a Transgressive Media:
An Interview *with Professor William Dutton*

Интернет как трансгрессивное медиа
Интервью *с профессором Уильямом Даттоном*

— *What does mediatization mean in your opinion?*

— I would argue that the concept of mediatization is anchored largely in Harold Innis's (1950) seminal work. Innis — a Canadian historian — was a mentor to Marshall McLuhan and McLuhan's famous phrase that the medium is the message. Innis and McLuhan argued that the medium used was more socially significant than any messages conveyed over that medium.

Innis challenged conventional perspectives on history and the media. As an historian, Innis was opposing the dominant paradigm of his time — that the basic

mode of production in the economy was deterministically shaping social and political structures. Instead, Innis argued that a society's communication infra-structure was more important is shaping or biasing social and political change. Innis wrote about the telegraph as one of his primary examples of a shift in communication infrastructure that enabled the expansion of empires. McLuhan (1964), whose book on the 'media is the message', which I read soon after it was published, while an undergraduate student, focused on electronic broadcast media. If he were alive today, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he would remark on it being more significant that households are spending so much time watching streaming video than what particular films they view.

This not only challenged economic determinism, but it did not replace economic with a technological determinism. Innis spoke about the bias of media and communication infrastructures, not their inevitable outcomes. But he made a case for not ignoring the historical role of shifts in media of relevance to politics and society.

In addition, his ideas did not align with dominant approaches to the study of media since the 1940s, which focused on the analysis of media content. Researchers assumed a relatively common text in nations with few radio and television options, and therefore focused on the messages, not the media.

— Is it possible to mention the basic relevant concept and idea of mediatization in the 2020s?

— From my perspective, since the rise of the Internet and Web, but also in the 2020's, the ideas of Innis and McLuhan are still quite fundamental to our understanding of the role of the Internet and new digital media in politics and society. I had the good fortune of directing the last years of a UK national Programme of Information and Communication Technologies (PICT), supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). PICT brought together centres of research on new media and communication technologies — all of which were anchored in one or another social science perspective. In that capacity, I focused on bringing together and integrating the findings of the centres involved and found it useful to organize all the findings around 'reconfiguring access' [1, 2].

This was my take on mediatization or Innis' idea, suggesting the primary role of technological change in information and communication technologies (ICTs) was to reconfigure access to: information (what we read, see and view, but also what we know); people (how we communicate with individuals, groups, or multitudes, but also with whom we communicate); services (how we obtain services, but also who provides what services to whom); and technologies (what technologies we access, but also what know how we require). This conception helped me understand the social and political implications of the Internet and Web, but it is as useful today in thinking about any new digital media, from AI to AR.

— Has your research field transformed? If yes, what are its main features, especially in (pan)demic)mediated reality? Are there any differences in it before/after COVID-2019?

— Most generally, I find my field of research in a state of flux. Maybe it has always been in flux. In the early 2000s, study of the Internet seemed like a waste of time to many who saw it as an ephemeral technology that would quickly lose its novelty and rapidly diminish in significance. By 2005, Internet studies were rising rapidly as the field in new media with incredibly optimistic views on its social and political implications, which were largely positive outcomes of an open and global Internet for sociality and democracy. After 2010, the Internet and Web became more taken for granted and viewed as such a routine technology of everyday life that they did not merit special notice. The Arab Spring woke a sense of the potential of the Internet to reach new networks with new ideas, but with the decline of democratic movements around the world, the Internet became a new scapegoat for many actors. Many saw its influence as dangerous, not only in destabilizing political regimes but spreading misinformation or disinformation across the world in clearly technological deterministic ways, such as conveyed in notions of filter bubbles and echo chambers. While research on how people use the Internet to gain information about politics counters techno deterministic perspectives, the disinformation theme had become a major focus of research and policy that ignored studies based on users, focusing instead on research on the production of disinformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how central the Internet and digital media had become across the globe. It was not to be taken-for-granted. With nearly 60 percent of the world online, the Internet became a life saver and job saver for many during lock downs and social distancing. The pandemic pushed even more individuals online in more central ways, but dystopian perspectives on the Internet and digital media remained quite prominent as this was a bandwagon within the research communities across multiple disciplines.

In a more academic sense, my field has been changing dramatically ever since I began studying the Internet in 1974. Initially, only a few academics studied the use of computer-mediated communications in those early days. As a political scientist, I had to publish in specialized journals as mainstream political science did not see communication online as a valid field of study — it was engineering maybe, or computer science, or maybe public administration, but not political science.

It was not until the early 2000s that there became some recognition of Internet studies as a field. I was actually recruited to be the founding director of the Oxford Internet Institute in 2002, when I was appointed the first Professor of Internet Studies at Oxford. This was a major recognition of change by the university, which had only recently recognized sociology as a field. Over the years, however, as Internet and related studies of new media have been one of the most burgeoning fields in the social and behavioral sciences, nearly every

discipline has begun to recognize Internet studies. Political science, sociology, information schools, and so on have all adopted research on the Internet as not just a legitimate but important area of inquiry.

However, when Internet studies was divorced from the disciplines, it was genuinely multidisciplinary. Maybe you would call it transdisciplinary. I truly believe you cannot study topics around the Internet, such as online voting, from a single disciplinary perspective. You need a transdisciplinary perspective as an individual or as a team. My worry is that the adoption of Internet and digital media studies by various disciplines will unintentionally undermine that transdisciplinary perspective.

— What are the main actors in the (pan)mediated communication model?

— The platformatization of the Internet led the platforms to rise as new and major actors in shaping developments online. However, as the platforms were increasingly acting as content providers and regulators themselves, such as in jettisoning the former US President Trump from social media, their roles as intermediaries came under increasing scrutiny. Far from neutral intermediaries, they were acting increasingly as if they were newspapers or publishers. This threatens to call into question their protection, such as from civil liability in the US under Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act.

In a short space of time, dystopian perspectives on the harms caused by the Internet, such as around disinformation, and the failure of platforms to act as genuine intermediaries, have brought regulators back into the picture as key actors. Prior to the 2020s, regulators took a more hands off approach to Internet regulation, but with new 'duty of care' regulation in the UK, privacy regulation across the EU, and questions over Section 230 or its applicability surfacing in the US, regulators have come roaring back into discussion about the future of the Internet.

— Which areas has been influenced by mediatization more? Culture? Society? Real or virtual world? Technologies?

— From my perspective on how the Internet and related digital media are reconfiguring access, I think the most dramatic implications are social – reshaping what we know, who we know, from whom we get services, and what know how we require. Moreover, I often find that technical change is exaggerated, such as the treatment of VR over decades of discussion, while social change is less visible and less often the focus of research or debate.

— Is the mediatization really transgressive (e.g., according to 'Aufhebung', etc.)? What are the problems and threats?

— Yes, but often not for long. It is common to find that new media, such as the Internet, violates older patterns of communication, such as leveling and

crossing borders. For example, the telephone was often credited with having a leveling effect, as compared with in person communication. And an open global Internet was crossing borders by design.

In the early days of email diffusion, its leveling effect was often cited as a major benefit. An employee could directly email their boss, when previously, they would need to go through a chain of command to communicate up the organizational ladder. This was transgressive, I believe, but it did not last. Organizations were relatively quick to create rules and filters, such as having individuals — a personal assistant — screen email. When Bill Clinton was President of the US, his VP Al Gore frequently used email, but President Clinton was said to be an infrequent user. The folklore was that if an email came in ALL CAPS, it was from Bill Clinton. Of course, individuals could write a letter to the President and receive a personal letter from the President, but email seemed to be a more direct form of communication that psychologically could have a leveling effect. That said, organizations and techies can repair any transgressions, such as by blocking email from the rank and file.

Likewise, an open and global Internet is by design transgressive. In early days of email, for example, it was difficult to call an academic in Russia from the US given the sheer scarcity of phone lines between two huge nations. However, you could email academics in Russia and that proved to be a more reliable way to communicate across borders. However, in today's dystopian climate of disinformation and malicious users, more nations are being to close their borders as an aspect of security but also political sovereignty. So simply because technologies enable some transgressive patterns of communication, policy and practice can be more conservative and undermine these potentials.

— *** What are the main directions for (your) future research?***

— My present preoccupation is a book on the Fifth Estate. I view the Fifth Estate as a collectivity of public-spirited networked individuals who are able to reach others online in ways that can hold individuals and institutions more accountable. Networked individuals can source their own content through search. They can create their own content for a global audience, such as through v-blogs or microblogs or posting a simple photo. Networked individuals can share information in ways that develop collective intelligence about air pollution levels or crimes in ways that can inform the public. They can leak information online in ways that reach beyond their own organization. This collectivity I call the Fifth Estate has become a new independent source of information and accountability in the digital age that is comparable to an independent press of an earlier age, which we have called a Fourth Estate.

In many ways, the Fifth Estate is an illustration of how digital media can be used strategically to transgress old boundaries. But the Fifth Estate is probably not indestructible, and the other estates of the Internet realm, including the press and media, are working very hard to undermine the influence of networked individuals.

The Fifth Estate is not a populist movement, as it can amount to one networked individual like Greta Thunberg making a major difference simply by her photograph in front of the Swedish Parliament being posted online that helped spark global interest in climate change. In fact, autocracies as well as democracies can benefit from networked individuals being enabled to hold institutions more accountable.

Интервью провела М.Г. Шилина / Interviewed by M.G. Shilina

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