

Chapter 15

The Social Media “Information Explosion” Spectacle: Perspectives for Documentary Producers

Friedrich H. Kohle
Edinburgh University, UK

ABSTRACT

The semantic web, social media and the amount of user-generated content continues to grow at a staggering rate. Social Media significantly contributed to the information flow during the Arab Spring, the Occupy and Wall Street movement continue to maintain a global online presence using social media technology. But is the social media information explosion really a unique event in media history? How did story telling evolve into social media? In order to place social media in its historical context and anticipate digital native expectations, we explore the origins of narrative and storytelling from the perspective of a documentary producer. How did past media technologies prepare the way for social media? How do digital natives perceive the world via social media and what do they expect from today's documentary producer? What are the viewing habits of digital natives? What do previous 'information explosions' have in common with social and digital media? These are essential questions for media and documentary producers navigating their way through the vast maze of social media technology and the semantic web, in addition to traditional media.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social media is defined by Kaplan & Haenlein (Kaplan, Andreas M. & Haenlein, Michael 2010). Readers should be familiar with the work of Marshall McLuhan's (1994) media theory and Briggs and Burke's (2009) history of media.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3822-6.ch015

2. BACKGROUND

A physicalist approach was taken to investigate the origins and evolution of media technology and the impact of social media on documentary filmmaking. However, a reductionist explanation as to how social media moves us, remains elusive. A dualist position offers a better explanation into phenomena such as catharsis, but still leaves many questions unanswered. As a result, the author of this paper has come to view social media as an extension of our senses (McLuhan 1994) and consciousness. What exactly is it that touches our inner world when watching a flash mob play ‘Here comes the Sun’ in a Spanish unemployment office? (Carne Cruda, 2012), Neuroscientists can measure the activity of our brain during catharsis, yet they cannot determine what *it* is that moves us to tears during those moments. Here we conclude that the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995) equally applies to social media *content* as an extension of our consciousness, and as such its deeper purpose remains hidden. Yet throughout history and across all media technologies, storytelling has been the key driving factor. Without compelling content there is no social media.

3. INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media are frequently referred to as the ‘information explosion’. Social Media is ubiquitous and significantly contributed to information dissemination during the Arab spring. It continues to be a major platform used by grass root movements such as Occupy and Wall Street. It is swiftly becoming a tool documentary filmmakers rely on during all production phases, i.e. ‘Mon Petit’, (Mon Petit, 2012) which tells the story of wheelchair-bound Albert Casal, hitchhiking from his native Barcelona to New Zealand. The producers of ‘Mon-Petit’ have learned how to apply social and digital media to develop, produce and distribute content. Without social media the production of ‘Mon-Petit’ would not have been possible in this form. Governments too are learning to use social media, but for different reason: propaganda and surveillance. Authorities find it increasingly difficult to censor the amount of user-generated content online when compared to traditional forms of documentary production. Facebook now exceeds 1 billion members (Shaughnessy, 2012).

But is social media really a unique ‘information explosion’? Investigating media history from a physicalist perspective, we draw comparisons to today and put social media into its historical context in order to explore current perspectives for documentary producers. Are we witnessing a paradigm shift or another evolutionary step in the development of media history? Can a reductionist theory fully explain the impact of social media? The documentary “God, Church, Pills & Condoms” offers insight into the methods used to develop, produce and distribute content online and examine online behavior of stakeholders and audiences. A survey conducted among 2nd year undergraduate students at NHTV (NHTV, 2013), University of Applied Sciences, Breda, Netherlands sheds further light onto changing viewing habits of digital natives. Results of this paper provide media and documentary producers with an overview of social media in its historical context, a better understanding of audience behavior and insight into emerging trends.

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