

Analysis of critical approaches on interactive communication enabled by social media

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Abstract

Interactivity is one of the most discussed terms in studies on new media and, recently, on social media. A significant number of authors with a positive approach towards social media, share the opinion that interactivity is the most prominent feature of the new generation of media, which has changed the audience's access to information. Meanwhile, in the last years, the critical attitudes to new social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc are growing. Critical authors view interactivity as a fetch that social media platforms use to gain more information on user behavior and activity, which they, then use as a product to be offered to advertisers. At this point, essential question marks are raised regarding the participatory culture and the algorithmic logic of social media and the transparency of them towards their users. Our study is focused on interactivity, looking at it from the perspective of the two mainstreams mentioned above, in order to address the key questions raised over this issue. The study is basically based on a qualitative analysis, examining the main critical approaches of different authors.

Keywords: *social media, interactivity, algorithms, participatory culture, audiences.*

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Introduction and Methodology

The development of the Social Media and the growth in their usage level are two main reasons why many inquiries in different countries had paid a special attention to this new generation of communication tools. There are two main axes on which is done research for the Social Media; the impact it had created in the traditional media, the professional practices of the journalist, referring in this case to the information production or to the media product and the other axis implies the impact created in the audience's behavior. Our study is mainly focused in an important aspect of communication like interactivity, which is crucial not only for the audiences as the consumer of this media product but, also for the journalists and media themselves functioning as producers of this product.

Interactivity has been considered as one of the main values brought from the technological transformations in the industry of communications and information. The concept of interactivity implies the same kind of interaction between actors that are part of the process of production and consumption of the media product. From the moment when communication and media scholars began to focus their attention on network-based research, and especially since web 2.0 started to become a widespread research topic, the concept of interactivity is considered as a value dividing two epochs in media history. However, as in every moment of media history for new concepts and technologies that have transformed this field, also in the case of interactivity, there have been different attitudes. Seen from this point of view the creation and development of the new media generation or social media, as well-known in the contemporary literature, had given a new dimension to interactivity. The Albanian media and its relation to the audience are quite the same with the international media regarding the adaptation of the new technology.

The study is based on a qualitative analysis that takes into account the main theoretical approaches on interactivity and interactive communication in social media. To conduct the analysis, different authors' views on the subject were taken into consideration. The methodology is based on the analysis of the main approaches of authors who have seen interactivity from different perspectives.

Social media and the transformation in communication

One of the main challenges mostly discussed in the last decade concern with the taking of control in production and the information delivery from the consumer side. Everytime we had faced huge transformation the researchers had raised the question; 'What's new about these changes?' Sonia Livingstone in her work titled "What's new about new media" explain this interesting theoretical approach. According to her, 'the new' is a term which is not related only to time, but it has to do with the changes it brings on society. This is also a case in the media, rather than from the technological point of view, the news that media brings, are classified by the changes they bring to society as a consequence of their use. So social impact, in this case, is in the first place.

Livingstone believes that the technological changes had brought many new alternatives, but they appear in an evolutionary way and not in a revolution one. Perhaps that is the reason why each of us while benefiting from the benefits of a new technology, after a certain period, seems that this type of technology has always been present in our life. For a better illustration of this situation, we can analyze the usage of the mobile phones from the journalist in their everyday professional activity. A young journalist who had started his/her work after 2000 cannot imagine the daily work activity in a period where the mobile phone did not exist. *Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,*

Youtube and the other applications found in the smartphones, are part of the daily job activity of a journalist. For this reason, it is very important from the researchers, to differentiate and orientate the inquiry in the field of communication and media while dealing with questions such as 'questions about the changes' from the 'questions about the progress', and 'questions about the technological changes' from 'questions about the social'¹. According to her, the assumption that the media are most likely to be considered a reason than a consequence of the social changes is a determinist approach based on technology. Livingstone argues that media successful prominence of the market and our daily lives is depended mostly on the social aspect and their usage context than their technological capacity advantages.

The social impact created from the usage of the new communication technologies and media which uses these tools is the fundamental logic followed from the well-known sociologist from the California University Manuel Castells, whom in his book "The Rise of Network Society" treats the communication transformation due to development of the social network.

The social network concept is treated even by the scholar Jan van Dijk whose book is titled "The network society". He considers the networks like 'the nervous system' of our society. According to Van Dijk, this new infrastructure upon which the society is built would be more influential than the construction of roads or people and goods transportation in the social and individual life of each of us. For a better illustration of this effect, Van Dijk presents the concept of 'information highways'.

The network society from Van Dijk point of view 'is a form of society which organizes its relation with the media networks,

¹ Sonia Livingstone, "New media, new audiences?" *New Media and Society*, vol.1, Nr.1, 1999, p. 63

which are substituting or almost replacing the social networks based on face to face communication. This means that the media and social media are mainly shaping the formation of the social organization and what is more important, the modern social structures. All this transformation, according to the author, shows that we are passing through a transitional stage, from the massive society toward the social network. This transformation affects every field of our social activity and has as its center the network communication.²

On the other hand, Castells presents a new way of communication as the main characteristic of the social network, which he determines "self-mass -communication", a further step beyond the massive communication for which had been mostly spoken and written in the last century.

The massive communication system was based on an institutional basis and in a vertical communication model where the message was produced by the media institutions and was consumed by a passive audience.³ Nowadays the people had created their own massive system of communication spreading new ways of communication like; e-mails, blogs, podcasts etc. based on the network. Castells includes in these social media systems like YouTube and Facebook, considering them as new forms of self-massive communication tools.⁴ In this case, according to Castells, the 'massive' element of this new communication is related to the audience level and the content discussed. He expressed that 'self-massive communication' is the massive communication itself because of the internet connection and the social networks, the communicator is able to communicate the message to the audience in a global level.

² Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society*. London: SAGE Publications, 2006, p. 240.

³ Steven H. Chaffee, and Miriam J. Metzger. "The End of Mass Communication", *Mass Communication & Society*, Vol. 4, Nr.4, 200, p. 366.

⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 13.

Castell massive communication is self-produced from the content point of view [the message], is self-oriented from the context approach, and self-chosen from the receiving and acceptance of the message conveyed.

With the rise of mediated communication provided by the computers (computer-mediated communication, CMC), the evolution of communication entered in a new stage. A new interactivity model of communication was possible due to the internet and the new technologies of communication. The individuals interact with each other and with the producers of the messages in an interactivity environment. Interaction is the element that gives the social character to media. If the social concept in the context of communication and media is understood as a symbolic interplay, then this means that not all media is "social". Based on this logic, Christian Fuchs, one of the critics of media outlets and pioneers of critical social media studies, is of the opinion that "it is not social to write a document on a computer, but it is social to send an email to a friend or have a conversation on Facebook".⁵

Network communication founded the basis for the creation of the virtual communities. At this point, Castells presents a new concept which is related to the virtual. Based on the analysis of the first model, he underlines the concept that what we perceived as 'real' actually is perceived virtually.

The concept of the real is always given through symbols. In this way, Castells answers to the critics who consider the new media environment as disconnected from reality and according to them it is isolated from the real world. Keeping his argument, that the 'reality' which the other scholars believe to exist, has never existed before he strongly suggests that we have to deal with a new concept defined as 'real virtuality'.

⁵ Christian Fuchs, *C. Social Media, A Critical Introduction*, 2nd Edition. London: Sage Publications.2017, p. 6.

The new culture of 'real virtuality' in which are included all the digital multimedia communication networks has become a comprehensive mean where are covered all the cultural expressions and individual expression making virtuality an important dimension of our reality.⁶ Taking into consideration the conclusion given by Manuel Castells for the new model of the massive self-communication and the culture of the real virtuality we are able to understand the role of the social media as typical representative of the communication evolution in our time.

The created identities of the social media and the interactive discussion performed in these platforms, by escaping all the physical and infrastructure obstacles have entered so deeply in our 'real' and 'daily activities' that has made it very difficult for us, the individuals, to find the difference between our action in the real society and the action performed in the virtual life. The usage of the social media platforms is related very strongly to our daily activity as individuals. The online interactive discussion shapes their behavior and activity in the offline reality, meanwhile, their outside network image and personality reappears in the network.⁷ The approach given in this case is more applied in the studies, which has as their main purpose the studying of the impact and the power that the social media have in increasing the social and political activity of the society.

This interactive relation between the individual and the social media, which behaves on both sides, make us even more related to the media environment. In some way, the researchers of media and communication had started to see the audience or the individual with a different eye than just a mere 'unlucky victim' who accept its undefined fate or the pre-defined fate

⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 404.

⁷ David Domingo, "Follow Them, Closely", *Social Media + Society*, 2015. p. 1.

chosen from the others. The individual of the communication society is an integral part of the media and he stands within the system. In the same way, this approach is almost entirely distanced from the standpoint of technological determinists who do not take into account the idea of interaction. According to them, audiences are exposed to technology and are affected by it. While researcher Elihu Katz and Alan M. Rubin, who have focused their work on the theory of "use and reward," do not expect the concept of "passive audience". According to the theory of "use and reward", the audience is not a passive receiver but an active interactor with technology, who decide what to do with it.⁸

We still cannot establish a reward for the social media, which have created such a large comprehensive circle, and the new ways of communication, they are offering, but somehow different scholars have tried to create some theories for this new reality.

If we accept the fact that the starting point for this involvement in the media environment is the opportunity the new communication technologies offer to us in order to interact with the provider (s) and each other, then there is a need for a deepening in the concept of interactivity. At this moment we see that the concept of interactivity is closely related to the participatory culture concept.

The theoretical approach to the interactivity and the participatory culture

In Interactivity is one of the most common terms used not only in the studies of the new media but also in the social media. Actually, the concept of interactivity is not related only with the online environment of communication or with the new

⁸ Em Griffin, E. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. p. 126.

technologies of communication, however, it can be said that in the context of the web-based communication has been more evident. Interactivity as a term of interaction usually takes different meanings depending on the context in which is being used. Even though the researchers of the human sciences agree with a certain definition for the concept of interactivity according to three main fields; interactivity from the sociological approach, interactivity as a communicative mean and media and interactivity as an informatics approach. While the concept of participatory culture has to do with the possibility of involving the audience in the information production process, or in the process of forming public opinion. Participatory culture, as in the case of interactivity, is considered as an important element that has made communication through new media a more democratic and less institutionalized process.

In the informatics sense, the interactivity process begins when a human being starts to use a computer. According to the scholar Jens F. Jensen, this approach does not imply the mediated communication between two or more individuals from the computer (a computer-mediated communication (CMC)). At this point, Jensen underlines the changes that both approaches informatics and sociological shares related to the interactivity concept. His idea is that through informatics is possible to have interactivity without having communication, but the opposite cannot be possible.⁹

Meanwhile seen from the sociological approach, the interactivity concept sources from a model which have as its center the relation between two or more individual, whom in a certain circumstance reciprocally behave and acts accordingly toward each-other. As we can see for the sociologist interactivity refer to a certain exchange between two partners involved in the

⁹ Jens P. Jensen, "Interactivity' Tracking a New Concept in Media and Communication Studies" *NORDICOM Review*, Vol. 19, Issue.1, 1998, p. 190.

same social context. According to the sociologist, it is possible to have communication without interaction [listen to music on the radio or watching TV, but there is no interactivity without communication. In fact, the approach to see communication from a sociological view helps us to better understand the concept in the media and communication field. The interaction between the individuals in some way is communication. The scholar Jens F. Jensen had seen that many other media scholars treated interactivity in the same parameters that the sociological approach does. On the other hand, he noticed that in general in the field media and communication, interactivity is used mostly in the interaction sense of the audience. For this reason, it is very difficult to discuss interactivity without referring to the 'audience' term. The audience, the user, the content consumer stands at the center of the interactivity concept. On the other hand, scholars like Fuchs contradict the idea that the interactivity, which is served as an advancement of the position of audiences in relation to the elites of information production, is an illusion, in reality. The idea that audiences are able to interact in the process of producing and distributing information is declined if we analyze the algorithmic logic that the largest virtual communication platforms such as Facebook, Google, or Twitter use. The algorithms used by the computer systems of these platforms direct the activity of virtual audiences according to a commercial logic that serves the interest of the companies that own these social networks. Although our online interaction seems to give us more power with a non-mediated communication and a more democratic information space, algorithms, in fact, dictate the information we react to or interact with. On the other hand, if we stop at interactivity as a concept that has nothing to do with the interaction of audiences, but includes media institutions, then we need a more conventional approach. Jensen gives us a wider definition of interactivity. He includes in this definition the ability of media to interact with the

audience offering a more institutional approach. According to Jensen interactivity refer to the 'the potential ability to measure media for the chances it provides to the users to affect the content and/or the shape of the media communication.'¹⁰

The other authors have tried to bring a more comprehensive definition basing mostly on the structure of the media, the communicated context, and the user perception. Spiro Kiouisis from Florida University defined interactivity like 'the level in which the communication technology can create an interactive environment where the participators can communicate as 'one to one', 'one to many' and 'many with many' synchronized or not, and also taking part in a mutual exchange of messages.¹¹

Meanwhile, David Domingo analysis the concept of interactivity based on the online journalistic perspective and on the relation between the journalist and the audience. According to him if we speak about interaction in communication, then we cannot skip the increased number of the users who are part of the information flow.

In his observance of the online newspaper in some European countries, Domingo notices a kind of struggle between the traditional values of journalism and interactivity. According to Domingo, the journalist has accepted interactivity as an important feature in their work, but practically the professional culture and the importance given to the speed of information, often the involvement of public and their desire to interact, is presented as a problem to be managed from the journalist than a profitable one.¹²

¹⁰ Jens P. Jensen, "'Interactivity' Tracking a New Concept in Media and Communication Studies", *NORDICOM Review*, Vol. 19, Issue.1, 1998, p. 201.

¹¹ Spiro Kiouisis, "Interactivity: a concept explication". *New media & Society*, Vol.4, Nr.3, 2002: 372.

¹² David Domingo, "Interactivity in the daily routines of online newsrooms: dealing with an uncomfortable myth", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol.13, 2008, p. 698.

Interactivity in social media

Field researchers are of the opinion that the specific characteristics and the way of using the medium have a significant impact on the nature and outcome of the communication. (Draucker, 2015, p. 51) Based on this principle, it can be said that the form or level of interaction that takes place in the social media space differs from several factors. First, there are the features that each social media platform offers to its users so that they can be participants and involved by contributing to the production and distribution of information. To illustrate, we can mention the case of Facebook, where the network offers the possibility for users to tag each other, thus enabling them to include other users in communication. Likewise, on Twitter, by placing the "@" symbol in front of the username tagged you can include that person in the discussion. While such an option is possible on Facebook and Twitter, on other platforms like Instagram or Youtube you can not find it. In this way, the specific features that some social media offer or do not provide affect the form and level of interactivity among users within the network. However, the creators of these platforms have left a choice to the users themselves, offering them the opportunity to block the tags. So if you choose to block the tagging opportunities from others within the network, you've made a choice on how you want to use the social network. In this way, you have chosen not to engage in an interactive communication by holding a more observant position. Social media from the philosophy of functioning are the most typical model of "interactive media". The basic logic of these platforms is based on the active user who produces content (information), shares it with others, and interacts inside the network.

Interactivity, in the case of social media, should be seen inseparable from the concept of "participation" or "involvement".

The users of these networks interact by being active as participants and involved in the process of producing, processing and circulating information. Scholars Jan Chovanec and Marta Dynel in their study of interactive forms of participation in social media highlight two key criteria in this regard. According to them, the framework for inclusion or participation in social media needs to function on the basis of two criteria related to the features of the functioning of social media. First, the infinite potential to replicate and respond to a message received via Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Secondly the potential of reformatting the communication from the models "one to one" and "one to many" which are the communication characteristics in the private context, towards the "one to all" model, which refers to the public context of communication.¹³ Social media gives contemporary audiences new privileges regarding participation in the communication process. The audience is no longer simply in the role of a final recipient but presupposes that it has an active role as a producer of information.

While the message can be spread through networks consisting of interrelated individuals, the "recipient" status of the person to whom the message is addressed changes, he or she may intervene in content deeper by manipulating it before conveying it to another recipient. In this way, we have a noticeable overcoming, as the person in the status of "addressee" in the first case turns to addressed for the next recipient. This situation creates a chain in the transmission of the message in social media. Social media are included within the interactive digital networks, which make up the whole range of internet technologies that collect, organize and circulate information in

¹³ Jan Chovanec & Marta Dynel, "Researching interactional forms and participant structures in public and social media", *Participation in Public and Social Media Interactions*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam: 2015, p. 1-23.

the digital space. They, in fact, are a combination of user preferences and automated decisions of those who control these platforms.¹⁴ If we start from the definition of Rafael and Ariel, we can face four main forms of interactivity in the social media: "user with user", "user with media", "user with content" and "media with media".¹⁵

In the case of "user with user" interaction, networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram offer a wide range of options. A Facebook user can enter an interactive communication process within the network with another user by commenting on the content posted by him, responding to the comments, liking, redistributing the information, communicating in real time via "messenger" by exchanging messages in the inbox. Meanwhile the interaction of "users with media" is also possible within the social media networks. A user of the platforms mentioned above, as well as many other networks, is likely to build an interactive relationship with the social media itself or media institutions that build their profiles on these networks. To illustrate this form of interaction we can take the case when the source of the distributed information in the social media receives comments, likes, or criticism from the user or the customer of the information. Likewise, the two other forms of interactivity: "user with content" and "media with media" according to the model mentioned above are present in the virtual environment of social media.

¹⁴ Nicholas Carah & Eric Louw, *Media and Society: Production, Content and Participation*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. 2015.

¹⁵ Sheizaf Rafaeli, & Yaron Ariel, "Assessing interactivity in computer-mediated research". In A. N. Joinson, K. Y. McKenna, T. Postmes, & U.-D. Reips, *Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*, New York: Oxford University Press. 2009, p.pp. 72-88.

Conclusion

The analysis of the main theoretical approaches where this study is based and the confrontation of the two main mainstreams, which study social media interactivity, enable us to conclude that interactivity is a concept that helps increase interaction within the context of virtual communication. However, social media as the main representative of virtual communication offers an interactivity scale based on algorithmic logic with commercial purposes. Conclusions that link the degree of interactivity encountered in social media, directly with the degree of democratization of information in virtual space, should be taken with reservations. On the other hand, the clash of these two main mainstreams does not give us sufficient evidence to deny the positive impact that interactivity has on increasing the degree of audience's involvement in the process of producing and disseminating information. Interactivity provided by social media makes the scale of balances between audiences and journalists as professionals involved in the process of producing and filtering information, to incline on the side of audiences. On the other hand, journalists themselves are aware of this new role of audiences and have agreed to leave some of their monopolistic role in favor of the audience. The study also showed that it is important to understand that the exchange of information or knowledge on social networks is possible only thanks to the interaction between users. It is worth pointing out that at this point, that the perception that the users themselves have for the offered interactivity plays an important role. If users perceive a satisfactory level of interactivity in social media, this affects the satisfaction they receive from usage and presence within the network.

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