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The media consumer in the Web 2.0 era

Abstract

The article is devoted to outlining the profile of a new media recipient, or rather a media user. It is assumed that new technologies, or rather a new way of using these technologies (Web 2.0), contributed to this. The new way of using means unlimited choice of content as well as time, place and way of reaching it; non-linear and superficial reception; interactivity; the possibility of modifying and creating messages. The new user is mainly superficial, impatient and impulsive, receiving non-linearly and comprehensively, more image-oriented than word-oriented, active.

Keywords: media, recipient, internet, non-linearity, multimodality.

I will begin this text with two quotations, outlining the background to the issue to which the article is devoted. The first quotation is from Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz's book *The After-School Media*:

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries [...] Poles are experiencing a profound change in both the type and style of culture in which they live [...]. At least two processes overlap here. One is systemic transformation – a political and economic change, but one with fundamental cultural consequences¹. The other is related to the entry of new media technologies into our lives and the experience of the intense presence of the media in the lives of individuals and in collective life.

I took the second quote from an article by Margaret Kita:

In the second decade of the 21st century, a generation enters adulthood that has been accompanied by e-objects [...] and e-technologies since childhood². [...] This is the first generation to have grown up with networked technologies and in their minds the world of the analogue is no longer there.

¹ M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Media powszednie. Środki komunikowania masowego i szerokie paradygmaty medialne w życiu codziennym Polaków u progu XXI wieku*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, pp. 13-14.

² M. Kita, *Language on the Internet. Recognition of the state of knowledge* [in:] *Language on the Internet. An anthology*, ed. M. Kita, I. Loewe, University of Silesia Publishing House, Katowice 2016, p. 45.

New technologies and a new way of using technologies – both the latest and the old, seemingly tame ones – have emerged. This could not but have an impact on the communication process itself, especially on the mediated communication process, including – the modes and styles of reception. In turn, the new modes and styles of reception shape the one who receives the message, the new recipient. It can be said that, in a sense, new technological worlds create new people. In a sense, and not in the sense of technological determinism, because – as Kazimierz Krzysztofek emphasizes – the breakthrough was not the invention of the computer or even the emergence of the Internet in version 1.0 (popularized in the 1990s)³. It was not until the Internet 2.0, i.e. the introduction (after 2001) of websites in which the content generated by the users of a given site plays the main role, that a paradigmatic shift, a breakthrough, a communication and cultural revolution took place. More important, therefore, seems to be the change in the way media are used, made possible by new technologies. Importantly, this new way of using media is not limited to the new media, it also carries over to the traditional media. As Tomasz Piekot notes⁴: "Press reading has long ceased to be linear and is an individualized, chaotic, unpredictable and – more importantly – verbal-visual process" .

If the main (though, of course, not the only) driver of change in reception practices is the Internet, especially the Web 2.0 version, what features of Internet communication may have influenced the formation of a new type of media audience? I think three basic ones – for the internet is primarily a hypertextual, iconic and interactive medium. Virtuality is also important, but more in terms of the sender than the receiver.

The Internet is not only a new way of forming broadcasting relationships and consuming messages. It is also – or perhaps above all – a gigantic treasure trove of information. A treasury such as has never been seen before in the history of mankind. A treasury in which new information appears every second (the new record for internet connection speed is 178 terabits per second). We are therefore currently experiencing information overload, and evolution did not foresee this amount of 'infomass' and its movement so quickly⁵. Hence the problems of selection, evaluation, processing.

This constant stream of new information shapes the habit of superficial reception. It already appeared in the reception of television programs – when, instead of one or two channels to choose from, there were dozens or more. The new style of reception has become *zapping*, or colloquially "channel hopping" (TV channel hopping), i.e. watching many things on TV at the same time – but inattentively, superficially and chaotically. On the Web, the equivalent of *zapping* is 'linking', i.e. moving from information to information like a game of dominoes. On the most commonly used device today, the smartphone, on the other hand, *scrolling* 'scrolling' is the primary mode

³ K. Krzysztofek, *Internet uspołeczniony. Web 2.0 as a cultural change* [in:] *New media and visual communication*, eds. P. Francuz, S. Jędrzejewski, Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2010, p.45.

⁴ T. Piekot, *Słowo w kulturze multimedialnych* [in:] *Język @ multimedia*, ed. A. Dytman-Stasieńko, J. Stasieńko, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej Edukacji TWP, Wrocław 2005, p. 291.

⁵ See S. Gajda, *New media in a linguistic perspective* [in:] *Language on the Internet...*, p. 60.

of reception. There is even talk of ZSS – *zombie scrolling syndrome*⁶. A metonymic term referring to the use of electronic media is the term ‘thumb generation’, which can be understood in two ways: to name the mode of reception, scrolling, where the thumb is the most important, and to name the mode of response, where a thumbs up (a ‘like’) signifies approval of the content. Significantly, this way of reception has also transferred to the press, which we browse rather than read carefully.

“Channel *hopping*” (*zapping*), “linking”, *scrolling* (*scrolling*), browsing, the user skims over the surface of the message, giving up on understanding its content.

“The modern viewer or listener is a ‘zapper’. He perceives many things at once, inattentively, superficially, without paying attention to the content⁷. A moment’s inattention on the part of the broadcaster results in a loss of engagement on the part of the viewer, who begins to watch or listen to the competition”.

A new media user does not have the desire (and sometimes the capacity) to read longer texts or listen to them. The experience of text messaging or tweeting plays a role here. When a text bores him or her, he or she can move to another media location at any time with a click or a swipe of the finger. On the Web, people wean themselves from focusing on a single text. They prefer to click and open new pages, to act all the time rather than wait. This also applies to traditional media: in more linear media such as television or radio, you can change the channel (*zapping*), in the press you can move to another page. In order to attract and hold – at least for a moment – the attention of the viewer, everything should therefore be short, condensed, economical to use and clear. As the new media user expects fast and attractively provided information, longer forms will slowly be (are?) forgotten. In addition, it can be seen that the media nowadays have a predominantly fatal function – it is a matter of attracting to a particular message and, in the case of the Internet, trying to guide users’ choices. The message should therefore strike a chord with users and move them (hence the tabloidization of the media, the use of clickbait (headlines that attract, the use of photographs and other iconic elements).

Particularly in the case of the online reception model, the most appropriate term for the impact of a message is to remain impressed. Sequentially viewed fragments are more registered and felt than analyzed and thought about⁸. As in the play on words cited by Christian Vanderdorpe : “the surfer experiences a *massage* (*le massage*) from the media, but the *message* (*le message*) remains unclear and empty for him”⁹.

⁶ See M. Kita, *Language on the Internet...*, p. 22.

⁷ J. Janus-Konarska, *Nowe media – nowa komunikacja medialna* [in:] *Dziennikarstwo i media*, t. 3. *Przemiany świata mediów*, ed. I. Borkowski, K. Stasiuk-Krajewska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2012, p. 90.

⁸ Ch. Vandendorpe, *From papyrus to hypertext. Essays on the transformations of text and reading*, transl. A. Sawisz, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2008, p. 151.

⁹ See, for example, U. Żydek-Bednarczyk, *Hipertekst w perspektywie lingwistycznej, komunikacyjnej i kulturowej* [in:] *Transdyscyplinarność badań nad komunikacją medialną*, t. 1.

This superficial reception most often has a non-linear character, which derives from the online exposure to hypertext, that is, a non-sequential, multithreaded and virtually infinite text, composed of nodes (modules) and references (links). It is the links that allow texts to be assembled from pieces, to be completed and changed. The concept of hypertext entailed a complete change in the behaviour of the audience, who should actually be called media users or (co-)creators of the message.

The terms navigating, surfing, drifting, scanning speak of the 'hypertextual' mode of reception. The first three refer metaphorically to moving through the water, while describing behaviors with varying degrees of participation by the protagonist himself. Navigating implies a conscious choice of direction, surfing is largely dependent on the wind and the movement of the waves, and drifting is movement without the protagonist's will. Which of these metaphors most accurately reflects the way a user of online hypertext moves? It depends on the particular user, the purpose of his or her wandering and the terrain over which he or she moves. It also depends – to a greater or lesser extent – on the conventions assimilated and the appearance of the pages (*design*) designed by the author. All terms, however, emphasize the independence or relatively low dependence on the intentions of the web senders.

Urszula Żydek-Bednarczuk formulates this as follows:

The user interacts with the hypertext, he can transform it, combine it with other texts, write his text. At a certain point, the boundary between specific senders and receivers is blurred, Hypertext lives on the Web thanks to the user's activity¹⁰. And it is the user who is most important in the construction of hypertext.

The way things work on the Web has changed the role of the receiver (online and offline) of a message. Admittedly, in a traditional communication situation (including media), the recipient is not just a receiver either; in interaction with the stimuli contained in the message, he or she co-creates its meaning, interpreting the message according to his or her knowledge, communicative competence, expectations, etc. The radical change is that the media user in the Web 2.0 era co-creates the message himself, piecing it together from selected pieces and thus constructs a meaning that does not necessarily agree with the meaning designed by the sender(s). When received in this way, fragments of messages are often torn out of their proper contexts and become decontextualized (and yet the meaning of the message largely depends on the context). The Internet surfer creates his or her own text made up of modules that are inserted into a new context of the hypertextual whole, and are therefore recontextualised, which can change their meaning in unplanned ways.

Stan wiedzy i postulaty badawcze, ed. M. Kita, M. Ślawska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2012.

¹⁰ U. Żydek-Bednarczuk, *Zmiany w zachowaniach komunikacyjnych a nowe odmiany językowe (odmiana medialna)* [in:] *Język w mediach: an anthology*, ed. M. Kita, I. Loewe, 2nd ed., Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2014, p. 29.

Importantly, the practice of non-linear reception can influence the mindset of media users¹¹. As Magdalena Szpunar points out, it is believed that 'hypertext minds' function more on an associative, associative basis, and that impulsive and intense contact with the medium supports short-term memory at the expense of long-term memory.

The Internet user of the Web 2.0 era has not only become accustomed to (co)creating a message. They have also become accustomed to interacting virtually with other users. Instead of being merely the addressee of a message addressed to him or her (in ONE-TO-ONE communication) or part of an audience in a one-way flow of information (in ONE-TO-MANY communication), he or she has become the receiver-sender. As a user of the Web, he can transform himself into a commentator, critic or (co-)author at any time. Accustomed to social media, he also looks for opportunities to express himself, his opinions, in other media. He not only wants to comment on, modify and redistribute media messages, but also wants to create his own messages¹². It is said that while television has made people into consumers, the Internet of the Web 2.0 generation has made people into prosumers (producer + consumer) or *producers* (*producer+user*).

It is noteworthy that broadcasting-receiving relationships native to the Web have also moved – as far as possible – to traditional media. However, those media which, for technical reasons, cannot provide the viewer with a real interaction with the sender, have either introduced quasi-interactive reporting mechanisms (e.g. by publishing letters to the editor, displaying viewers' opinions sent by e-mail or posted on Facebook on the screen, organizing polls, etc.) or have resorted to *face-to-face* communication styles. This means not only the introduction of a large number of phatic signals, but above all a low degree of officialdom and the spread of colloquial language and style in public communication. Interestingly, even written messages are beginning to be dominated by oral strategies appropriate *to face-to-face communication*.

The Internet is both a hypertextual and interactive medium and a multimodal medium – with a predominance of iconicity.

In order to show in the right dimension what has really changed, it must not be forgotten that all media messages are multimodal, that is, they use more than one semiotic code to convey meaning (also to perform various media functions): word (written and spoken), image (still and moving), sound. Even the most traditional medium – the press – is a multi-coded message that makes use of various iconic elements: those that are an integral part of the verbal text (such as typography and layout) and those that function alongside the verbal text – although usually in conjunction with it (photographs, drawings, infographics). It is also important to realize that multimodality does not mean that the semiotic systems used in a given message function independently, existing side by side, on the contrary – a multimodal message is like an orchestral score, where the individual instrumental parts interact to form a whole

¹¹ M. Szpunar, *The Internet and its impact on memory processes*, 'Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja' 2015, no. 2, pp. 149-156.

¹² See J. Janus-Konarska, *New media – new media communication...*, p. 91.

that is not just and simply the sum of its parts. As Bogusław Skowronek wrote¹³: "Media content is not the simple sum of pictorial, aural and verbal narratives, but the effect of their mutual interpenetration and interaction – a trans-semiotic process" .

The phenomenon of multi-coding of messages has always existed (also when we speak, we use not only words, but also paraverbal means, such as loudness or intonation, and non-verbal means, such as mimicry or gesture). What has changed, however, is the greater and more important participation of iconic codes (one even speaks of the ionization of media discourse) and new ways of combining elements belonging to different semiotic systems. This is particularly noticeable in online messages, which both exploit a variety of codes and appeal to different senses: sight, hearing (and partly touch)¹⁴. In addition, we are dealing here with a combination of multimodality and hypertextuality, which some researchers treat as a unique phenomenon called *hypermodality*¹⁵.

Although, as I mentioned, multi-coding is not a new communicative phenomenon, however, the variety of codes cooperating in the transmission and the – sometimes – complicated rules of their interaction have made it possible to speak of a new type of communicative competence – multimodal competence. It concerns the creation as well as the reception of multi-coded messages.

So what is the reception model for the latest multimodal messages? What turns out to be more important – the shape of the message or the competence of the recipient and his or her attitude¹⁶? The results of oculographic experiments show that both the control by the message itself and the control by the user must be taken into account. On the one hand, the layout structure (*design*) is important, which suggests the links between elements and their relative relevance, and the navigational structure, which suggests how to navigate through non-linear text. On the other hand, the multimodal competence of the audience, their general knowledge, their culturally conditioned interpretative patterns, their interests, and their assumptions and expectations of the text are important. If one considers the message itself, it can be observed that iconic elements play a major role. It is these that attract, influence emotions and control reception. The modern media user, using sites such as YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat, watches messages rather than reading them. He is used to images, to infographics, to colorful highlights, to varied typography, to pictograms and emoticons. His attention is drawn to that text which is somehow integrated into the image. Pictorial stimuli are combined with verbal ones in a dynamic and recursive manner.

When writing about the new reception model and the associated new type of audience, it is essential to mention a phenomenon that is extremely important

¹³ B. Skowronek, *Mediolinguistics. Introduction*, Konspekt, Krakow 2013, p. 96.

¹⁴ See J. Lemke, *Travels in Hypermodality*, 'Visual Communication' 2002, no. 1/3, pp. 299-325.

¹⁵ H. Stóckl, *Reading language-image texts? Elements of basic competence* [in:] *Linguistics of the Media. An anthology of translations*, ed. R. Opiłowski, J. Jarosz, P. Staniewski, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut-Neisse Verlag, Wrocław-Dresden 2015.

¹⁶ H.-J. Bucher, *Multimodal understanding or reception as interaction* [in:] *Media Linguistics*....., p. 100.

for media communication. As I have already mentioned, media communication in the age of the reign of the Internet is characterized by information overload. However, the unlimited possibilities of choice (*multichoice*) relate not only to the selection of the content itself, the wealth and variety of which are simply bewildering, but also to its reception at the chosen time, place and situation. This has been determined primarily by the invention of the smartphone and the explosive growth of mobile telephony, to which social networks have begun to migrate. This has led to a dispersion of audiences, who have been given the tools to adapt media messages to their needs. There is an individualization of access and audience behavior. As Tomasz Goban-Klas notes¹⁷: "The notion of an audience as a collection of people simultaneously receiving the same content is becoming [...] an anachronism"¹⁸. Accordingly, Manuel Castells writes, using a paradox, of 'mass individualized communication'. It is mass because it involves a potentially global audience, it is individualized because content creation and selection is individualized.

With the development of media technologies, and especially with the introduction of the Web 2.0 version of the Internet, the so-called mass audience has disappeared and in its place smaller or larger communities of perception (communities of discourse, communities of interpretation) have emerged. Bogusław Skowronek writes about them as follows:

Specific discourse communities are [...] a sign of new forms of community [...] which are formed not only as an expression of permanent communicative ties, but also often as a result of voluntary and often temporary dependencies, strengthened by unifying emotions, actions and mutual exchange of information¹⁹. Similar leisure activities, tastes and values, their own identifying marks and rituals, and last but not least, appropriate codes and forms of communication characterize such groups.

These information communities sometimes degenerate into information ghettos or information bubbles, within which the seemingly individual and personalized media user moves.

New possibilities for media use: selectivity concerning not only the choice of content, but also the choice of time, place and manner of accessing it, non-linear reception, superficial reception, interactivity, the possibility of modifying and creating the message – all this has led to the emergence of a new type of viewer, or rather media user. What is this new audience?

He is superficial, impatient and impulsive, perceives non-linearly and comprehensively, oriented more to the image than to the word, active. Someone who thinks by association, 'links', demands attractive images and sound, is unable to focus on longer

¹⁷ T. Goban-Klas, *Media and Mass Communication. Theories and analyses of the press, radio, television and the Internet*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2006, p. 235.

¹⁸ M. Castells, *Władza komunikacji*, transl. J. Jedliński, P. Tomanek, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2013, pp. 81 et seq.

¹⁹ B. Skowronek, *Mediolinguistics...*, p. 38.

(especially verbal) messages. This characteristic, of course, applies only to a subset of media audiences – mainly those of generation Z, the internet generation. Media broadcasters (and not only them) must be aware, however, that this is an ever-growing percentage.

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