

The Effects of Simultaneity and Modern Aesthetics on the Fragmentation of Information

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies the emergence of simultaneity as a representative outcome of the new media revolution, and hypothesizes that it causes fragmentation of information both when consumers perceive media content and when they distribute them. Case studies involved in this research, assisted with aesthetic analysis, includes YouTube, Weibo, and Little Red Book, which are three prevalent social media in the world and in China. Conducting comparative analysis between the old and new media, this research utilizes Marshall McLuhan's theory of the "global village," the two-factor model of website design, and concept of change in audience. Further, this article evaluates the implications of this phenomenon, and prospect the future development of information fragmentation.

Keywords: *New media; information fragmentation; YouTube; global village.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media simultaneity arises when there is a synthesis of different sensory fields, integrating them as one shared media consumption experience that could be enjoyed by consumers[1]. Unsurprisingly, this concept emerges and evolves corresponding to the development of media from the old to the new. Dating as early as the prehistoric time, cave paintings are the media people already employed for documenting hunting expeditions, religious, political, and educational uses. Back then, the simultaneity of such media consumption is relatively low, as the substantial time occupied to paint on the cave walls is indispensable; Also, the uniqueness and exclusiveness of cave paintings allow the content to be perceived merely by a small amount of people at a time, while it is unlikely to spread. Later distinguished from pamphlets and newsletters in the seventeenth century, newspapers circulate and transmit news of events regarding international trade and commerce in the public sphere, appearing in a regular and commercial basis. The printing press, enabling the movable type, gave rise to not only a widespread distribution of the media, but also a diversity of content in newspaper[2], which in turn enlarged people's vision and empowered a greater amount of people to obtain that information in a shorter time. Now, the new media paradigm is facilitated by all forms of computing, which results in engaging ways that people can synchronize with their sensory apparatuses and the surrounding environment; the concept of simultaneity is realized through more advanced practices such as media

multitasking and multiple media use[3]. Thus, it is deductible that simultaneity evolves alongside with the new media revolution both in its growing utility and the various type. This article is going to discuss the simultaneity in media use under today's context, incorporate modern aesthetics, and explore the mechanism by which it influences consumers' fragmented information perception.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. The Fragmentation of Perceiving Information

This article hypothesizes that the increasing simultaneity in media consumption spawns the fragmentation of information that consumers receive. The ample definition of fragmentation under such context is "the dissolution over time of audience's news exposure," which was once concentrated yet and now widely distributed[4]. As mentioned earlier, one attribute of the new media that is accountable for this phenomenon is that multiple media consumption could be practiced at once. While one device activating various functions may already seem as an axiom to modern audience, the simultaneity encouraged by the inner arrangement of media today penetrates consumer's daily lives, and influences their information perception by fragmenting content in a more implicit manner.

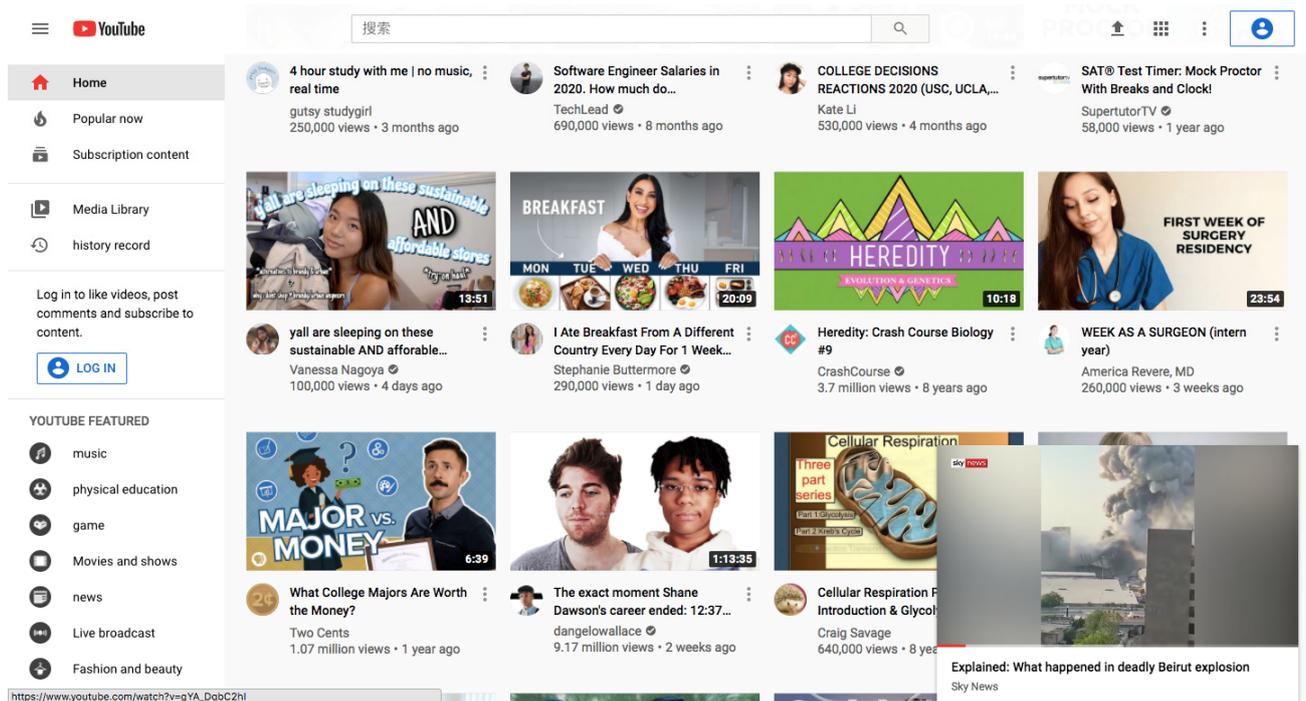


Figure 1: Screenshot of YouTube website version[5]

YouTube, the most popular video-sharing platform in the world, offers a great range of individual user-generated and corporate videos, TV shows, music, and documentaries, etc. Shown by figure 1, which is shot from YouTube online version, the video content recommended for this user is arranged in grids, which maximizes the usability of the limited space on an average laptop screen, and appeals to the rationality of audience as if they are skimming through a goods shelf in the supermarket, choosing the product they are satisfied purchasing. From the first glance, the audience can view at least eight videos' topic in such catalogue all at once. In a microscopic perspective, each icon is composed of a cover of the video, the title, amount of views, publish date, and the publisher, with all arranged densely and efficiently in a square, providing nearly all the basic information that is needed for the audience when browsing the website. Such simultaneity in receiving a substantial amount of information, both the holistic overview of each video and an array of numerous videos, inevitably results in information fragmentation as each segment is designed to occupy equal attention from the audience. More importantly, the small window placed in the right corner of the screen is a function of "mini-player" by which one can minimize the size of a video from originally occupying full-screen into a much smaller size, allowing audience to play the video while browsing other content on YouTube. Evidently, this function assumes audience would want to explore other content such as comments, publisher profile, and other videos simultaneously while watching one that has already been played, which in turn

also undermines the reception of each piece of information.

The second screenshot is a prevalent lifestyle App called "Little Red Book" in China, which also employs fragmented arrangement of content on its page. Rather than videos, this App is a platform where consumers share pictures and blogs about life, including a page where people post what they have explored in the city where you are located. In this screenshot, posts recommended are also arranged in fragments, hence merely a phone screen can encompass abundant disintegrated information. Particularly, the content is placed in two vertical rows, staggered so that the individuality of each post is emphasized, and each collecting enough and equal attention from the audience. Thus, when scowling down such well-proportioned page, the audience distribute their perception to a wide range of segmental content.

However, the two ways mentioned above are examples of consumers passively enduring the fragmented perception. In the modern era, the availability of different media channels urges consumers to actively seek for media multitasking. One way of doing so is to incorporate media using to non-media activities; findings reveal listening to music, communicating on the phone, and browsing internet are some common media practices accompanying others like doing chores and commuting[3]. Such simultaneous combination of conducting media and non-media related practices leads to divisible perception of information as well, inherently fragmenting consumers' attention.

2.2. The Fragmentation of Distributing Information

Unlike before, the advanced hardware today makes generating, editing, and spreading media much easier that nearly everyone can spontaneously post, like, repost content on social media. In fact, this tendency not only makes consumers creators, but also tightens the relationship between individual users, and the link of them to the society. As Marshall McLuhan has suggested, the extension of our sensory apparatuses brought by new media “contracted” the globe into a village where “time has ceased,” “space has vanished,” and the implosion of communication forces people to develop global responsibility[6]. Thus, now is the era when media events happen simultaneously across the global scale, where the boarder of time and space can be transcended by media use.

In such grand flow of information, fragmentation is also attributed to the simultaneity in distributing knowledge. For instance, Sina Weibo, a famous social media platform in China, has strict word limitation of 140 Chinese characters for each post. Therefore, rather than being rational and prudent, the editorials tend to be breaking and volatile in order to accommodate this requirement and attract audience. Such property, in turn, sets a hidden rule that information should better be fragmented than integral at the first place. Furthermore, the prevalent functions of social media today directly surge the trend of reposting content, with comment and numerous layers of edit, to even other media platforms. During these processes, personal propensities are spontaneously incorporated in the dissemination of content, which contributes to the fragmentation of information when they are being altered slightly each time as an individual re-create them[7]. Therefore, an intense, dynamic global sphere is constructed where information are not only widely distributed, but also significantly fragmented and varied.

2.3. Fragmentation as a Sign of New Media Revolution

Information fragmentation is an essential outcome of the new media revolution. The approaches taken by the media in use today could be classified using the two-factor model: the functionalities of simultaneous media use are the “hygiene factors” without which the consumers would feel dissatisfied, and the other factors like the assistance from modern aesthetics are “motivators” that enhances consumers’ satisfaction[8]. Working collectively, both factors leads to the result of information fragmentation, indicating the necessity of it under today’s media context. In the well-evolved global village, audience have changed from the far past. Now, being granted with the rapidity of communication, people can connect with those who are on the other side of the globe as quickly as they contact people who are inhabiting the same physical space[7]. Such connection between individuals is nearly irreversible

that people demand quick and explosive information that can enrich the circulation of information, which in turn diminishes the need of them being accurate and precise. Thus, the fragmentation of information is a necessity in response to the great simultaneity emerged today, maintaining the rapid flow of sharing content throughout the world. Another premise is that the new media stimulates individuality, which allows a greater range of people to voice their opinions relatively freely, and be heard by other users. The regeneration of content is one of the most essential symbols of it. Fragmentation in distributing information developed in favor of mass consumption, where each consumer can express his/her self-awareness and aspirations equally, corresponding closely to the liberal appeal of today’s society[7]. Additionally, people are more likely to strengthen their uniqueness by expressing individual’s emotion in particular rather than focusing on the credibility of the content. Therefore, information could be divided randomly in a variety of ways by which people want to feature their own personality, and entangled in the spread of articles, images, videos, which aims at leaving an impression in the massive internet web.

David Dalrymple once claimed that one of the generalized results of internet to the society is information needs not to be stored and searched manually. Instead, all that could be done by external management of the internet itself. Therefore, another reason why fragmentation is inevitable today is that people rely heavily on the convenience of the searching engine, which degrades people’s needs to memorize integrate information, yet demanding consumers more of remembering important segment of information, and where to access them[9]. Accordingly, people trivialize the information searching process, which requests less time and less depth when acquiring them on the internet; this is a representative change in audience. Today, as the pace of living becomes increasingly rapid, people are inclined to process information during their fragmented, spare time apart from work. Since media is the extension of people’s selves, which have changed, it has to adapt the change in audience by breaking down tedious, heavy information into simpler, appealing ones. The 15 seconds videos on Tiktok is a great example. Moreover, the individuality promoted also serves to segment the media to a smaller scale, where content are more specialized when delivering to a limited group of people who are analyzed to have narrow but common characteristics[10].

After all, the fragmentation of information is not only an effect of the external manipulation of the media. Instead, it is also an essential response to the change in consumers’ impetus.

2.4. Advantages of Information Fragmentation

When evaluating this phenomenon, it is important to match its outcome to the intentions embedded in it. One of the most important benefits brought by the fragmentation in media is that such trivialized content are short yet

containing a burst of information, which appeals to the modern consumers' rapid life pace. Because unlike old media, the simultaneity allows new media to deliver concise and quick information to the consumers, aligning to the demand of consumers, in a more efficient manner. Furthermore, in distributing fragmented information, consumers tend to add their personal thoughts and preferences in them. Though such fragmentation may digress eventually from the original version, a lot of inspiration and creativity may be encouraged from this process, contributing to a more dynamic and self-sustaining environment[11]. Therefore, while the algorithm of the internet avoids attitude discrepant information for individual users, the fragmentation allows news seekers to easily reach diversified opinions[12]. This also promote cultural diversity, giving the minority the opportunity to speak for themselves.

2.5. Disadvantages of Information Fragmentation

There are also numerous concerns about the fragmental information in today's media environment. One is that both the multiple media use and the media multitasking can cause significant distraction to the consumers. Rather than focusing on one task exclusively, people now tend to advocate quantity over quality, which essentially undermines the average learning people receive per task. Especially when associating media activities with non-media related task, though the effects varies among individuals, research reveals that it still reduces concentration and costs tiredness when people do so[3]. Similarly, besides entertainment, online learning may also face the same problem. Since people only invest fragmented spare time, the miniaturized information they learn is likely to be incomplete and not comprehensive enough, which casts difficulty establishing connections with existing knowledge[13].

In the big picture though, the fragmented information circulates in today's internet web could be easily distorted, edited, and faked, due to the excessive online availability for consumers to process the information, and the fact that they blend a lot of personal thoughts in when dispersing. In this sense, the credibility and integrity of information is put at risk, which may lead to pseudo news or cyber-violence. Moreover, the erosion of mainstream media may cause disappearance of broadly shared public concerns, thus weakens the capability of the public unity when confronting social issues; plus, it is empirically supported that fragmentation feeds polarization[14].

2.6. Future Prospect of Information Fragmentation

As mentioned earlier, the fragmentation of information is highly subjective to the new media era, then it is also worthy to predict the future development of it, to

maximize the advantages that consumers can gain and prevent the potential concerns. The technological progress of media hardware has never halted, and the tendency points at the principle to engage media into consumers' daily lives to a greater extent. "5G," virtual reality, artificial intelligence, all of which aims at a faster, simultaneous, immersive relationship between consumers and media. Therefore, it is hard not to deduce that the simultaneity would give rise to further fragmentation of media content in the future. However, such development would also be accompanied by the future change in audience, who might allocate their time more intermittently to media as the newly invented technology blurs the boarder and costs for individual to access them. Nevertheless, the fragmented knowledge should never, and will never, replace the integrate, rigorous ones; the value of such kind must be recognized. To eliminate or prevent the harm brought by information fragmentation, consumers need to either subjectively, or guided by media technology, adhere to intensive reading and browsing when conducting researches or anything for educational purposes. Lastly, consumers are expected to develop advanced ability of evaluating sources.

3. CONCLUSION

Simultaneity is a concept which evolves alongside with media revolution, given it is represented by the simultaneous activation of consumers' different sensory apparatuses. By now, it is no longer simply a phenomenon as a result of objective development, but it is more utilized by media producers to engage consumers in the way they appeal. Such mutual relationship gives rise to greater information fragmentation in today's media usage, both inevitably and unintentionally, having thorough effects on the audience that are alerting and worth analyzing. While such fragmentation of information brings convenience and enjoyment that align with the fast-mode society, it also poses an innovative challenge for human race to navigate the right trajectory towards the future revolution.

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