

# NEW SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: REVIEW OF THE MEDIUM THEORY

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## **ABSTRAK**

*Media telah menjadi bagian yang tak terpisahkan dengan masyarakat. Integrasi ini membawa berbagai perubahan kepada kedua belah pihak mengingat interaksi yang terjalin di antara keduanya. Salah satu perubahan yang mendasar adalah bagaimana media telah membawa sudut pandang baru bagi masyarakat dalam menjalani kehidupannya sehari-hari. Bila dikaji dari sejarah, kondisi ini sebenarnya sudah terjadi sedari media itu ditemukan untuk pertama kalinya. Gagasan bahwa media adalah sebuah lingkungan yang mampu mendorong inovasi bahkan revolusi sebagaimana yang dicetuskan oleh para ahli teori medium. Artikel ini menilik lebih jauh mengenai keberadaan teori medium dengan menggunakan metode studi literatur dan contoh aplikasinya yakni melalui keberadaan media sosial dan implikasi penggunaan media sosial dalam praktek kehumasan. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah pendekatan praktis dengan menekankan pada pembahasan deskriptif. Dari hasil pembahasan, ditemukan bahwa teori medium berakar pada konsep keberadaan media sebagai sebuah lingkungan yang mampu membawa pengaruh dan perubahan kepada kehidupan manusia. Misalnya aktivitas dalam media sosial semakin mempengaruhi kehidupan di luar media sosial, dengan contoh kasus pemilihan Presiden Barack Obama pada tahun 2008. Kehadiran media sosial juga menciptakan banyak peluang baru bagi praktek di dunia kehumasan, misalnya munculnya profesi kehumasan yang khusus mengelola image perusahaan melalui dunia maya.*

***Kata kunci: media sosial, kehumasan***

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“Facebook has changed me.

I remember I once found it difficult to cope with the idea of having a photograph of myself in a public space. I am less private than I used to be”  
(Golds, 2010)

“I tweeted my opinions on the topics covered in *Online Marketing Inside Out* book. The authors of this book read my tweet, followed me, and even tweeted a thank you. This kind of interaction would have never happened without Twitter”  
(Clermont, 2009)

## INTRODUCTION

Media and society have always been inseparable. Hjarvard(2008), in his article *The Mediatisation of Society Theory*, even deduced that media simultaneously have become an integrated part of society. This integration, undoubtedly, has brought issues about changes in societies and media as both sides interact with and affect each other. One of prominent topics covering this issue is that media have generated a great impact on the way people live. The two testimonies above, for example, may help to illustrate how new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter with their “premise of increased engagement” (Hoffmann & Kornweitz, 2011, p. 32) can change their life. Simply by making them to be more extroverts, providing them a link to other parts of the world or creating opportunities to get in touch with someone they never expect before. Hence, the existence of media has played a significant role in nowadays human life.

However, these changes do not only happen in today’s societies. In fact, media have revolutionized human civilization since thousand years ago when people “had no idea about electricity or alphabets” (Hikmah, 2011). History has proved that the invention of communication tools such as printed media or telephone has facilitated people to extend their ideas or even inspired them to transform the governmental system (Crowley & Heyer, 2011 ). Related to that, the idea of the very nature of media may bring major effects within the society has captivated the attention of some communication theorists, who later on framed this claim within a theory, called “Medium Theory”.

This essay will attempt to explain how medium theory has illuminated the professional communication practice. This essay is divided into four parts. The first part describes nature of the medium itself while the second part outlines concepts of the theory by elaborating ideas from the medium theorists. Next, the essay’s third part analyses new social media by using the medium theory’s frame of work. Lastly, the fourth part discusses the usefulness of medium theory within the context of professional communication practice, particularly in public relations industry.

### **The Nature of The Medium**

Literally, the term *media* is taken from the Latin word for “middle” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000, p. 6). Before the age of mass media, media as plural form of medium are simply referred to something situated between a subject and an object. Derived his definition from a historical dimension, Raymond Williams (1983, as cited in Laughey, 2007, p. 3), in his book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, describes media as “intervening substances” or agencies between the messages that are being sent (sender) and the beneficiary of the messages (receiver). In relation to their historical sense, media are also defined through “the capitalist’s point of view” (William, 1983, as cited in Leverette, 2003, p.13). It means that media are also being acknowledged as profitable enterprises, which produce benefits for its owner. Laughey (2007) even sees media as a “lucrative business sector” with advertising as the driving force behind the industry. (p. 4). In short, media enclose various dimensions that help to define their meaning.

For many years, media such as television, film, radio, newspaper and the internet have become study objects for many experts, especially communication researchers and observers. It is also generally known that when those experts discuss about media, most of them usually refer to the content that media deliver or the role of media as an industry. For example, some scholars argue that the television has generated negative impacts on children and teenagers due to inappropriate actions showed by television programs (Anderson et al., 2003; Windah, 2005). Similarly, when people address the “love and hate” relationship between Rupert Murdoch and the Chinese Government, they mainly talk about his media empire in that country (Dover, 2008; McKnight, 2002).

In the other hand, little did those media were being observed as themselves while in fact, media as environments can be significant social powers. Croteau and Hoynes (2003) even support this by arguing that “the very nature of medium can be the key to its social impacts” in the development of human civilization (p. 307). Due to this notion, it is then crucial to assess the media as themselves, in the way that media are important parts of communication process (Hartley, 2002, as cited in Hikmah, 2011). Furthermore, types of media also affect the effectiveness of human communication; in a sense each medium has different characteristics which in turns might generate different impact (Meyrowitz, 1994, 2009). Thus, these aspects of “medium is the message” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 134) have motivated some communication theorists to analyse media as nature and their contribution to human life.

### **Outlining The Medium Theory**

As briefly described before, the medium theory emerged as an effort to study media as particular environments, apart from the content or the message they convey. As quoted from Meyrowitz (2009, p. 519), medium theory is “a special type of media study that focuses on such characteristics of each medium and how each medium (or each type of media) is physically, socially and psychologically distinct from other media”. Likewise, Nabi and Oliver (2009, p. 518) supports this by saying that medium theory is closely related to the field of “media ecology”. The research tradition in medium itself has been started from the 1950s as first generation of medium theorists introduced their notions of medium theory from “a macro view of the history of human civilization” (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 51). The medium theorists believe that the existence of medium within the society has culturally influenced the way people behave since early civilization. Likewise, they also try to convince that the technological development of communication media have significantly contributed to human life. The latter argument becomes the main focus of the second generation of medium theorists by complimenting it with a specified relation to daily behaviour.

To begin with, medium theory started to appear when Harold Adam Innis, a political economist from the University of Toronto, argues that the development of communication media, which is regarded as the key in human evolution, has always been supported by the social and political elites in the society. This means that the social and political powers have been wielded through “control over communication media” since the elites can easily dominate certain media (Innis, 1950, as cited in Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 51). Innis derives this argumentation by extending principles of economic monopolies to the study of information

monopolies. He does it by carefully analysing the history of human communication development, starting from Mesopotamia and Egypt to the British Empire and the Nazis. Meyrowitz (2009) even specifically calls Innis's book *Empire and Communications* as an effort of "rewriting the history of civilization as the history of communications media and their influences" (p. 521). For example, in his book, Innis confides that the development in Rome was encouraged because of the Rome's economic monopolies over Egypt. This situation has provided the Roman Empire's societies with many inexpensive communication tools from Egypt. As a result of availability of low-priced medium, such as papyrus roll, the science development in the Roman Empire was advocated, for instance the invention of geometry and geography (Davis, 1999; Hikmah, 2011; Innis, 1950; Meyrowitz, 1994).

Moreover, Innis also introduced the notion of media bias by suggesting that most of communication media boast bias tendency of time and space. Innis then categorizes media into two types. First categorization is time-biased media such as stone hieroglyphics or epigraphy clay. These media, according to Innis, may last at longer time within the society, but at the point feature limited mobility due to their sturdy form. The second type is space-biased media such as papyrus and newspaper. These media are simple to bring, which in turn make them easily to be moved from one location to distant space but bounded by their short of durability. These two types of media then are believed to lead major social change in the society, such as supporting the practices of governmental system and as well as encouraging the emerge of different type of institutions (Innis, 1951). In conclusion, Innis proposes media as key to social changes through historical point of view.

Another medium theorist, probably the most famous and the only medium theorist that become a media celebrity, is Marshal McLuhan. Being a close colleague to Innis at the University of Toronto, McLuhan adapts Innis's ideas in the role of media in inducing social change among the society and enriches it by adding technological approach. McLuhan (1964, as cited in Laughey, 2007, p. 33) states that "any advanced modern society is shaped by the various media technologies that are available to it". McLuhan uses the invention of railway as analogy of how technology may rapidly shift "the scale of previous human functions" by creating new kinds of work and leisure activity (1995, p. 152). Furthermore, McLuhan (1967) also believes that media play an important part in changing the society's structure of culture, because "the medium is the message" (p. 9). In other words, it is the medium that "shapes and controls the scale and form the human association and action" (p. 8), regardless whatever the contents it delivers.

Following that, McLuhan also adds the perspectives of medium theory by purposing that media become the extension of human senses. He claims that the introduction of new medium to a culture changes the "sensory balance" of the people in that culture. For instance, the spread of literacy, printing as well as electronic media have given people "an eye for an ear" and imploding them into a "global village" with a greater connection (McLuhan, 1964, as cited in Nabi & Oliver, 2009, p. 522). Hence, McLuhan contributes technological standpoints to medium theory.

However, some scholars argue that Innis and McLuhan's approaches in defining medium theory are considered too broad and lack of evidence (Leverette, 2005; Meyrowitz, 1994; Sloan, 1968). Meyrowitz (1994) even particularly addresses the failure of the first generation of medium theorists in providing "a detailed attempt to link this theoretical perspective with analysis of everyday social interaction" (p. 58). Working on the tradition of McLuhan, Meyrowitz (2007) then purposes the second generation of medium theory by combining it with Irving Goffman's theory of human "back-stage" and "front-stage" presentation in daily life as an effort to complete the missing link. In his book *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz explains how those "stage" performances were blurred as result of new media invasion. Particularly focusing on television, Meyrowitz argues that this electronic medium has changed the American's "sense of place", which "sense" defined as both perception and logic whilst "place" described as social position and physical location (p. 308).

Related to that, there are several main arguments proposed by Meyrowitz. First argument is that electronic media have "combined what were previously distinct social settings" into a familiar situation (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 309). For example, in a past, children and adults may know about taboo things such as sex, but they did not usually speak of this topic in front of each other, which in turns categorizes them into different social settings. Television, on the other hand, weakens such settings as it encompasses children, adults, men and women and all other social groups in a single informational environment. It pressures people to "break down old segregation of behaviours and audiences and to treat people of different sexes, ages races and profession to be more alike" (p. 3). In other words, exposing people with informational flow, television has forced people to bring their "back-stage" issues to the front. Second, electronic media have "moved the dividing line between private and public behaviour" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 309).

According to Meyrowitz (1985), compare to print media, television has thrusts the personal, private realm into the public arena. One example is how when the president of US showed his operation scars to millions of people through television. This kind of situation is normally shared only to family or intimate friends in a private setting. However, due to its technologies of information-sharing, television has made us to involve in what once considered as "not our business" (p. 308). Simply say, what used to be them, now become us. Last argumentation is electronic media have "weakened the relationship between social situations and physical places" (p. 309). It means that when people communicate through television, where they are physically no longer defined where and who they are socially. For example, to be psychically alone with someone does not necessarily mean we are socially alone with them. Through television, there are always other people who can change our intimate encounters (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 115-120). In short, Meyrowitz concludes that new media with their technologies have changed our day by day life.

### **Studying Medium Theory through The Case of New Social Media**

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media technologies such as new social media have been dominating the way people communicate. Some scholars even argue that presence of new social media, sets of identity-centric information and communication technologies (ICTs) that enable production and sharing of digital

content in mediated social settings, have significant implications to society's life (Brodsky, 2010; Singh, 2010; Stutzman, 2009). For example, Birkerts (1994, as cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2000, p. 311) points out that this virtual social life created by digital interaction has changed the real social and cultural life. Lessig (2010, as cited in Booth, 2010, p. 134) supports this by weighing on the online culture as it will "spill over into our offline culture", simply saying that we cannot ignore what happened online, because it influences our offline existence.

Following that, Schulz (2004, cited in Hjarvard, 2008) highlights four roles of new social media in generating the social change in terms of human communication and interaction. First, they enable the expansion of communication irrespective of both time and space; second, new social media complement the face-to-face social activities; third, they facilitate a combination of activities to be conducted at the same time and finally, new social media force the users to adapt their behaviour according to the sites' valuation, formats and routines. A prominent example to illustrate those roles is U.S. President Barack Obama's election in 2008. As cited from Langlois et al. (2009), Obama's Facebook groups greatly aggregated 1.2 millions of his supporters during the presidential campaign. Addressed by Hoffmann & Kornweitz (2011) as medium of "direct citizen participation", this public aggregation via Facebook does remarkably magnify the engagement of society to the campaign itself, by extending their social activities or participation such as informing others about campaign events, attempting to persuade donations or taking part in activities related to politics without having to sit down face to face. Therefore, it is likely clear that new social media can be prospective means for spurring social change, with stressing point that these sites play a facilitating as well as mediating roles in connections and interactions among their users in society.

Owing to that, there are two main explanations for this claim to be apprehended. Firstly, new social media enable creation of dense network that extend human communication abilities. As previously purposed by McLuhan (1970, as cited in Berger, 2007) the world now is a global village, where physical distance is even less of a hindrance to the real-time communicative activities of people. Therefore, social spheres are greatly expanded by the openness of the web and the ease at which people can search for online communities and interact with others that share the same interests and concerns. In Obama's case, The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that it is a "record breaking more than 50% of Americans in the 2008 US presidential election used the internet and social media like Facebook or Twitter to share their views, get the news about the campaign and learn more about the race" (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Obviously, these Americans come from different social status, different professions as well as ages, vary from more than 45 states. Here, Facebook serves the people's interest in a platform that enables them to communicate regardless their physical location or social situation.

Secondly, new social media with their quick dissemination of information support prompt interaction in virtual community. It means the information on the new social media can be posted and received immediately. As a result, billions of audiences are able to share and receive information on the same platform at the same time. In other words, the information-flow on the new social media has allowed the people to interact more easily because it could be disseminated faster,

which in turns affect their users situational behaviour. For example, quick spread of info on Japan's Tsunami and Earthquake had induced enormous direct responds from people around the globe. Addison (2011) asserts in one of his reports that once images and videos of Japan's tsunami hitting the web within minutes count from the first wave hit Sendai, thousands of messages were then updated via Twitter where people were sharing and showing of good will, condolences and offering aid for Japan. Simply say, what are Japanese government's concerns now become global societies business. This situation has also proved that new social media become extensions of human life in a time of crisis. Many people reported that Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites became connecting tools for the victims as they "became a lifeline for many when mobile phone networks and some telephone landlines collapsed in the hours following the 8.9 scale earthquake" (Addison, 2011; Wallop, 2011). In conclusion, social media sites are groups of new medium that may revolutionize the society's daily life.

### **Navigating The Medium Theory in Public Relations Practice**

As an important part of communication process, media undoubtedly have played a significant role in communication industry. One of professional communication industries that is heavily influenced by media is public relations (PR) practice. This happens because media are considered not only as channels that enable PR practitioners to communicate with their stakeholders, but also as one of major factors that determines the successfulness of a PR campaign (Frahm, 2010; Wehmeier, 2009). Following that, there are several issues in PR practice that can be evaluated from medium theory's points of view.

The first issue covers the present spectacle in PR practice. Based on the concept of McLuhan (1967) that media technologies are shaping the modern society's life, it is then understandable if development in the media may trigger evolution within PR industry. In fact, it becomes a nature for practitioners in this "multi-billion dollar industry" (Corporate Watch UK, 2003) to be adaptive and responsive to their changing environment (Cropp & Pincus, 2001). As illustration, the presence of new social media has encouraged the appearance of PR 2.0 (Macnamara, 2010a). Defined as new practice in PR that uses "a combination of social media tools that are available to communications professionals to reach and better communicate with influencers and consumer audiences directly" (Breakenridge, 2011), the emergence of PR 2.0 itself has brought impacts for the industry. At present, more companies require their PR officers to have not only a set of traditional abilities, such as writing, speaking and interpersonal skills, but also to equip themselves with social media skills, such as "technology journalism, digital marketing, advertising and blogging" respectively (Macnamara, 2010b, p. 29). Meanwhile, several companies even recruit PR practitioners whose main responsibility is to manage the company's social networking properties (Air Asia, 2010; World Vision Australia, 2011). In conclusion, the medium theory has helped to understand changes in the nature of today's PR practice.

The second topic encompasses the improvement of communication process within the PR world. Based on understanding that each medium possess particular characteristics and such variables may "influence the medium's use and its social,

political, and psychological impact” (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 50), the application of medium theory within the PR industry will help its practitioners to communicate more effectively with their stakeholders. Lattimore (2007, p. 381) even states that it is one of PR practitioners’ important tasks to “know how to use every medium most effectively and creatively”. In other words, the PR practitioners will be able to measure which media that may best help them to deliver their message and assist the practitioner in reaching the impacts that they preferred to have. As an illustration, in order to communicate new policies from the university, PR practitioners at the Monash University may choose to convey the information through different communication media to reach different goals. For example, the university’s Facebook account such as Monashuni2011 (2011) page may serve as great platform if distributing the new policies in a rapid way become the main purpose. This social media will help PR practitioners to disseminate the information faster due to the nature of medium that able to yield an “organic buzz” (Burns, 2009). In addition to that, this new social media will also facilitate PR practitioners in getting direct feedback from their stakeholders. Facebook, particularly, provides its users with platforms that enable them to comment, tag and share the information in seconds, discussing the university’s new policies. On the other side, the PR practitioners may also utilize newspaper or produce official pamphlets and handbook in order to assist their stakeholders in further understanding the new policies. In short, medium theory has helped to comprehend enhancement of communication process in the PR practice.

The third issue deals with boundaries between public and private area within the PR practice. As previously described before, the technological determinism in their nature has enabled new media to blur the line of private and public realm (Meyrowitz, 2009). At one point, the presence of new social media has made the PR practitioners and their stakeholders to be closer than ever. People now can get their “hands on” the company private matter. For example, contributing ideas for the company’s logo or simply voting for a new product’s design (Frahm, 2010; Golds, 2010). However, this thin line of what should be publicly shared and privately discussed might create more complicated situation than it may seem. Jim Macnamara (2010b), the director of the Australian Centre of Public Communications, particularly highlights the privacy and reputation as one of the major quandaries. One of noteworthy example is the controversy around Fergus Kibble. Kibble became a public discussion when he posted critical comments about Telstra, related to “environmental credibility of its Yellow Pages directory” (Mumbrella, 2010) through his twitter account. At first, Kibble’s intention was to express his “personal comments” on the issue (Macnamara, 2010b, p 24). However, the fact that Kibble embroidered his position as an executive of Hill & Knowlton firm within his twitter profile page has made those tweets as if they were the firm’s opinion. This situation then generated appalling implications for the firm’s public relation campaign, by “causing considerable harm to the reputations of their organization and the brand” (Macnamara, 2010b, p. 25). Hence, the medium theory has helped to understand the consequences of vague line between public and private matter in PR practice.



## CONCLUSION

In short, the presence of media had generated remarkable impacts on human development, started from the early traditional tribes to present modern society. As an effort to understand this notion, many experts had performed research on the media. However, more often than not, media were studied only for their content or their function as an industry, never before they were examined as environments. This missing link was completed by some predominant theorists by purposing argumentations based on historical, cross-cultural as well as technological approaches, which claimed that the media themselves as environments can be a significant power to change the society. New social media is an example of development in media technology which brings enormous impacts to today's society life. Based on web 2.0 connection that allow for rapid information-flow, new social media boast several strengths that enable them to generate bigger impacts than any other traditional media. Following that, public relations practice, as a part of communication industries which are closely related to media, is also influenced by the media development. The changes in this industry are varying, from adaptive respond and improved capability to convoluted sphere of communication process.

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