

Original Paper

Medium Theory Research Based on Reflections on the Relationship between Medium and Time

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Abstract

American sociologist David has mentioned that different societies cultivate different concepts of time, in which the understanding of social structure cannot be separated from the development of medium. What kind of relationship exists between medium, society and time, what kind of realistic orientation they have in the empirical world, and how we understand and face this relationship. Friedrich Kittler's investigation of the medium history found that medium manipulates the timeline, and Hartmut Rosa's theory of accelerated society explains several alienation phenomena encountered in modernity. This article aims to understand the role and function of medium in it, expecting to perceive and respond to the alienation in the accelerated society.

Keywords

medium, time, medium theory, accelerated society, alienation

Introduction

Time is so often mentioned and applied in our daily lives that it seems to be a self-evident concept. In the history of medium studies, time as a variable is often been addressed. Theories such as Innis' time bias, James Carey's view of ritual, and McLuhan's space-time perception are all intrinsic to the relationship between “medium and time”. This paper goes back to the philosophical implications of time, and tries to reorganize the relationship between medium and time by means of the closely related concept of “temporality”.

Time and temporality

What comes to mind when we talk about time? The timetable for the departure of a train, the length of a phone call, and other familiar concepts can all be categorized as time. However, it is not so easy to give an interpretive definition of what time is. It is not only a scientific topic but also a complex and

ancient philosophical topic. When we turn to modern philosophy, another important topic emerges, temporality. Represented by Aristotle, the pre-modern study was a metaphysical, existential tradition dominated by linear time, and through the German conceptualism of Kant, Fichte, early Schelling, Hegel, and late Schelling, the thinking about temporality suffered two transmutations, in which the researcher of temporality who was held in high regard was the German philosopher Heidegger.

Heidegger distinguishes time into vulgar time and primordial time (Zhang, 2020). In "Being and Time", he mentions that vulgar time refers to objective time in the usual sense, which flows linearly and unidirectionally, from the past to the present to the future, and constitutes a dimension of the world that is measurable but untouchable, obscuring human existence. In explaining primordial time, he proposed a unique concept of existence - Dasein. "From the perspective of phenomena, the temporality of the origin is experienced in the true existence of Dasein and in the prior determination" (2014). Temporality is thus the phenomenon of time observed and felt on the basis of existentialism, with this being as the subject, and can be categorized into the three dimensions of having been, present, and future, corresponding to the past, present, and future of vulgar time.

In the relationship between time and human survival, medium as a tool bring them closer together: The concept of time has evolved gradually through two stages, natural time and clock time, and clock time has brought about a profound change in people's daily lives and thought. Currently, humans are gradually transitioning to a new "medium time". The emergence of mass medium such as television and radio, which cut complete news events into discrete, inverted pyramid structures, or cut time programs with unexpected advertisements, is making the audience's perception of time become discrete.

In addition to changes in the concept of time, medium also manifests as a new existence situation, which is neither external to human natural existence nor just subjective understanding of time, but a mediuming force that can transcend subjectivity and objectivity, namely medium temporality (Zhang, 2020).

Time-manipulating medium and social acceleration

Friedrich Kittler pioneered the "German medium Theory", which viewed medium as a condition for human existence and emphasizes the decisive role of technological objects. In his investigation of medium history, Kittler found that from alphabetic symbols to simulated medium, computers and data processing systems, medium are increasingly capable of manipulating the time axis. Medium can stretch or jump over the timeline based on its own special properties, while humans constantly adapt to the changes in time structure brought about by medium technology and adjust their experiential lives. Therefore, human society is accelerating on the fast ship of digital medium, and the discomfort between time and human beings also catalyzes the occurrence of social alienation.

Time-manipulating medium

Kittler expels the human being from thinking about the medium, gives it ontological connotations, and

views medium technology as a mode of time management. He believes that culture is accumulated and passed on from one generation to the next, which requires technology to store it. Thus, in Kittler's view, the medium is a cultural technology. The notion that culture, such as philosophical literature, is created by people naturally obscures the role of the medium as a technical object. If inheritance had to rely only on oral transmission, culture would necessarily not be able to be documented as accurately as the written word due to the fact that oral transmission connotations would be distorted. At this level, culture is formed due to technological/medium, and culture is created by technology, which lies prior to the subject as the material basis of consciousness and thought.

In his view, "writing is the first technology in history to manipulate time" (Kittler, 1993), the writing medium meticulously selects, records, and stores the sound chain that originally passed through time in spoken language, constituting a "symbolic time" that is fixed in the space of the syntactic structure of the chain of meanings made up of rows of letters, which can be repeated and, to some extent, can be moved around. In the technological age (from the phonograph to the computer), the technological medium allows things that do not have symbolic to be recorded separately, randomly, and in a hybridized manner, attempting to select, store, and produce material "real" itself, "Real time" is processed as a temporal event (Sybille, 2006).

As Bian Donglei and others (2006) pointed out, after the human concept of time has gone through natural time and clock time, the medium represented by television, radio and later cell phones have created a new time structure, which is based on cyclic time and linear time, and is a kind of dotted, scattered, and molecular motion-like picture.

Presence and temporality of digital media

Time in the medium sense is considered as a structural factor. In the process of news production, time is one of the most important material factors. For example, "regular distribution" is the mechanism that establishes the production and operation of newspapers. Mass media create their own time as a premise, while society adapting to this situation. In this sense, mass media is essentially time-oriented industrial production.

"When deadline approaches, editors have no choice but to cut long coverage into fragmented newsletters," this scenario has become more prevalent with the advent of technology-based media. Newsletters with headlines, leads, and content are sent first, and emphasize that the host will report later or insert the news in the follow-up program content as a means of compensating for their completeness. This means that the audience learns the details first, which is diametrically opposed to the order in which events occur. This fact has a profound impact on the journalistic ethos, as well as on the informed habits of the audience. "As soon as typesetting and news-gathering decelerate, newspapers change — not only the layout of the newspaper, but the style of the writers." This is the theoretical concern of Kittler and Heidegger, that digital media act on time as a manipulative intermediary between primordial time and temporal experience (Zhang, 2020).

In Kittler's eyes, the arrival of digital medium of the computer signifies the end of media history. Representational symbols such as words, sounds, and images, all converted into the digital form of ones and zeros by the technology of the computer itself, had reached the ultimate point in media history. The operation logic of technical media is subtly implied in the structuring of comparison data streams, which takes far less time than "human perception time" (Kittler, 1993).

The seemingly real-time nature of each response to a keystroke is actually an illusion, as any step in computer processing takes time (Kittler, 1993). Space and time are drastically compressed, and human social interactions become instantaneous and transient, creating a technologically mediated whiplash of social acceleration.

Critical Theory of Social Acceleration

All aspects of modern society are constantly accelerating changes. The development of medium and technology gives people the freedom to dominate their time, do many things at the same time, and complete them faster and faster. As society continues to accelerate, people increasingly lack enough time to maintain their relationships with each other and instead rely more and more on mediated technology. Deceived in the guise of technological empowerment "autonomy", modern people are suffering from the torture of insufficient time and a deep sense of busyness.

Hartmut Ros refers to this pathology of modern society as social acceleration, which has three meanings: the acceleration of science and technology, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life.

First, the acceleration of scientific and technological progress refers to the ability of science and technology to accomplish tasks at an ever-increasing speed, which is the most obvious and easiest to observe and measure, and is mainly reflected in the development of means of transportation, production and information dissemination. Second, the acceleration of social change is the acceleration process of society itself. For human individuals at the node of the times, this acceleration is obviously less direct than the experience of technological acceleration, as manifested social institutions, values, and concepts with transformative significance such as fertility and unemployment. Third, the acceleration of the pace of life is the speed of various activities in daily life. Technology makes the time to complete each task shorter, people have more time at their disposal. An interesting example is "once upon a time the carriage was very slow", now you can go to office A in the morning, and set off to travel in B in the afternoon. After the pace of life accelerates, people can only use more efficient technology to handle urgent affairs, which accelerated social change and the pace of life again. Three aspects are repeated like this in this cycle.

Rosa points out that current social structures and lifestyles reflect a "shrinking of the present" at both the structural and cultural levels: time seems to be passing faster, human relationships and even the whole world are becoming more fluid. We are like standing on a constantly moving "steep slope" called society, which requires us to cope with it with a greater degree of acceleration. This constantly

strengthening vicious circle fundamentally determines the essence of modern life.

Obviously, the convenience and scenario-based devices give people a lot of freedom, but also make them lose their own space and time. The boundaries of various scenarios of life and work are forced to compressed and merged, so that people lose the objective conditions of refusal.

Anti-accelerated slow social practices

People on the "steep slope" either actively or passively chase the accelerating society, and when the physical and mental limits are exceeded, people only feel tired and overwhelmed, looking forward to pressing the pause button for themselves.

Alienation in an accelerating society

As Baudrillard said, we live in an accelerated era, where all "real" things rush to exist and die, in the countdown of constant renewal and disappearance. In his book, Rosa defines the new "alienation" of modern society as a state that what we do, even voluntary, is not what we really want to do, and divides it into five kinds of alienation.

First, the alienation of space, modern people move frequently, unable to develop a sense of intimacy and familiarity with a geographical space, and lose their sense of "hometown". Second, the alienation of the relationship between people and things. In the past, the relationship between objects and people was much more intimate and long-lasting, which constitutes our identity to some extent, but nowadays, the elimination and renewal rate of products is greatly improved, and it is difficult to become a part of people. Third, people do something voluntarily rather than actually wanting to do it. Information explosion causes all sorts of distractions when one wants to concentrate on something, so that they give up the idea of doing it.

Fourth, the fuzzy passage of time without experience, and this representation of alienation is especially evident in the digital age. We deliver the original experiential experience such as shopping and travel to the screen, and this kind of de-sensory and de-contextualized experience fragments ignore the subjectivity of the "who am I", and finally cannot leave the temporal memories of these digital experiences (Wen, 2022). Fifth, the alienation of human relationships. The rapid mobility of modern society allows people to meet a large number of people in a short period of time, have a short-lived connection with each other but quickly dissipate with the mobility, eventually can not produce a substantial resonant relationship.

Social "deceleration" and slow practice

In an accelerated society, the dominant time norm appears as "a naked fact, an irrefutable law of nature, the time norm is simply 'there', and it is up to the individual to follow it or not" (Hartmut, 2018). This irrefutability of temporal norms quietly becomes the governance need of the accelerated society, an unnoticed ideology that swirls the people in the accelerated society into a "game of catch-up".

The medium, as a manipulative intermediary, is the best tool to execute this game of catch-up. As technology accelerates, the medium is gradually embedded in people's daily life, becoming a kind of time marker that silently puts people on the acceleration belt. Some people may be aware of this coercion and actively choose to “slow down”, intentionally countering the alienation brought about by the accelerated society with various slow practices.

Some young people directly display the emotion and posture of “non-cooperation”, naming their activities as the so-called Wise Men's Movement, which later became popular on the Internet as “Lying Flat” (Lv, 2021). Some others are nostalgic for analog technology, featuring labels such as “handmade”, “nostalgia”, and “sensibility”, recalling the rate of life before the advent of digital media. Interestingly, slow and fast are not necessarily binary opposites, but superimposed — the highly educated often have easy access to the resources and literacy to understand fast media, but actively choose to “avoid” them.

Conclusion

Acceleration has become a prominent feature of modern society. When people realize this inadaptability, they will think repeatedly and ask themselves: can we get out of this cycle? On the one hand, we try to slow ourselves down to resist this acceleration, on the other hand, there is a worry: if I slow down my life pace, I may not be able to keep up with the new things and information in society, and will I be abandoned by society, can I bear the consequences? The three aspects of accelerated society show that social change and the speed of life pace seem to be the key to the problem.

In the context of an accelerating society, it is inevitable to embrace an ever-accelerating future. However, social critical theory is the coexistence of breaking and building. Rosa's theory of social alienation allows us to realize that the problem of alienation is not unique to the individual, but is common to modern society, helping us to recognize the reality on the one hand, and enlightening us to move forward openly in spite of our struggle and resistance on the other.

It is a kind of idealism to stop pursuing growth and instead to pursue “qualitative” improvement on the basis of the established logic of growth, or to rebel against the discipline of modernism (which is constantly pursuing improvement, development, and accumulation) to achieve a balance between speeding up and slowing down, hoping for an establishment of empathy with others and the world in order to rebel against alienation. But there are some things we can choose to slow down, maybe at least not so fast, which is quite meaningful for the demands of cultural and social life.

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