This is a repository copy of *The Digital Difference: Media Technology and the Theory of Communication Effects*.

The Digital Difference: Media Technology and the Theory of Communication Effects. W. Russell Neuman. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2016, pp. 369.

This book contributes impressively to our understanding of the digital reconfiguration of the communication ecology. Neuman offers us a thoughtful, sophisticated, empirically rich analysis of the ways in which the mediation of human relationships can no longer be explained in terms of the long-established media effects paradigm. It falls into three main parts.

The first (comprising the first two chapters) offers an insightful account of the development of media effects theories and the challenges to most of their underlying assumptions presented by the emergence of a radically expanded media flow. Neuman engages critically with the principal axioms of pre-digital media effects theory, most notably the preoccupation with measuring the strength of a limited range of powerful stimuli. In an environment of digital media abundance, in which effects are more likely to emanate from exposure to a fragmented constellation of inter-textually complex and polysemically ambiguous sources, public meaning is rendered unstable. While early media effects researchers were concerned about the dangers of over-determined effects, the situation now is one of radical equivocality. There is a sense in which public meaning has become tribalised.

In chapters 3, 4 and 5 Neuman explores the micro-ramifications of this greater interpretive variability. His refined analysis is organised around three concepts: profusion, polysemy and polarisation: there are more sources of authoritative knowledge to choose from; more opportunities for subjective resymbolisation; and more ways of reinforcing beliefs by ignoring unwanted information and remaining within niches of ideological seclusion. The consequences of each of these individualising tendencies for the public domain raises a fundamentally important normative challenge:

> The psychology of individual humans is tribal in nature. Humans are prone to polarization, to the interpretation of polysemic speech in different ways resulting from their diverse social identities and lifeworld experiences. Miscommunication and noncommunication result. The challenge to the establishment of collective norms and institutions in the structuring of communication and the public sphere at the social level is to take that component of human nature self-consciously into account – to institutionally and culturally compensate in response to the impulse toward tribal polarization. (p.290)

The final part of this book (chapters 6 and 7) responds to this policy dilemma. Neuman begins by interrogating the 'marketplace of ideas' metaphor and exposing the structural dangers facing any commercialised system of public knowledge and debate. This leads him to ask whether the same risks of corporate hegemony apply to the digital media ecology. He seems optimistic: 'The Internet provides the opportunity in the public sphere for all who had only the opportunity to listen the opportunity now to speak, as well' (p.247). Neuman goes on to say that 'Perhaps the most exciting structural innovation in the new media environment is the explosion of collaborative and social media that permit new forms of networking and information sharing and the structured aggregation of content' (p.260). On p.254 he asks whether such embryonically democratic developments are capable of challenging the long-standing dominance of the media marketplace. He answers that this depends 'on how we as a community of concerned public citizens respond to this critical juncture in public policy and commercial practice'. On p.305 the call for fresh policy thinking is even more emphatic:

> … the revolution of digital networks and media provides us with a most welcome opportunity to rethink how we systematically study and how, accordingly, we might self-consciously structure the practices, institutions and norms of the public sphere to better serve important values and ideals.

Alas, I am not convinced that this opportunity to rethink is taken up in the pages that follow. Neuman most certainly sets out a hugely valuable critique of pre-digital media effects theory; clearly identifies significant fractures within the digitally-enabled public domain; and rightly urges media scholars to think afresh about the policy implications of their work. But he does not offer anything close to a proposal – or set of proposals – aimed at consciously restructuring the practices, institutions and norms of the public sphere. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the opacity of the final part of Neuman's call to arms: 'to better serve important values and ideals'. What sort of values and ideals? Determined by whom? Implemented by whom? Given the implicitly normative thrust of Neuman's generally compelling analysis, it would have been good to hear more from him about how the norms of public communication might themselves be arrived at through democratic agency. What are the human capabilities that a democratic public sphere should generate and sustain?

This book is essential reading for anyone who believes that the foundational assumptions of media effects theory are directly applicable to the contemporary media ecology. As a comprehensive and insightful account of the problematics of contemporary public communication, this should be on all student reading lists. As a critique of old policy assumptions and a call for fresh thinking, it is both suggestive and frustrating.

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