Mass media communication at the beginning of the twenty-first century

Dimensions of change

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This paper identifies and analyses current dimensions of change in mass media communication and in particular changes in mass media news transmitted via the Internet. In comparison with traditional media such as newspapers, Internet mass media products rely increasingly on a hypertext structure and on the integration of different channels of communication (hypermedia). In addition, they seek to convey the impression of personal, almost private communication. Audiences are carefully targeted, and media products can be customised to the personal needs and preferences of individual consumers. Online news media are also more interactive, requiring choices by users who activate some links and ignore others, and allowing users to "talk back" to the producers and interact with other users. The life span of information is changing as information is published as news in increasingly shorter time spans. Reception patterns are also changing: television and radio broadcasts available on the Internet can be received in a selective and asynchronous manner, like newspapers. Finally, online media differ from their traditional predecessors in their immediate world-wide availability, and in a reduction in the fixity of their texts.

1. Introduction

At present we are witnessing an information revolution whose significance parallels and perhaps even surpasses that of the information revolution caused by the printing press in the fifteenth century. The invention of the printing press was one of the decisive factors that made mass communication possible, first with pamphlets, later with regular news sheets and then with daily newspapers.
The printing press made it possible to produce a large number of identical copies of the same text. Previously every text, even if it was a copy of another text, was in a sense unique and created individually. Mass production of texts created large numbers of identical texts, and thereby gave the text as such permanence and fixity.

The first half of the twentieth century brought television and radio as new forms of mass media communication with significantly different reception patterns. Radio and television broadcasts are consumed at the same time as they are broadcast. This has consequences for the choices available to the recipients. While newspaper readers can skim the headlines of their newspaper copy and read individual articles or parts of individual articles according to their own preferences, television spectators and radio listeners are limited to the choices presented to them. They can of course opt out, switch off their receiver or at least their attention. Or they can change to another channel. But they cannot turn to the sports news first, skip the soccer results and turn immediately to the latest news on cycling.

More recently, computer technology and the Internet have given rise to new forms of communication and new ways of disseminating information that combine text and broadcast channels. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many newspapers, radio and television stations are presenting themselves on the Internet. They provide information about themselves, and they offer a selection or even their entire output of texts or broadcasts in the new electronic medium. At first sight, it may appear that the new medium changes very little. Newspapers often publish their articles on the Internet without any significant changes from the traditional print version. Radio stations offer a live stream of their normal programme or sound files of selected programmes. Television stations generally offer a selection of video clips from their programmes. However, a closer look reveals that some important changes are taking place.

These changes can be subsumed under six headings. First, there is the aspect of hypermedia, that is to say the integration of different channels of communication such as written texts, still pictures, motion pictures and sound. Second, the news media are becoming more personal and more narrowly targeted at specific audiences, and some media products can be tailored to the needs and preferences of individual consumers. Third, there is a new level of interaction and interactivity in online news media. Fourth, the traditional life span of information, e.g. the twenty-four hour cycle of replacing one newspaper issue with the next, is changing in significant ways. Fifth, on the Internet the synchro-
nous and linear reception pattern of traditional radio and television pro-
grammes is being replaced by an asynchronous and selective reading pattern
that is typical of newspapers. And finally, the availability of media products is
no longer subject to the same physical restrictions as traditional media, and the
products, in particular media texts, are losing their fixity because their electron-
ic publication format makes them susceptible to immediate modifications and
changes wherever they are received. In many cases these tendencies can already
be observed in the traditional news media, but the online media either accentu-
ate and accelerate these tendencies, or give them new dimensions.

In what follows, I first sketch some of the effects of the invention of the
printing press in the fifteenth century and of the advent of periodical news
publication in the seventeenth century. I then identify significant present-day
diachronic developments in mass media communication, focusing not on the lin-
guistic microstructure but on global communication patterns. As such, this paper
is an extension of what Fritz (1995:470) calls the third stage in the development of
historical dialogue analysis, i.e. the study of the evolution of dialogue forms. While
the first stage analyzes individual historical texts and the second stage compares
earlier forms of dialogue with later forms of dialogue, the third stage analyzes
the diachronic development itself. From the many questions that Fritz lists as
relevant for such an endeavour, this paper tackles only the most modest one by
trying to identify dimensions of change that are taking place at the moment and
— at least partly — as a result of the information revolution caused by the
computer and the Internet (see also Jucker 2000b:45–47).

2. Gutenberg, pamphlets and early newspapers

Mass media communication in a modern sense would not have been possible
without the printing press. Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press and of
movable type between 1450 and 1455 constituted a watershed in the dissemina-
tion of knowledge and information. Before that date every text was in a sense
unique. Even if it was a copy of another text, it had to be created individually by
a scribe who was liable to change — wittingly or unwittingly — some minor or
even major aspects of the text (Herring, van Reenen, and Schosler 2000). With
the introduction of printing, it became possible to produce large numbers of
absolutely identical texts. The production process became cheaper and more
accessible to wider ranges of society. Mass media became possible.
Mass media communication differs from other forms of communication in several respects. First, it is communication from one sender to a large audience, that is to say it is communication from one to many. In a modern context the situation is more complex in that the sender is generally not one single individual but usually an institution with a complex structure and a distribution of tasks (see Bell 1991: ch. 3). Second, mass media communication is characterised by an asymmetry between sender and receiver, that is to say, it can largely be described as one-way communication. Sender and receiver stick to their roles and do not take turns as in normal face-to-face communication (but see Morris and Ogan 1996). A third aspect that is typical of many forms of mass media communication is periodicity. Newspapers, weekly magazines, radio or television broadcasts are all regularly replaced by subsequent issues or broadcasts. The final aspect is the accessibility of mass media products, which are available to the public at large (see Jucker 1995; Schröder 1995:1).

Newspapers were not the first form of mass media, of course. Their forerunners were occasional news sheets that were published to report on some natural disaster or special historical event, such as a war (see Glüer 2000), and political and religious pamphlets in which controversies were debated, often in a highly polemical fashion (see Bach 1998; Claridge 2000). The first English periodical newspapers appeared in the early seventeenth century. Sommerville points out the important distinction between occasional news, which “may be one of humanity’s oldest pleasures” (1996:17) and daily news, which is a comparatively recent invention. In fact, for him the news revolution dates to the time when news became regular and periodical. That meant that the producers of mass media publications no longer waited for something important to happen before they published a newsheet. Instead, they had to go out and look for news in order to fill each new issue, because every issue had to be of roughly equal length and had to appear to be worth its price for the readers (see also Diller 2000).

These early news publications were called “corantos” or “newsbooks”, depending on the size of the publication (see Brownlees 1998, 1999; Fries 2001; Xekalakis 1999). The first corantos in English were produced in Amsterdam as translations of Dutch corantos. Both corantos and newsbooks consisted of sequences of letters from correspondents, who sent their dispatches from the place of their posting in important cities such as Rome, Venice, Prague, Vienna, Cologne and Paris. There was no other organisational principle in the newspaper except for the headings for each individual correspondent (Brownlees 1998, 1999).
From Prage the 17 herof
There are againe some more peeces of Ordinance caused to be fetched out of
the Magazin / and brought into divers places of the Castle / the same shall also
be done in the Cittie / the reason is / because they feare for an uproare when
the execution shall be. In like manner the Generall Saffars Horsemenn are
arived here / beeing 7. Companies strong / well Armed Men / alone they have
no long gunnes or Cerbyners / they are inquarted in the old and new citty /
it is said / that the Execution shall be upon Munday or Tuesday next / which
being ended the Emperours Commissioners shall goe from hence into
Moravia / and there doe the like Execution.
The Spanish Souldiors in Moravia doe Tyrannize very much over the Citizens
and Inhabitants.
The Souldiors / which lye here / would yester night have savaged the Jewes Cittie
(or that part of Prague / wherein the Jewes dwell) but an Agreement is made /
and the Jewes must give the Governour of Walsteyn a great som of Money.
The Governour Frenk goeth dayly here up and downe / without any watch / he
will sett out an Apology against Mansvelt. [9 July 1621]
(quoted by Brownlees 1999:52)

As a result of publishing on a periodical schedule, events had to be presented as
being important. Even if nothing happened that earlier would have warranted
the publication of a newssheet, a periodical publication had to create the
impression of reporting important events, and every issue had to create
anticipation for the next issue. There was no time to wait for the conclusion of
long lasting events, such as criminal or political investigations. Every new issue
had to have a narrative closure and the superficial appearance of completeness.
The news had to be reported in terms of facts and in an atomic form (see
Sommerville 1996:8).

As I point out in Section 6 below, the periodicity of news reporting is one
of the basic dimensions along which mass media communication is changing
today. The life cycle of information is getting increasingly shorter. The steady
flow of events is cut up in increasingly smaller and smaller atoms of informa-
tion that replace each other at an ever more rapid pace.

3. Hypertext structure and hypermedia

The overall increase of information contained in modern newspapers is often
accompanied by an increasing modularisation of information. Newspaper
articles are becoming shorter, and longer stories are broken up into several
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separate articles. The front page of many newspapers consists of articles that are only started on that page and continue elsewhere in the newspaper. Add to this the use of colour, and the result gives the impression of a jigsaw puzzle. Thus we could speak of “Lego-journalism” (Bucher 1996: 32), or perhaps jigsaw-journalism. The front page is no longer intended to be read in its entirety. It is a means of orientation to the rest of the newspaper.

These information modules are linked to one another in various ways. They form a hypertext, that is to say a network of textual elements and other information units that are interlinked. The individual brief introductions on the front page of a newspaper, for instance, are linked to longer articles inside the newspaper. In fact, the information units often do not consist of texts, but of pictures, charts, diagrams and the like. To the extent that the network of information units includes not only texts but also other media, we may speak of hypermedia rather than hypertext.

Online newspapers take these developments to new extremes. The entry page of an online newspaper is much smaller than the front page of a printed newspaper, with less room for texts. Snippets of information on the front page are linked to longer texts and other information units.

Blum and Bucher argue that we should not overestimate the significance of the hypertext structure of online newspapers because the modularisation, the hypertext structure and the integration of non-textual elements are already features of printed newspapers.

Figure 1 reproduces the front page of the online version of the *Los Angeles Times* of November 1, 2001. A large portion of the window is taken up by links to various sections of the newspapers. An entire column on the left side and a horizontal bar just below the masthead consist of such links. The top of the window contains the masthead on the left and an advertisement on the right. The remaining square is filled by a fairly large picture with a brief caption and three headlines with lead paragraphs of one or two sentences each. Thus the visible frontpage contains very little text. With the settings chosen for this screen shot, the text cannot even be read properly because part of it is cut off.
Online newspapers introduce significant changes in two respects. Electronic links differ from mere references to other information units in that they actually integrate the linked element into the original element. The target of the link is a mere click away. The reader does not have to turn the pages and scan a page for the appropriate textual element. Electronic links can also lead directly to material that is not part of the newspaper as such. A newspaper that summarises the inauguration speech of a new president can include a link to the full text of the speech that is stored on the official home page of the government, and thus include the full text in virtual reality. A printed newspaper can also give an indication of where the full text of this speech can be found, but in actual fact it would be much more difficult for readers of the printed newspaper to follow up such references (see also Rada 1999: ch. 3 for a careful assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of print and online newspapers).
In addition, online newspapers include not only pictures and charts but also animation, sound files and film clips. We seem to be witnessing a merging of three traditionally disparate media: print, radio and television. While online newspapers include sound files and film clips, home pages of radio stations and television stations include a large amount of written texts, still pictures and other elements that are more typical of newspapers. Access to the film clips is provided by written texts.

In this way, cyber television stations and online newspapers resemble one another more closely than traditional television stations and print newspapers. This distinction might become even more blurred in the foreseeable future, such that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish the two. This stage has not yet been reached, however. Television stations still tend to think in the format of movies, newspapers in the format of written texts.

4. Personalisation, audience targeting and customisation

By the term “personalisation”, I refer to the more personal approach taken by many news media. This subsumes, for instance, the use of linguistic forms that directly address the audience (imperatives, questions, pronouns of address, etc.). It also subsumes new formats in the way of presenting the news in so-called infotainment programmes. There is no longer a single newscaster who reads the news. Instead, two newscasters, usually a man and a woman, present the news and occasionally interact, introducing some humour in the process. They create the feeling for the audience of being part of a circle of old friends who exchange not only information but also jokes. Personalisation, therefore, is not a characteristic feature of online media but a more general trend in many branches of traditional media (cf. Jucker 2000a).

The term “audience targeting” refers to the attempts of media channels to cater to specific audiences. Traditionally many media channels tried to cater to large sections of a society, perhaps even the entire society in the area of distribution. To some extent this is still true for some publicly owned television channels, whose brief it is to provide programming for “everybody”. With the augmenting number of media channels, both print and electronic, such an aim is increasingly unrealistic. Audiences are faced with such a vast number of media channels and such vast amounts of media output that it is impossible to stay completely informed. This seems a contradiction, but if audiences lose their orientation in the welter of information, they are no longer receptive to new information.
News media, therefore, cater more and more to increasingly smaller audiences, that is to say to special-interest groups, such as people interested in history or crime (television stations), bird watching, cycling, computers, house building, etc. (magazines). Newspapers and television stations organise their information output into easily recognisable sections or special interest broadcasts targeted at a subsection of the larger audience. Thus, for instance, a newspaper reader can turn directly to the sports section and ignore the financial news.

The culmination of this tendency to cater to increasingly smaller audiences with specially designated areas of a newspaper may be observed in the personal ads section. In these pages, it is not the newspaper as such which communicates with the newspaper readers, but a single person who publishes an ad that is directed at a very limited number of people, even if it is read by many more. It may be directed at just those people who want to buy a second-hand car of a certain make, a certain age and at a certain price; at those people who are looking for a holiday cottage in the south of France; or at those female readers who wish to make contact with a good-looking middle-aged male reader for romantic weekends. Ultimately an ad may even be directed at one single person only, such as search ads (“I saw you on the train to Liverpool last Monday. Please get in contact!”), or Valentine greetings, which may be so cryptically worded that only one single reader will understand the message and feel addressed.

I have used the term “audience targeting” to refer to the attempts by the news media to address more or less well-defined subsections of the public at large. The term “customisation”, on the other hand, refers to possibilities for the audience to create a media product of their choice. Very few newspaper readers read their daily newspaper in its entirety. They read some articles in detail, skim some briefly and completely ignore others. Regular readers and subscribers of specific newspapers know the structure of their newspaper and often turn to the specific parts of their paper that interest them most, for instance the financial news, the sports pages or the cartoons. But all readers and subscribers purchase the entire paper, even if they regularly ignore entire sections of it. Against this background, there are attempts to tailor newspapers to specific readers. Many newspapers offer different local editions which share the national and international news with their parent editions, but differ in terms of the local news. A more extreme version would be newspapers that are tailor-made for individual readers.
Some online newspapers in fact offer users the possibility to set up their own profiles, e.g. the *Los Angeles Times*. That means that the readers can select those sections of the newspaper they are interested in, and only receive (have access to) those parts. The selection of articles for such a reader is much smaller and at the same time much more relevant, because it only includes items that correspond to the profile of interest of that reader.

To mention another example, the Internet portal and search engine *yahoo.com* offers users the possibility to create their own “front page”. Users can choose the layout, the colour scheme and the contents of this front page from a large range of options and topic modules. Such a front page offers the users links to up-to-date articles from several international news agencies and newspapers within the chosen topic areas. In addition, the front page may also contain brief weather summaries of exactly those locations around the world chosen by the users, listings of selected television programmes, the users’ personal horoscopes and so on.

Such opportunities provide a compromise between the wealth of information that is available and the limited capacity of individuals to absorb all of that information. The producers of news media are no longer the gatekeepers who decide which news items will be integrated and which ones will be left out. The users themselves can be their own gatekeepers.

In addition, as O’Sullivan (1999) points out, the boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication are becoming increasingly blurred on the Internet. Faster computers, faster connections, powerful computer programs and affordable hardware such as webcams make it possible for private individuals to become “broadcasters” and address a potential audience of millions. O’Sullivan mentions Jennifer Ringley, who started in 1996 to feed a 24-hour live video of her apartment, as one of the earliest examples of what he calls “personal broadcasting”.

5. Interaction, interactivity and feedback

Mass media communication is generally, and almost by definition, one way-communication (Morris and Ogan 1996). It is communication from a single source to a large and diverse audience. At first sight, the possibilities for readers of a newspaper or spectators of a television news bulletin to react to the messages that they receive appear to be very limited. The audience seems to be confined to the role of a passive recipient. However, there have always been
some levels of interaction, and these, too, are reaching new heights on the Internet. I distinguish three different levels, for which I introduce terminological distinctions. First, the readers, viewers or listeners interact with the medium (printed newspaper, television set, radio or computer) to access information. For this aspect I use the term “interactivity”. Second, the readers, viewers or listeners may interact with the producers of the media product or with other recipients. For this aspect I use the term “interaction”. This distinction is based on a suggestion by Storrer (1999). Third, media producers try to access the interests and the reading, viewing or listening patterns of their audiences. For this aspect I use the term “feedback”.

With regard to interactivity, the earliest newspapers, as pointed out above, consisted of dispatches from correspondents (Schröder 1995; Fritz and Straßner 1996; Brownlees 1998, 1999; Fritz 2001). There was no other structuring principle apart from the headings of each letter that indicated the place of origin of each dispatch. It was only in the twentieth century that newspapers started to provide headlines and other guides to a selective reading process (Simon-Vandenbergen 1981; Bucher 1996:57; Schneider 2000:51–52). Today there are very few newspaper readers who read every single issue of a newspaper in its entirety. It is more normal to pick and choose individual texts in a newspaper on the basis of headlines, pictures, placement on a page and so on. In this sense, readers play an active role when they read their newspapers (Bucher 2001:140–141). For online newspapers the selection process assumes a new quality. Readers have to “communicate” their choices to the medium that they are reading by clicking on appropriate links. The computer reacts by displaying the desired information unit. The reader interacts with the text, or rather the computer on which the text is stored or displayed.

In addition, the news media are trying to open up communication channels for the audience to talk back to them (Jucker 1995; Jucker 2000a). This is the level of interaction. Letters to the editor are a well-known means for the audience to voice its opinions. Radio stations produce phone-in or talk-back programmes in which individual listeners can talk to radio presenters, journalists or invited guests. There are telephone hotlines for the audience to alert a newspaper or a radio station to events that (in their opinion) should be reported on. Sometimes opinion polls are conducted among the audience via telephone. The members of the audience are asked to ring one of two or more telephone numbers depending on their personal opinion on a given issue. On the Internet, the range of possibilities for interaction with the producers of the media product or with other media recipients is broader and easier to activate.
It takes less effort to click a “mailto” link in order to write a letter to the editor than it does to write a traditional letter; and it takes only a click to participate in an opinion poll (see Figure 2).

In addition, media audiences are given opportunities to interact among themselves. Many media sites offer discussion boards and chats for their audiences. A discussion board is a site where anybody can post questions and opinions. Other people can read these contributions and react to them by sending their own opinions. Chats are sites where participants exchange text contributions in real time in a kind of immediate interaction. Such chats can be moderated or unmoderated. In moderated chats, a convenor screens each contribution before it is passed on. In unmoderated chats, no such intervention takes place (see Figure 3).

These forms of interaction depend on the motivation of individual members of the audience to participate and to make their voices heard. The media producers, however, are also interested in the opinion of the silent majority. They are interested in systematic feedback from their audiences, which they can try to probe via research questionnaires, elaborate audience investigations and viewing figures. On the Internet, audience research has a new quality. Media producers no longer rely on questionnaires in which researchers establish what the audience claims to be interested in. Instead, the media producers get the results directly in the form of click rates for individual parts of their products. The result is not what people tell a researcher, but what they do when they feel unobserved.

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Figure 2. Online “opinion poll” at cnn.com (October 31, 2001)
6. The lifespan of information

News information has a clearly defined life span that depends on the type of news media (Jucker 1995: 4). In a weekly newspaper or magazine, the information is replaced once every seven days. A daily newspaper becomes obsolete the moment the next issue appears twenty-four hours later. In the electronic media, news cycles are even shorter. News is replaced or partly replaced every few hours or — on news channels such as CNN or BBC World — every hour. Every new news bulletin updates or replaces the information of the previous bulletin.

For online media, the concept of the news cycle does not exist to the same extent as for the more traditional media. On the one hand, new information can
be added much more quickly. Online newspapers can integrate new articles whenever they are ready, regardless of publishing deadlines. There is no delay until the publication of the entire newspaper. Many online newspapers even have news tickers that provide breaking news in increasingly shorter intervals.

But the life cycle of information does not become shorter only because of the possibility of continuous publication. Perhaps a more significant difference is the fact that information does not become obsolete with the publication of the next issue of a newspaper. Daily newspapers in the print medium are normally trashed soon after the publication of the next issue. There are probably few places outside of professional archives and libraries where old issues of daily newspapers are kept. This means that for most people, articles in last week’s newspapers are no longer accessible. With online newspapers this is different. Articles that are no longer breaking news or current news immediately become part of the archive. Yesterday’s articles are as easily accessible as those published last week or half a year ago. The difference between hot news and archive becomes blurred.

For online radio and online television this second change is more relevant. Their information life cycle is considerably shorter than that of newspapers, even in the traditional medium. A further decrease of the life cycle does not seem possible. Radio stations that produce a live stream are in this respect indistinguishable from traditional radio stations. The listener receives continuing broadcasting via the Internet rather than via the more traditional wireless transmission. The technical possibilities for broadcasting breaking news and shortening the information life cycle are identical. However, in contrast to the traditional way of broadcasting, the Internet can integrate their broadcasts into an archive for later retrieval. Just as normal newspaper readers do not store old issues of their newspapers, most radio listeners or television viewers do not tape-record news bulletins. On the Internet, they have access both to very recent and older bulletins.

7. Reception patterns

Printed newspapers as well as online newspapers are characterised by an asynchronous and hypertextual reception pattern, that is to say a newspaper is read several hours, perhaps even days, after it is written and printed. The readers read it at their own leisure, and decide which articles are worth reading partly or in full, and in which order. Radio listeners and television viewers, on
the other hand, generally receive broadcasts simultaneously and at the very time they are broadcast. A news programme, for instance, is received in the same sequence in which it is produced. Listeners or viewers have the option of not listening or not viewing, but they cannot turn first to the sports items or the weather if the station starts the programme with foreign news.

On the Internet, radio stations either produce a live stream, that is to say that their programmes are broadcast live and can only be received at that time, or they make sound files available after their original broadcasting. Television stations on the Internet generally offer video clips of their programming after the original screening. If users access such video clips, they do this some time after publication, obviously. They can choose which clips they want to view and in which order. In this sense, the reception patterns of online radio and television stations are the same as for newspapers. Viewers and listeners can access yesterday’s news bulletin and decide on their own which items they want to receive and in which order.

8. Availability and fixity

Before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, every single copy of a text had to be written by hand and was, therefore, unique in a sense. There were always minor or even more significant changes between a source text and its copy in the form of scribal errors, dialectal adaptations or intentional modifications (Herring, van Reenen and Schøsler 2000). With the invention of the printing press, it became possible to create large numbers of identical texts. In this sense, texts became more fixed and permanent, and as a result the concept of the individual author who produced a particular text rose in importance. Through printing the production process was greatly accelerated, but the distribution of texts was still slow. Every single copy had to be carried as a tangible artefact from the place of printing to the place where a reader wanted to read it. This is still true, of course, of modern printed material. The distribution channels have become much more efficient, but the printed texts still have to be carried from the place of printing to where they are read.

Television and radio broadcasts, on the other hand, are transmitted electronically. At the same time, these channels are usually restricted geographically. Most radio and television stations broadcast locally or nationally, and only very few (though the number is increasing) are available internationally. For Internet publications this is different. Once a text, an audio file or a video clip
has been published on the Internet, it is immediately available wherever people have access to the Internet.

Even more important is the fact that texts that are published on the Internet lose their permanence and fixity. On the one hand, electronically stored texts remain modifiable, and on the other hand, they often include — via hypertext links — other texts. A printed newspaper article remains intact even if some readers annotate their copy of the newspaper with marginal comments, if they highlight certain passages and cross out others. Such annotations are clearly recognisable as annotations for any subsequent reader of the same copy of the text. For Internet texts this is not true. Once a text has been published it can be downloaded and modified at will. Users who save a copy of the text on their own computers can rewrite passages, cut out or replace passages, and so on, without changing the outward appearance of the text. Subsequent readers of the downloaded text will not necessarily notice that they are reading a modified version that differs from the original text.

In addition, as pointed out above, electronic texts often include links to other texts. These may be intratextual links leading to other places in the same textual element, intertextual links leading to other textual elements in the same hypertext, or extratextual links leading to other hypertexts. Such links integrate other texts into the original text (Kuhlen 1991:107; Storrer 1999:39, 2001:200). The boundaries between the texts become blurred. Even if the original text or textual element remains unchanged, the texts that are integrated into the original text via links may disappear or they may be modified or replaced by other texts. As a result, the original text also changes.

The loss of fixity also means that the status of the original author is once again reduced. Today we are (still) used to thinking of texts as having been produced by a single author or a small group of clearly identifiable individuals. This contrasts with the situation before the printing press, when it was often not possible, and often not important, to distinguish among individual scribes who might have modified a text. For texts in the electronic medium, the concept of an individual and clearly identifiable (group of) authors may ultimately lose the importance that it has for printed texts.

9. Conclusion

Against the background of some of the changes that took place in early newspapers, I have identified in this paper relevant dimensions of change for mass
Media in the global world of the Internet. I have focused on fundamental aspects of the communicative situation and not on the details of linguistic realisation, such as lexical choices and syntactic structures (cf. Crystal 2001).

Six dimensions of ongoing change were identified. First, online media channels are characterised by a hypertext structure and by an integration of different channels of communication (hypermedia), such as written texts, still pictures, motion pictures and sound. Second, there is an increasing tendency for media channels to tailor their products to the preferences and needs of individual consumers. This includes the possibility for individual consumers to receive entirely personalised versions of a media product. Third, the interaction and interactivity of traditional mass media channels are reaching new heights in online news media. Fourth, the life span of information is changing in significant ways. Information can be published as news in increasingly shorter time spans. Newspapers can publish news almost as it arrives, and in addition news can remain accessible in the archive of an online newspaper once it is no longer breaking news. Fifth, the reception patterns of online television and radio are similar to those of newspapers. Users can receive items individually at their own leisure and according to their own preferences. Finally, in contrast to traditional mass media products, the products of online channels are immediately available to a worldwide audience, but these products lack the fixity and permanence of traditional mass media products. They arrive in an electronic format that can easily be modified by the receiver.

In the case of early newspapers, it required considerable time for the changes of the communicative situation to have a noticeable impact on the linguistic realisation of the messages, e.g. the genres and text types, the linguistic structures and lexical choices. At first old conventions were used in the new medium. It is to be expected that today this process will be accelerated (Herring 2002), but at present we are still waiting for the mass media channels to make full use of the potential of the new medium.

Note

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