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MSc in Communications Studies
December 1, 2002

Essay One

Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly how individuals incorporate the media into their lives.

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.¹

¹ Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, read by Polonius to King and Queen (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii), implies that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is more certain than the perceptions, i.e. psychological beliefs are more certain than perceptual beliefs.

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1. Introduction

Philosophy tries to find answers to questions like: ‘What can we know?’ There is no definitive answer. Maybe the question is too broad. Narrowing down its scope to media use – media such as television, radio, Internet, books and music – we could ask: ‘Can we ultimately know how people incorporate the media into their lives?’

There are a variety of methods to investigate media use – one is to watch the individual consumers. Observation can only capture attributes from the external world, though. It does not tell us anything about inner motives and involvement.

Questioning people about their consuming behaviour is a different approach to gather data about media incorporation. But do people do what they say, do they say what they do if asked by a friend or even an unknown interviewer? It seems that these investigations will not result in ultimate answers conforming to the truth by a number of reasons.

2. What can we know?

‘I know, that I know nothing’, Socrates (469BC—399BC) should once have said. Knowing that, he might have known more than many others. The question ‘what can we know?’ is one of the four core questions of philosophy shaped by Immanuel Kant (1724—1804), dividing philosophy into four major disciplines (Kunzmann 1999: 11):

- What is Man? (Anthropology)
- What should I do? (Ethics)
- What can I hope? (Religion)
- What can I know? (Metaphysics)

Metaphysics, regarded by Aristotle as the ‘first philosophy’, asks for the primary causes and sources of ‘being’. Parts of metaphysics are cognitive science and epistemology.

2.1. Theories

Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is based on two major opposing points of view, namely rationalism and empiricism, which are finally brought together by Kant.

2.1.1. Rationalism

René Descartes (1596—1650) doubted the truth of everything. He mistrusted every reception of his senses, regarded the material world as nothing more than a dream, and imagined that an omnipotent god could deceive him in every belief he wanted to take for granted. Since everything therefore seemed to be dubitable, nothing could be certain at all. But being able to think all this, Descartes concluded that he *was*, which he expressed as ‘I think, therefore I am’, that means, one can be ultimately sure of one’s own existence. Upon this starting point, Descartes wanted to build his knowledge of the world, the next step being to deduce *what* he was: ‘I am a thing that thinks.’ If he stopped thinking, he concluded, he would no longer exist.

And as I observed that in the words I think, therefore I am, there is nothing at all which gives me assurance of their truth beyond this. (Descartes, Discourse: Part iv)

That is, nothing else about human nature can be known with such perfect certainty. In Descartes’ world everything is explicable through deduction, a method used in mathematics to conclude new things from the basis of a few axioms. This rationalist view which was also held by Spinoza and Leibniz is opposed to the empiric view, held by many British philosophers in the 17th and 18th century.

2.1.2. Empiricism

John Locke (1632—1704) sees the human mind in its initial state as ‘tabula rasa’, a white paper. It is the senses that fill the mind with information or ‘ideas’ as Locke put it. All knowledge is based on experience and evolves from sensation. The method used by empiricists is induction. ‘According to empiricism, a belief is justified when it is connected by good reasoning to evidence obtained by perception’ (Morton 1997: 27). Perception will be investigated more in detail later on.

2.1.3. A priori – a posteriori

The beliefs one can have in advance of any evidence are called a priori. Descartes knows just by thinking that he exists. The opposite of a priori knowledge is a posteriori knowledge,

knowledge which can be gained only with evidence from perception (Morton 1997: 48).

Locke assumed all beliefs are a posteriori since our mind is a 'tabula rasa' in the beginning.

Immanuel Kant brings both empirical and rational views together resolving the debate. Kant approaches the question the other way round. Instead of asking how we could manage to understand the world, he asks how the world comes to be understood by us, i.e. he shows how reason determines the conditions under which experience and knowledge are possible. He asks how one could understand perceptions from experiments if no a priori beliefs are in the mind. To be able to describe perceptions, there have to be some prior beliefs in the mind, i.e. we are born with a set of concepts and categories in common which determine *how* we think rather than *what* we think.

Kant postulates, all knowledge starts with experience but is dependent on the way the mind works and reacts to that experience.

2.2. Perception

In contrast to the rational approach empiricists gain knowledge in a way that is not based on reasoning. Since individual use of media has to be perceived one way or another, 'perception' itself is looked upon more closely.

Perception is the use of our senses – such as sight, hearing and touch – to learn things about the world around us. But visual appearances for example may not reflect the facts; they may be false, like mirages in deserts for instance.

To study perception itself one might want to examine how the senses react to various stimuli. Again, this examination is based on perception, which makes it seem impossible for psychologists and physicists to gain valid knowledge in their field. Why can they use theories based on perception to study how beliefs can be based on perception, without going round in circles (Morton 1997: 24)?

The solution is to use some assumptions we have about perception to judge which perception to trust and which to reject. The trusted ones are then to be used to judge further perceptions. Going on like this allows us to improve our understanding of perception (Morton 1997: 42).

As said above, in the theory of empiricism, a belief is reasonable if and only if it can be based on evidence obtained from perception. Since ‘beliefs partly based on perception rest partly on processes that are not explicit reasoning’ (Morton 1997: 116) – we have to trust some of our perceptions to build on them – it can be concluded that such beliefs are not as ‘valid’ as beliefs solely derived by thinking like in the rationalistic approach. Maybe ‘knowledge should be judged as more or less ‘useful’ rather than as true or false’ suggests A. Sayer (1992: 70).

2.3. *Media in our lives*

Knowledge derived from sensations could be false, but life would be hard if one would not believe in most perceptions and use common sense for obtaining new knowledge via empirical methods.

To research media use the researcher has to perceive the audiences’ use of media somehow. This ‘perception’ could be in the most direct way via observation. Other, usually qualitative means suitable to do reception analysis include interviews, surveys and laboratory experiments (Rosengren 2000: 21).

The audience once was seen as passive mass that was easily influenced by the messages it received. Harold Lasswell’s (1902—1978) ‘magic bullet’ or ‘hypodermic needle’ theory for example said that messages ‘hit’ the audience and thus directly change the individual’s beliefs or even behaviour. That was in times of much propaganda after the First World War (Mattelart 1998: 26). Today the audience usually is seen more active and a number of theories abound, the ‘uses and gratification approach’ by Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz in 1974 being one of the most prominent ones, dealing ‘with the individual uses made of mass media and with the gratifications derived from that use’ (McQuail 1997: 21). The question there is: ‘What do people do with the media?’ (Mattelart 1998: 123)

The active audience is capable of decoding media in ways which are relevant to their everyday lives. Although there is an overall similarity of mass media use between populations, the amount and type of media use varies considerable between individuals (Rosengren 2000: 152). Measurement is not straight forward:

In today's societies most individuals spend considerable amounts of their time reading, listening to and viewing various types of mass media content. Far from being as simple as at first glance it may seem to be, the measurement of these considerable amounts of time represents a difficult problem. (Rosengren 2000: 152)

One problem is that people are aware of a social norm that criticises excessive time spent on media (McQuail 1997: 21).

The difference between sold and read newspapers is a good example to illustrate the difficulties in measurement. Readership of a newspaper is the number of readers of the newspaper or magazine, whereas circulation is calculated by the number of copies sold or distributed. For most types of newspapers readership is higher than circulation due to the fact that 'each sold copy is usually read by more than one person, especially when copies are sold to households/families' (McQuail 1997: 45). For advertisers readership is of higher interest than circulation since they are concerned about reaching individual people. Readership can only be assessed by a survey which does not result into such exact or valid numbers as circulation, though. The same is true for the 'book' medium: those who buy the books do not necessarily read them and vice versa: Books are borrowed from libraries or friends and they are bought second-hand on the flea market; books in digital formats can be even downloaded from the Internet in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels² for example – thus readership can never be measured precisely.

Audience for other media such as music and film are equally hard to measure today because of the growing 'underground' market on the Internet. Music is exchanged via peer-to-peer networks as MP3-files; films converted to MPEG (Moving Picture Experts Group) from DVDs or even filmed from within the cinema are now being exchanged as well. Due to broadband connections this is done in a reasonable amount of time using the same tools as for exchanging music.

² Some e-book readers argue that reading books on (eye-friendly flat-) screens is more comfortable than reading a book the traditional way. Sitting in a comfortable chair a single keystroke suffices to turn pages and there is no need to hold the book in one's hands.

2.4. Methodologies in critique

Possible problems arising with the different research methodologies will be looked upon in more detail in this section.

2.4.1. Observation

A method to gain knowledge about how individuals incorporate the media into their lives is to record their behaviour by observation, i.e. by perceiving them dealing with media. For example one could be watched reading a newspaper, a book, watching television or listening to the radio. Especially for the latter it seems obvious that the observer cannot be sure the media user consciously listens to the radio (and even less whether the messages the speaker wants to convey are understood). Also, the observed individual might think of something completely different than what is discussed on the radio.

Another problem is that the observed person is very likely to behave differently and use the media to a different extent than if she/he would not be observed, i.e. observation is a reactive method (Ferber 1999: 46). One could argue that people get used to the observer and ignore him after a while, but the observer has no means to detect this discrepancy. Observations are restricted concerning morality (What *may* be watched?), space (What *can* be watched?) and time (*How long* can be watched?). These restrictions ultimately defy exact knowledge about media incorporation into lives.

To measure TV or radio consumption special tools have been developed to avoid the presence of a stranger. The 'setmeter' and the 'peplemeter' are technical devices attached to a radio or TV to record which channel the set was tuned to at which times. The 'peplemeter' is even more sophisticated in that it allows recording the consuming habits of individuals as they are meant to press their 'own' button before using the media. Again it is not assured that people really do obey to the rules and thus the result may be flawed.

2.4.2. Interviews and surveys

Another means to enquire media use is by interviewing the consumer face-to-face, i.e. the individual is asked about her/his media consumption habits. Surely the questioned person will try to answer the questions to her/his best effort but the answers do not really reflect

the facts. It is imaginable that the respondent gives statements the way she/he would like to see herself/himself consuming media. Respondents even tend to say what they *think* the questioner might want to hear. Or if not knowing any answers they just come up with (plausible) ones – probably even without being aware of this blemish themselves.

Errors in self-attribution are very likely. Since ‘we can make as many mistakes reasoning from our own behaviour as reasoning that of others’ (Morton 1997: 148), a difference in what people say and do is to expect. Thus, the method of interview is not perfect either.

As third tool to investigate media incorporation, surveys could be taken into account. But again problems arise in getting valid data. People see themselves different than they behave, as mentioned above. People do not admit how much they watch TV for example because they think themselves it would be ‘too much’ or more than the average person watches TV and thus they will not conform the ‘norm’, i.e. people give ‘socially acceptable answers’.

Regarding quantitative surveys it is not always easy to put one’s own attitude into a range of three or five boxes to tick. Thus, in setting up such a survey the questionnaire plays an important role: ‘The more precise and detailed the questions, the better the answers’ (Rosengren 2000: 152). One way to come up with detailed questions is to make a pilot, i.e. a preliminary survey among people one trusts, e.g. within the family or among friends.

2.4.3. Diary

Instead of watching people the consumer herself/himself could note down her/his activity in a diary over a period of time as a kind of self-observation. This type of self-completion questionnaire produces a vast amount of data that is not easy to interpret and classify but data recording could be supported by the use of PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) for example. In addition there is the problem of selective perception which could be described as ‘one only sees what it suits one to see’; the media user rules out consumption she/he might regard as a waste of time, for example.

2.4.4. Common research problems

Different types of distortion occur doing research. The ‘volunteer bias’ is an error that arises from a low response rate due to the fact that some types of people are much keener than others to take part in surveys and thus push the results into specific directions.

Students for example tend to take part in surveys more often than other people. The opposite of ‘volunteer bias’ is the ‘non-response bias’ which means that the people not willing to take part in the survey could be different in some important way from the ones that took part. Working people might have different attitudes than students for instance who ‘seem to watch *more* television than do young working-class adults’ (Rosengren 2000: 159, original emphasis), maybe because they do not have the money for other enjoyments.

One possibility to try to surpass the self-admittance error is to do a mirror-sample, i.e. instead of asking the respondent about her/his personal behaviour the interviewer or the survey asks about close friends (of the same sex and age group). Since the interviewed persons usually do not know exactly how their friends behave or incorporate media it is assumed, that it is their own behaviour they will describe.

Reliability and validity of investigations are the most important criteria to judge empirical research. The more probable it is that various scientists come up with similar findings by using the same instrument, the more *reliable* the instrument is. The *validity* of an investigation describes how well-founded statements about the specific research area are. Reliability and validity sometimes are seen as opposing aims of social research that cannot be reached simultaneously (Ferber 1999: 48).

A method to decrease bias is called triangulation. It is assumed that gathering data about one single object of study by employing various methods reduces bias. Though multiple methods may come up with different results, the results of a variety of different research approaches should be similar (Jensen 1991: 62).

2.4.5. New methods for a new medium

Concerning the research of Internet use, the so called ‘new media’ offers a distinct feature the other media do not offer: Web statistics. Web-server applications such as ‘Apache’ or

'Tomcat' for example log with every 'hit' from a visitor on one of the offered pages detailed data about the visitor. Not only time, URL and IP-address are recorded but also the software the visitor is using as operating-system and web-browser are logged – even the used screen resolution is likely to be gathered. Moreover one can reconstruct the path the surfer took through the website and how long she/he remained on one specific page. But does this really tell us something about the human being behind the screen? For the time spent on one page for example, simply the time between two consecutive hits is measured; it is not said that the user really did spend this period of time 'reading' that specific page. It might not even be a human being that 'surfs' the web! It could also be a kind of 'robot' indexing web-pages for search-engines or other software feigning human surf-habits.³

Such methods cause flaws in the web-statistics if they need to be concerned for usage research, i.e. one cannot know whether the visitor really 'reads' the content and thus how people incorporate the Internet into their lives.

3. Conclusion

It is not much one can know for sure. Real life research is dependant on empirical methods – but their results are not as valid as rational beliefs can be. Asking sceptics 'What can we know?' they will answer that there is nothing that we can 'know' for certain in the sense of the word 'know' as used by the rationalists and empiricists. Still, it would be foolish not to trust most of our perceptions in everyday life. Common sense allows distinguishing between more and less useful knowledge. Natural sciences all depend on empiricism but their findings seem to be clearer than those from the social sciences. There are too many variables in real-life research that cannot be taken into account fully; it is not possible in

³ Some companies offer payments for looking at advertisements during surfing the web. The ads are put on the users' screens by special applications the user has to install. For every minute they are actively surfing the Web and watching the ads they get for example 0.1 pence. Users found ways to surpass the need to surf the Web themselves by writing small tools to do the surfing for them (the software randomly 'clicks' on links) and thus 'earn' some money while they are in fact away from the computer.

means of time, space and morality to watch people every time they use media. Surveys or interviews result in answers that might not reflect reality.

Results will always concur between validity and reliability. Hence, the answer to the question: 'Can we ultimately know how individuals incorporate the media into their lives?' is: 'No'.

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