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The Shaping of the New Society through the New Media Technology

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Abstract

This paper examines the definition of an information society and its influence in transforming individuals into becoming an information society. In the context of Malaysia, this paper shall discuss the role of cellular technology in shaping and transforming the Malaysian society into what is termed as a Cellular Dependency Society (CDS).

Cellular Dependence Society (CDS) refers to individuals who make full use of the mobile phone applications in running their daily activities. This includes their communications, business transactions, leisure, entertainment and other needs. Through the introduction of new media technology and with a mass application of cellular devices, a new society emerges.

With the new interventions, innovations and technology adaptations, however, there are positive and negative outcomes. Matters of traditions, values, languages, cultures and the like will be affected. Habits of the heart will also be challenged and changed.

The new media technology which includes interactive television, internet, telecommunications, digital broadcasting and many others can be categorized into various types of media available in our market. In this article the authors will discuss the transformation of the CDS and how it affects the changing patterns of the Malaysian consumption of the new media technology. The previous and the present scenarios in term of the dynamics of the media production and consumption will also be discussed.

The use of mobile technology has increased drastically. Spending on telecommunications has also increased for the past 10 years. Numbers of subscriptions to cellular devices provided by three mobile service providers- Maxis, TMnet and Digi have also shown an increasing trend.

This paper shall conclude by discussing some issues that need to be addressed pertaining to CDS. This includes matters regarding policies, copyrights, ownerships, and balancing the new technology against our priceless heritage.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing discussion on cellular phone technology and how it has transformed the society into a Cellular Dependency Society (CDS). The introduction of cellular phones in the market in 1988 by CELCOM and TELEKOM has created a new wave on how we communicate in Malaysia. Before the introduction of the cellular phones, most Malaysians communicated using hard-wired cable phones. With the introduction of cellular phones, the society has become more mobile and more dependence over the use of the technology; in fact, most daily activities and social transactions too have accelerated significantly.

Today, we live in a society where instant and immediate telecommunications have become an integral part and parcel of our daily lives. Our ways of communications are brief and fast. Our means of communications are becoming more and more personal. Indeed, our reliance is on a small, yet sophisticated mobile device that has defined and shaped our ways of thinking and communicating. From inviting our spouse for breakfast, to wishing `good nights' to our kids and love ones have become an accepted norm thru conveying short SMS messages. Sending emoticons with big pinky hearts will do to replace our night kisses and hugs. Perhaps, with all the latest innovations and development of today's cutting-edge technology, our society might have changed in their perceptions about things, their own cultures, values, economic or business transactions and at the same time their own world view.

A Glimpse into Cellular Technology in Malaysia

Back in 1988, when mobile devices were first introduced, the market was presented with only two types of mobile phone technology, *ATUR* owned by Telekom and *010*, owned by CELCOM. To most public then, mobile phones provided them with some mobility (depending on the service coverage) and basic telecommunications tool. When cellular phones were first introduced, the society treated the new technology as a new gizmo for the big boys only. Over time, the thirst for newer and better cellular technology has driven many business enthusiasts to embark on this window of opportunity. As more and more users in Malaysia begin to accept and adapt this mobile cellular technology, they begin to ask for more applications, memory capacities, functionalities and others. Without doubt, a sophisticated mobile cellular device today is capable of being a tool that serves all the telecommunication requirements of its users. A PDA-phone, for instance, is capable of being a mobile office for a business person. Sending SMS messages, receiving and making calls, surfing the internet, e-mailing, capturing video clips, recording business conversations, calendaring, keeping tracks of appointments and schedules, listening to MP3 songs and many more can all be accomplished using an O2 mobile device.

Meaning, the thirst for new mobile cellular technology apparently has shown up in our doorsteps with all its wonderful applications; and unlike some other developing countries, we welcome the gift of today's technology. Some countries, for instance, perceive the new technology as a negative influence that will change their traditional values, cultures and norms that have been with them for hundred years. As described by Everett Roger (2003) in his theory of diffusion of innovation, he explained how the Peruvians reject 'boiled water' to be part of their life. To the Peruvians, they believe that boiled water is only meant for the weak and sick people. To most of us, such concept is beyond comprehension; however, to the Peruvians this belief has been with them for hundreds of years and the notion needs to be protected. This concept of determinism could be seen as an obstacle to the new technology.

Malaysians and the Information Society

Webster, as stated by Grantham and Tsekouras (January, 2005) in "Information Society: Wireless ICTs' Transformative Potential", outlines five definitions of an information society. These are technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural. Discussions on information and post-industrial societies have suggested that mobile technology plays a vital role in realizing the idea of becoming constitutive of lives of its users - both in a work place and in a social milieu. This paper shall touch on some of the definitions put forth and how the definitions have contributed to the new Cellular Dependency Society (CDS) transformation.

Through a rapid global innovation, technology has transformed us into a society that cannot function effectively without it. We have become a technology dependence society. With the new introduction of 3G technology and its multimedia capabilities, cellular phones today are capable of providing knowledge and information at the users' fingertips – anywhere and any time. Now, cellular phone users are able to explore new territories, gain latest data, make vital choices, and exercise their right in making decisions and travel beyond physical boundaries in search for knowledge and information. In the media convergence that we experience currently, for example, cellular phones are capable of promoting new types of television show. The Truman Show acted by Jim Carey has become a reality in our own local show. More reality shows have been created, emulated and copied from the concept of the Truman Show. At present the reality has become more advanced whereby the audiences are given the opportunity to make decisions via SMS. In fact one of the Philippines soap opera allows the viewers to submit their ideas through SMS, on how the soap should end.

Cellular Technology Users

In Malaysia, technology is perceived positively in all sectors – education, business, social, and so forth. Most people own their personal mobile cellular phones. Certainly, one will be out-numbered if one does not own a cellular phone, as owning the mobile phone symbolizes achievement, sophistication and success to the owner. In fact, owning a mobile phone per person is actually an understatement. This is because everyone is going for the most trendy and latest mobile device. If the mobile phone is without a camera function, or Bluetooth enabled or MP3 ring-tones then, it is not cut out for some teenagers. Today, if a mobile is not with a secure digital (CD) memory card, then, it may not be even be preferred. The lingo on the street has now gone into the application of G3 (3rd. Generation) mobile technology services. Telecommunications companies such as Maxis, Celcom and Digi have brought to us the latest technology so quick for us to utilize; that without realizing, we have not yet master the earlier technology. The introduction of 3G technology, with multimedia capabilities, has promised users that knowledge and information are just matter of clicks away. The bottom-line is the cellular technology has hit the market will its latest gizmos regardless if the applications are relevant or can serve the actual needs of the users.

Thus, cellular phone users can be perceived as individuals who adopt modernization and consume modernity as part of their ways of life. This technology transformation is clearly observable through the cause and effect of globalization. Even though mobile cellular devices are extensions to the traditional hard-wired telephones aimed as basic communication tool, the technology associated cellular devices have managed to influence our meaning and practice of communications. Today's generation of mobile phones enable users to utilize time and space most effectively. In fact, technology today has compressed and redefined the concept of time and space. Time and space could be described as optimizing functions and capabilities to the fullest. In other words, the society will become more productive and at the same time will favor technology growth.

Cellular Device as a Source for Value Creation

As suggested by Webster, knowledge and information can be traded as sources that generate economic returns. The notion of the knowledge economy is made possible via the existence of new and powerful cellular phones. In other words, knowledge and information have been translated into valuable resources worthy of value production.

Make no mistakes, all business parties participated in the development of the mobile devices are working very hard to ensure that the end-users are geared with the latest technological gadgets – from stylish and slick hardware

look to the latest upgraded version of the OS development and to the sophisticated yet simple and user-friendly applications. With all sorts of business strategies, price wars, promises and goodies, we can see today stiff competitions are taking place among mobile providers in their effort to win over the market share. For the years 2003 and 2004 alone, Nielsen Media Research reported that telecommunications companies were recorded as top three advertisers across all media; and the top ten brands advertised across media equally corresponded to the top advertisers. (p. 62, Vol. 6: Apr-Jun, 2005). Statistics derived from the report show the top three advertising expenditures - Maxis spends $144,463,000, TMnet $89,628,000 and Digi $80,468,000. In fact TMNet and Maxis total gross income for year 2004 were more than 2billion. Generally, what these figures tell us is that telecommunications is a lucrative industry, while the society is very much depended and subscribed to it.

Advertising expenditure was high and steadily spent in the efforts to gain consumer trust and confidence. Telecommunications companies continue to study, manage and understand factors that influence the market share. In doing so, these companies need to weigh and make correct decisions based on total investment, marketing and pricing decisions (Langley, Sabert and Timoni, 2005) to shape the society as they want then to be.

However, not everyone agrees to the fact the technology is capable of defining the Information Society. Some technologists argue on the premise that ICTs lead to an increased tradability of service activities previously limited by the necessity for proximity of production and consumption.

Cellular Dependency Society (CDS): A transformation into a New Society

Cellular Dependence Society (CDS) refers to individuals who make full use of the mobile phone applications in running their daily activities. This includes their daily communications, business transactions, leisure, entertainment and other needs. Through the introduction of new media technology and with a mass application of cellular devices, a new society has emerged. The new society here refers to individuals who are not only members of the information society, but they are also technologically dependence. Soon as the individuals adapt the technology-based mobile technology, they realize that its efficacy has brought about ease to many daily tasks, duties and responsibilities. No more round trips to the post office. Passing memos will soon be the practice of the past. Making appointments via SMS are more convenient than having to call up the secretaries. Casting votes and making decisions are now at our finger tips. AFUNDI or voting for the Malaysian Idol is a common vocabulary to many of our cellular phone users. In short, these individuals simple cannot go on their daily routines without the personal assistance of this amazing device.

The Price to Pay

With all these advancement and development taking place in technology, its adaptation comes with a price for us to pay. The society that embraces the technology will be conditioned to depend on these new tools. The question here is how far will the society depend on this mobile technology? Will the society collapse if this facility is being withdrawn? How then has the mobile technology shaped us into becoming a Cellular-Dependency Society (CDS)? What effects does a society experience from this technology transformation? What have we to gain or what have we to lose?

Just a few nights ago, we took our kids to our favorite restaurant for a small get together. As the night slowly drifted away, our children were also carried away in their deep SMS activities. The young ones were busy trying to kill the clone soldiers in their portable Gameboy Star War game. Occasionally, we ourselves have to respond to quick SMS messages. As we looked at each other, we smiled and nodded in a silent agreement that we have all embraced the mobile devices around us to a point of perhaps no return. Everyone – all racial groups, males and females, young and old, the have and have not, submit to using the device in their walks of life. For business transactions, leisure, entertainments, pleasure, personal, political and everything else, the mobile device has successfully fulfilled our daily needs.

As we ponder upon this amazing gift of time and technology, we wonder what will happen if we are deprived of this mobile device. What will happen if tomorrow there are no more mobile communications devices at our disposal? Are we not hooked, entrapped by the cutting-edge technology, mesmerized by the grand design of the capitalists or simply victims of the Dependency Theory?

With the new interventions, innovations and technology adaptations, we fear also of the negative outcomes. Matters of traditions, values, languages, cultures and the like will be affected. Habits of the heart will also be challenged and changed.

The issue of the Digital Divide has also made us ponder and debate over the matter. Suffice to say that there are pros and cons to this digital divide issue. As with the mobile device, we feel that the technology has become so common that everyone who chooses to adapt and use the technology can do so with little guidance. The author's 72-year-old mother has her own Nokia, an Indonesian maid who just arrived a few months ago, a gardener and perhaps everybody else. The issue, however, is not on the possession of the tool, rather on how the tool is being utilized.

In our discussion, for instance, we argue on the use of SMS and the justification of the SMS charges. Take, for instance, the un-standardized cost for downloading polyphonic or MP3 ringing tones. One can see various

advertisements on this downloading service that charges various prices. One author feels that the SMS is capitalizing and cashing in as the users are ill-informed of the overall SMS business transactions. On the other hand, the other author feels that the choice is made by the users knowing how much they will be charged per SMS activity. Brand Equity magazine reported that "… last year, a whooping 9.5 billion SMS messages went back and forth between individuals in Malaysia …" (p. 22, Vol. 6: Apr-Jun, 2005). If we do the math, such a figure really translates into a very handsome amount spent by all of us!

We both agree that the Cellular-Dependency Society that begins to shape us also robs us of our common societal values and norms. We fear that meeting places for everyday communications will only take place in cyber. Even though we appreciate that little attention is needed on our kids as the parental supervision can now be managed by the Gameboy device, we fear that the kids will grow up lacking social interactions with their adults or older people. It is true that we can now surf the internet for news and information via our cellular phones; but, wouldn't it be fun, relaxing and healthy having to walk to the library, search for a good book and simply sit down and enjoy the reading. In other words, why surf the Internet for a beautiful beach when you can actually drive to the nearest one and enjoy the sun. Why sending multiple SMS to one another when you can actually spend time talking and enjoying a face-to-face communication, just like the good, old days!

Conclusion

In our conclusion, we like to stress that the technology we experience today is here to stay. The magnitude of its discussion is endless. Arguments on both sides of the coin are as valid as they can be. More dynamic, advanced and futuristic technology will continue to be introduced to further mesmerize and assist us in our daily routines. Adapting the new technology is not a question. Preparing and educating our users for the newer technology is perhaps a challenge worth examining and undertaking. Our society will be entering the era of optimism and those who choose not to conform to this positivism will soon be left behind. Those who choose not to adapt the technology may end-up being 'techno-phobic' or even anti-modernism. To the technocratic individuals, they believe that gaining access via the technology – internet, cellular devices and others – will enable them to search, learn and acquire all the knowledge and information they desire. Perhaps, issues surrounding digital divide and social divide will also be resolved.

As the mobile technology weaves its way into our society, it takes pride in shaping and molding our new generations to come. It will be our duties to ensure that the technology compliments, not defies our traditional values and heritage we hold dear to our hearts. Though the technology is capable of creating a

popular culture, we hope that there will be governing and regulatory bodies which can ensure that our youths will stay on the right track.

In addition, we need to ensure that there are also regulatory bodies that keep an eye on the many business opportunities that can be capitalized by irresponsible capitalists on the expense of the ill-informed society. Proper control on service charges, close supervision on the use of the mobile device so that no copyright infringement occurs, clear and precise policies on matters pertaining to mobile applications, cyber laws that protect all parties and many other matters relating to the application of mobile devices should closely be examined and regulated.

Cellular phone technology, as we have presented, is capable of shaping almost everything - from transforming a culture to altering existing values and the creating new norms. With technology, speed and rapidity are of essence. With rapid growth in new discoveries and innovations, societies evolve, countries develop, laws and regulations are rewritten, traditions and cultures are redefined.

'Speed', in technology term, can be perceived as a powerful source that divides the society into, fast and slow types. Through the test of time, history has proven that the heralds of infinite progress in technology development and innovation have constantly imposed a forced march towards modernization. What was once a slow, cumulative historical process of building a culture is now being drastically altered through the same source.

Finally, the task of balancing the new technology against our priceless heritage will be very challenging indeed. The price to pay will be seconded or disputed by many. The choice of being technologically 'slow' or 'fast' may just be a matter of individual choice. Digital divide may be a blessing in disguise.

Let us know your opinions. SMS us your comments! ;-)

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