CHANGE IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION:
A Redefinition in the Field of Analysis

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Introduction

Among the experiences that distinguish the socialization of people belonging to different social groups, in the era of mass media, media consumption has represented a largely shared base. Individuals belonging to different social groups, especially if in the same age bracket, have up to now conducted "media diets" that in large part coincide.

This situation was determined by a concentration of the audience on few communication relationships controlled by a center. In this way, media consumption became - together with education, military service, and national holidays - a factor of cohesion among groups that outside of these areas have life experiences that diverge.

As Sunstein (2001) effectively notes, the system of mass media is a part of those "general interest intermediaries" that have marked western societies of the twentieth century. Such institutions are relatively recent but, we may add, have become a distinctive factor of what has come to be defined as *modernity*. Western societies during the twentieth century reconfigured themselves by assigning a particularly relevant role to media in the maintenance of their own integration.

Today, the advent of digital media expands the possibilities for receiving communication, but also for the creation, storage and sharing of the same. The panorama that Communication Sciences has traditionally dealt with is starting to show signs of discontinuity. The exponential growth of options and the growing number of possibilities to personalize have made the activity of media choice more important and pervasive than before. Audiences find themselves more and more explicitly having to choose which communication relationships they want to be inserted in. They can build much more personalized 'media diets' in a set of offerings that is more and more extended.

Growing possibilities of choice also mean growing possibilities of differentiation in media consumption, that depends increasingly on individual preferences and less and less on a centralized supply. At most, each person has the opportunity to choose a "media diet" that minimally overlaps with someone else's, and that is continually restructured by new combinations of communication products.

We are still far from such an extreme panorama. Nonetheless, today's technology allows the supply of communication to develop well beyond the receptive capabilities of the individual, and the perspective is of further multiplication. If this is true for the world of the traditional mass media (radio and tv), it is even more important when digital media are included in the analysis. Without a doubt, this fact makes audiences' behavior and its consequences an interesting object of analysis in this moment.

It is possible that we are witnessing from its very inception a process that can radically change the profile of the media community, and therefore of society itself. While mass communication has always gained its power from audience concentration, new technologies of communication, instead,

make fragmentation of the audiences and/or their reorganization into new groups of information consumers technically possible and economically worthwhile.

The crisis of the role of public interest intermediary of mass media finds itself in a general trend of social change where the basis of traditional groupings is in crisis. The change is characterized by processes of *disembedding* and *reembedding* (Giddens, 1994), from the creation of new groups organized in networks, unanchored from traditional geographical and social contexts but part of a "space of flows" (Castells 1997). Analyzing the trends of change in post-Fordist societies, Mingione (1991) significantly entitles his book "Fragmented Societies."

I consider it interesting to identify the traits of the current social mutation that interact more directly with the process of audience fragmentation and with the general change of media consumption. Even if the theoretical references that I will use sometimes do not explicitly include the world of media, it still comes directly into play, not in a secondary way. I think that what is happening in the world of media is for many reasons exemplary of the changes that are at a general level at the basis of the creation of the so-called "Network society".

This paper proposes a theoretical framework to analyze the phenomenon of audience fragmentation in relation to new dynamics in the formation of social groups.

Audience fragmentation is here seen as an effect of both the quantitative multiplication of the channels of mass media and the affirmation of digital media that also change in a qualitative sense traditional media relationships. In this paper, I put forth the hypothesis that there is a double trend in the fragmentation of media consumption, one that is technological and internal to the media system, the other that is social and external to it. From an understanding of the interaction between these two forces and the relationships that make them act jointly, it will be possible to study the new media groupings that characterize the information society, just as the mass audience was the media grouping typical of Fordist capitalism.

These phenomena put forth important questions to sociology regarding the possible lack of a unifying function of media in a society where many other *general interest intermediaries* lose importance. Moreover, in a situation where media use is subject to fragmentation, communication consumption could become a relevant factor of differentiation among people and groups, and link itself theoretically to the theme of inequality.

In this framework, the reflection on audience fragmentation becomes an analysis of the fragmentation of media socialization, in a world where this is more and more a relevant part of socialization *tout court*.

A Definition of the Problem

In the simplest models of the media communication relationship, the audience is the group of receivers of a certain transmission of information. It reacts to the message like an atomized and indistinct mass. Research has little by little added elements of complexity to this original framework. Different dimensions of audience activity have been brought to light, like its resistance to influence, the pursuit of interests and gratifications, the embedding in social and cultural contexts that influence its behaviour.

These many contributions have made up a picture that is more and more complex and multifaceted around this concept. Today, as McQuail affirms (1997, 142), "there is no doubt that the audience concept is in many ways outdated and its traditional role in communication theory, models and research has been called into question". The audience is a discursive construct that categorizes in an abstract way the world of actual audiences, something that is less and less fully definable or knowable.

Moores (1993, 8) states that there is no stable entity that can be isolated and identified as "the media audience" and that it would be better to use the plural, "audiences", because this underscores the

fact that the audience is actually made up of many groups that are different from one another from the point of view of media and genres that they prefer or for their specific social or cultural position. This declining significance of the concept of audience is not only the result of a growing complexity of the theoretical categories with which it was analyzed. It is also caused by inferior applicability to the actual situation in the evolution of media consumption. Among the practical reasons for this loss of pregnancy is the multiplication of media and channels. "Attention to media sources is so diversified and dispersed in many directions that it makes no sense to speak or think any more in terms of a single or mass audience […] or to refer to an entire population in their capacity of potential media users" (McQuail, 1997, 143).

At the same time, the communication process itself has even been re-conceptualized by theory. After the advent of digitalization and interactivity, the concept of audience is not completely adequate for identifying whatever group of actors are at play in the new communication media relationships. Thus, the audience concept seems to have a real explanatory value only inside what we might call the 'paradigm' of mass communication. In a Kuhn-like way, we can define it as the group of theoretical orientations and experimental procedures that characterized communication sciences in the study of traditional mass media. Today the study of social influences of new communication technology has a priority objective, in my opinion, in the search for new categories with which to analyze groups of media consumers.

McQuail (1997, 2) states that: "Audiences are both a product of social context (which leads to shared cultural interest, understandings, and information needs) and a response to a particular pattern of media provision". I think, therefore, that it is analytically correct, even if clearly a simplification, to distinguish among two big groups of possible influences on audience restructuring: the media offer and the social context.

Isolating the first of these factors in the current context of change, it is opportune to ask the question: *what are the possible reactions of the audience to a quali-quantitative growth of the media offering*?

Attention may be placed on the fact that a new configuration of the gamma of media offers the possibility of expressing demands and differentiations present in society that were previously implicit on the level of mass media.

Developing McQuail's thinking as cited above, in a given historical reality media consumption may be also considered as the manifestation of differentiations of communicative needs and identification tensions present in society, in the ways made possible by the structure of the means of communication.

Thus, to properly interpret audience behavior we will have to ask if *in society there exist forces exogenous to the system of media that push toward a reorganization of traditional social groups, toward the creation of new identities and in what way these may be in agreement with new possibilities for media consumption*.

In this way, the social context and technological innovation remain conceptually separate and considered as independent sources for reorganization of media groups.

In the case in which growing differentiation possibilities of the media offering furnishes space for expression and expansion of independent differentiation trends emerging in society, we would have a framework of double pressure for the reorganization of audiences, one that is endogenous and one that is exogenous to the media system.

Given this picture on the problems posed by audience reorganization, a final, fundamental question remains: *what are the social consequences that this kind of double pressure might produce today*?

In this paper, I will try to furnish a few theoretical hypotheses on these points, that will call into play different fields of sociology in an integrated way.

The Hypothesis of Fragmentation and Regrouping of the Audience

Faced with new communication technologies, audiences enjoy an array of possibilities for consumption that are quantitatively and qualitatively broader than what was available to the audiences of traditional media.

Describing the quantitative and the qualitative planes separately, we may distinguish the increase in the diffusion of signals quantitatively, from the qualitative change brought about by the different dimensions of interactivity.

Actually, the quantitative and qualitative points of view are inextricably tied as sources of innovation in the world of media. As a matter of fact the change in the traditional media relationship increases the quantitative possibilities to receive or send information. At the same time, the enormous multiplication of the channels of transmission has a significant effect on the quality of the use of media.

From a theoretical point of view, the overabundance of media communication implies a gradual process of abandonment of attention on the part of the audience (considered here as a constant) toward traditional sources or ways of information and the selection of differentiated user packages. The selection activity in a quality-quantity communication overload thus becomes a central theme in the study of the era of *post-broadcasting*. In this chapter I will discuss a few possible scenarios for the restructuring of media consumption connected to this perspective.

In order to define the possible levels of this process, McQuail (1997, 137) proposes four models of audience distribution that go from "unitary" to "breakup" (fig.1). In the unitary model, the maximum concentration of the audience applies, the audience is unique. In this situation, not only is the external differentiation irrelevant (the gamut of various communicative channels available) but the internal (the presence within one channel of programs aimed at different target audiences) is as well. This means therefore that the model of audience which the media construct their contents for is indistinct. The media therefore offer a so-called generalist content (modeled on what Gilder, 1995, calls "lowest common denominator"). The unitary model is well-suited to the initial phase of television (the 50s and the 60s) and well represents the media activity of the national channels.

Fig. 2 Four stages of audience fragmentation
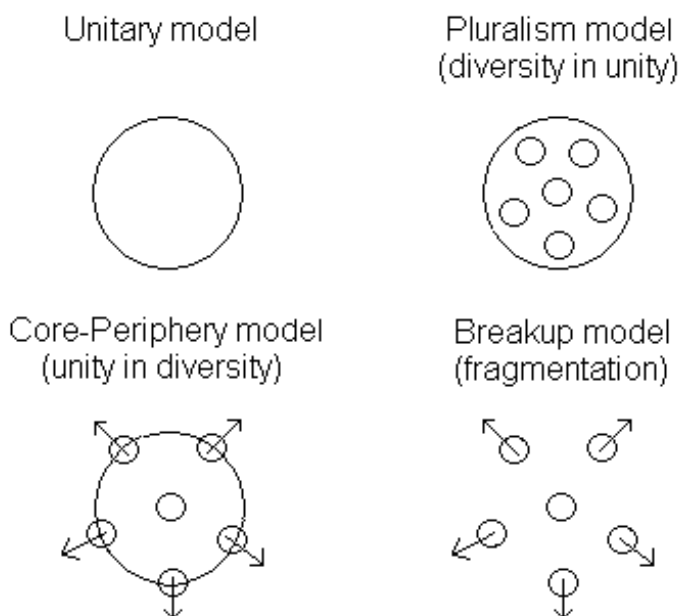
(Source: McQuail, 1997. 137)

In the pluralism model, external diversification grows in a limited way, but above all, the first signs of internal diversification appear. The programming starts to have diversified targets, still within a

unitary frame. The appearance of daytime and evening programming belongs to the internal diversification of the pluralism model, as do regional differences, and specific programming aimed at a certain audience targets in a privileged way.

In the third model, called "core-periphery," "the multiplication of channels makes possible additional and competing alternatives outside this framework. It becomes possible to enjoy a television diet that differs significantly from the majority or mainstream" (ibid.). This is the model that is created with commercial media and that according to McQuail is still ongoing.

In the final level, the "Breakup model", there is "extensive fragmentation and the disintegration of the central core. The audience is distributed over many different channels in non fixed patterns and there is only sporadically shared audience experiences" (ibid.).

The advent of new communication technologies comes when the third level, the core-periphery model, is already established. In any case, this potentially speeds up the evolution toward a "breakup" model, making this scenario ever more possible in a theoretical way (even if it is still quite far from actual realization).

In describing the four stages, McQuail has the world of television above all in mind, and considers its evolution principally as a quantitative increase in the media offering: more channels among which to choose.

However, to fully trace the possible path of audience fragmentation, I think it is opportune to include digital media into the analysis. To do this we will inevitably focus on their general characteristics, without looking at all the specific communication applications of digitalization. This extension is necessary to take into account other fronts of audience fragmentation, not expressed by the means of television, and that may make the McQuailian hypothesis of breakup even more extreme. In the final level of McQuail's model, there remains in fact a sharing of communication contents among the components of the audience, even if only sporadically and without pre-fixed schemes. This derives from the fact that television, on which the model is constructed, provides for "transmission," "broadcasting" (or "narrowcasting") and therefore a finite group of contents transmitted from one to many. The spectator decides the channel, but cannot obviously decide what will be transmitted in that moment.

In addition to the quantitative increase in the ability to send and receive signals that is offered by digital media, they also have brought about a qualitative change in the emergence of different forms of interactivity, both with the means of communication as well as with other users.

Bordewijk and Van Kaam proposed a classification of types of communication relationships that ends up being useful for fully understanding what is meant today by "audience fragmentation."

Using the two key variables of the "control over information storage" and "control over time, topic and place of communication", they define four types of media relationship, according to whether the variables are controlled by the individual user or by a media center, like for example a television station (fig. 2).

Fig. 2, Four patterns of communication relationship

		Control over information storage	
		central	individual
Control over time, topic and place of communication	central	**ALLOCUTION**	**REGISTRATION**
	individual	**CONSULTATION**	**CONVERSATION**

(*Source:* Bordewijk,B. and Van Kaam, B.*, Towards A New Classification of Tele-information Services*, cit.*)

Allocution is the media relationship in which a center controls both the characteristics of access and the information transmitted. The principal instances of the allocutory model are the national television networks where the station controls contents and transmits it in a single moment. The audience depends therefore on the central source both for acquisition of information as well as for ways of accessing it. The allocutory relationship is typical of the paradigm of mass communication, where there is a uni-directional communication relationship in force, a limited market of media offerings and reduced possibility for feedback.

Actually, the McQuail model discussed above (fig. 1), describes the evolution of audience limited to this type of communication relationship, embodied above all by television. But we can see what the other possible media relationships are and how new media make them possible and operative in new media diets, so that they start to represent a significant part of daily media experience.

The consultative relationship is obtained when the control of information is centralized but the audiences (maybe it would be better in this case to say "users") choose specific contents among those proposed, as well as the time and the place for their acquisition. Consulting an Internet site falls into this category (for example looking for the timetable for a train on the national railway's site).

In the conversational relationship, both the information and the control of access to it are in the individual area. This is the case with discussion groups or so-called virtual communities.

In the end, registration occurs when an interconnected network of individual users can be kept under control by a center that keeps track of or monitors exchanges of information, and manages the information that is gathered in this way. This is the case, for example, of the central registration of telephone calls, but it may also explain the phenomenon of forums held within Internet sites, often used by the managers of the sites to get commercial information about their users.

If we use the concepts of Bordewijk and Van Kaam to describe the frame of innovation brought about by the new media, we can say that they have marked the end of the monopoly of the allocutory model and have extended communication relationships to every one of the other three types of relationship.

Audience fragmentation in the new channels described by McQuail is mixed today with an increase in the types of media relationships as described by Bordewick and Van Kaam.

The extreme projection of these two trends is a situation where the final level of fragmentation ("Breakup" in McQuail's model) combines with the end of the predominance of the allocutory model. In this way, new types of communication relationships combine their differentiation potential with the quantitative increase of channels. Even if far from actually being achieved, this outcome is technically possible today.

The Audience's Activity in Interpretation and Selection

What clearly emerges from this analysis of the fronts of change in media offering and consumption is that the concept of "audience activity" must be inserted in a partly different horizon from the one in which media studies operated during the era of mass media.

From Lazarsfeld to British cultural studies, the study of audience activity in the "paradigm of mass media" has mostly concerned divergent negotiation of meanings of texts, filters made up by social and cultural backgrounds, possible opposite readings with respect to the intention of the broadcaster. In a word, it focused on the interpretive dimension of audience activity. In fact, if the available communicative possibilities are few, audience activity is found principally in different uses and readings of a closed group of proposals.

If, on the other hand, we take into consideration a system of offerings that is qualitatively and quantitatively abundant, the dimension of the selection from among the media proposals appears to greatly increase in importance. Although the selection activity has been studied as a relevant

phenomenon for understanding media consumption also before the advent of digitalization (especially by the "uses and gratification" research), it is gaining today a much greater relevance.

Levy and Windhal (cited by McQuail, 2001, 87) underscore that the various forms of audience activity do not all regard the same moment of the media experience. "They may refer to the precedent expectations and choices, or to the activity during the experience, or to the moment subsequent to use" (ibid). They are not therefore able to be substituted for each other. However, one can gather from the analysis done in the preceding paragraphs that different kinds of audience activity may acquire centrality according to the model of the offering in a certain historical period.

This means that the "paradigm of mass media", with its audience concentration, gives greater significance to activities of an interpretive type, while the digital paradigm to those of a selective type. It is from this latter point of view, that of the creation of one's own specific media diets, that I here consider audience activity.

Using the starting points present in Gilder (1995), it may be said that in a system of concentrated media offerings, the audiences are forced into communication relationships whose contents do not represent their "first choice". Standardized consumption forces the broadcaster to construct contents on a sort of "lowest common denominator" of public tastes (often represented, according to Gilder, by the less noble aspects of human interest). In this view, new media and the communication possibilities they offer should instead make possible the regrouping of interest niches, and thus offer the audiences the chance to opt for their "first choices". It follows then, that the more a consumer of communication can construct a diet of "first choices", the more relevant his activity of selection is, rather than that of interpretation.

It may incidentally be cited that the possibility of making "first choices" has increased not only from the growth of communication offerings, but also from the different domestic use that is made of the media, in particular new media. The physical multiplication of media devices inside and outside the home, and the strictly personal nature of their use, eliminate some of the traditional domestic limitations of personal choice. "For example, the traditional notion of 'family television' (Morley, 1986), with its associated hierarchies of gender and generation, is rapidly becoming obsolete, for the very possibility of personal/private television viewing created by multi-set homes is transforming the meaning of both solitary and shared viewing" (Livingstone, 1999).

To sum up, I feel that the change taking place in the world of media should shift, at least in part, the attention of scholars to the act of selection that happens in various moments before actual use. This dimension of activity on the part of audiences must occupy an important place in audience studies. They have to inquire about what the determinant factors of choices are both inside and outside the world of media.

The enormous growth in the possibilities of selection due to the development of the means of communication can, in any case, foreshadow possible scenarios that are very different from each other. On a typical, ideal level, we can identify two macro-types of media selection that develop in a very different way the meaning of audience fragmentation.

On the one hand, we have individual factors that can give place to audience fragmentation that we may define as "casual". That is, each person chooses the offering according to his/her own tastes, passions and contingent circumstances. If this were the case, while still worrisome for advertising agents, the fragmentation of the audiences would not represent a new front of stable social differentiation.

More significant for their potential influx on society are instead the choices dictated by social factors, that can give way to a "systematic" fragmentation that would stably group people belonging to certain segments or social groups. People would tend in this case to choose their media consumption on a socially determined way, so that audiences would be more and more overlapping to segments of society already characterized for other reasons.

I will explain here why I feel that the manifestation of fragmentation is to be expected inevitably - at least in part - in its "systematic" version and why audience activity in the Network Society is increasing its social relevance.

The Exogenous Trends in the Regrouping of Media Audiences: Social Fragmentation

Castells (1997) bases his work on the analytical distinction between two kinds of sources of current social change: those that are of a technological nature and those that refer to economic, political or cultural innovations. He thus considers that change in the information society is more important where technology goes hand in hand with the independent long wave of economic and social change. What at first glance may appear as the inevitable effect of a new technology is often the result of a co-acting social reality that gives sustenance and breadth to that technology's potential.

Following this analytical framework, the study of the impact of new media on audience is not so much about forecasting what this or that new communication possibility might provoke. It is instead about discovering those sources of social change where new technologies can be exploited with important consequences.

Therefore, if there is today a technological potential for audience fragmentation, we must understand what are the possible interacting social forces. This will let us understand where are the potential lines of fracture of the mass audience as well as the ways for regrouping. The manifestation of new possibilities of differentiation in media consumption is a question that is socially determined.

Here I will deal with the question whether there exist growing trends toward fragmentation in our society, irregardless of new media possibilities that, however, can significantly interact with them. The answer to these questions has primary importance in linking the discussion on media consumption change with some of the wider social changes. If, in fact, as I have already pointed out, the differentiation in media offerings and subsequently in audiences, happened at the same time as other independent trends of social fragmentation, we would have a double pressure framework of fragmentation in the media system, one that is endogenous and one that is exogenous to it.

I will here consider some of the traits of social change that appear to be able to interact with audience fragmentation. These forces play against the total "breakup" of audiences that I described above as the extreme outcome of the fragmentation process. They act, rather, in the re-grouping of fragmented audiences, even if in different and disjointed forms with respect to the traditional mass audience.

In the social system that has developed around the so-called "Fordist capitalism" there was a general tendency toward inclusion and social homogenization. This may seem paradoxical if one thinks of the much more marked fronts of division present in the Fordist society: first among these that of class but also of gender and political ideology. Nevertheless, the divisions were regulated in such a way as to be included in a single system, which some authors have defined as "organized capitalism" (Offe, 1985; Lash e Hurry, 1987).

Discussing the passage from Fordist systems to post-Fordist systems, Mingione (1997) explicitly speaks of "fragmentation". In the associative regulation of work that is particular to Fordism, he says there existed a sort of integrated division. Mingione underscores how that model of social regulation of work is historically concluding and speaks instead of a new phase that he defines as "fragmented (or flexible) regulation". "The ways of reorganization of the advanced economies express forms of new social relations […] complex and varied *networks* of cooperation (Castells, 1997), where associative and universalistic dominant parameters constitute more of an obstacle to development and not a propulsive factor. The problem is that the new mix of economic sociality that is developing produces in its current state a deficit of social integration" (ibid, 137).

In the advent of post-Fordism we are witnessing a more general de-homogenization of behaviors with respect to the preceding phase. This happens both in consumption (in the past influenced by an offering based on scale economies and standardization), as well as in family and social behaviors. Such a trend is also visible in the decline that methods of socio-demographic segmentation have

experienced in marketing, substituted by psychographic segmentation or those based on the analysis of lifestyles (see for example Moores, 1993, 215-223)[1].

The social transition summed up by Castells (1997) in the passage from industrial capitalism to informational capitalism is in part overlapped by the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Regarding the reorganization of social groups in the information society, Castells (1997) develops an argument on two levels. First, he reveals the creation of information networks that link dominant circuits of society and that set aside a firm rooting in space and time. Castells' idea is that the important actors of information globalization (places, people, companies, institutions) are linked among themselves through networks. These actors act as junctions in what he defines as "the space of flows". This also implies a separation between the junctions themselves – geographically distant but near in the space of flows – and what is around them – geographically near but very far away in the space of flows. The metropolis is an example: "What is most significant about mega-cities is that they are connected externally to global networks and to segments of their own countries, while internally disconnecting local populations that are either functionally unnecessary or socially disruptive" (Castells, 1997, 436). A network organization, paradoxically, offers greater possibilities for separation among various segments of society, in that the interest prevails for establishing links between similar junctions that can easily produce value through cooperation in specific moments.

This mechanism also functions on a micro level, and the space of flows thus becomes the basis for constructing new groups in which the individual contains his/her own social activity: "The nodes of the space of flows include residential and leisure-oriented spaces which, along with the location of headquarters and their ancillary services, tend to cluster dominant functions in carefully segregated spaces, with easy access to cosmopolitan complexes of arts, culture and entertainment […] I propose the hypothesis that the space of flows is made up of personal micro-networks that project their interests in functional macro-networks throughout the global set of interactions in the space of flows" (ibid. 446).

On the other hand, this same phenomenon produces in reaction identity needs that oppose the uprooting caused by information networks. Groups that Castells calls "cultural communes" re-form on this trend, and their identity is based on territory, on religious and ethnic belonging and on historical memory. "When networks dissolve time and space, people anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic memory. When the patriarchal sustainment of personality breaks down, people affirm the transcendent value of family and community, as God's will" (Castells, 1997b, 66). The description of a similar dialectical panorama between the forces of dis-aggregation and those of re-aggregation may also be found in Giddens (1994). The latter, like in Castells, are not limited to counterbalancing the former, but regroup in new forms, in completely new models of social relationships. Giddens states (ibid. 79) that in the conditions of modernity, more and more people are living in circumstances where the primary aspects of daily life are organized by "disembedded" institutions that link local policies with globalizing social relationships. But, Giddens continues, it is necessary "to complement the notion of disembedding with one of reembedding. By this I mean the reappropriation or recasting of disembedded social relations so as to pin them down (however partially or transitorily) to local conditions of time and place".

Castells and Giddens paint in this sense similar pictures: global connections uproot social relationships from their traditional contexts; in contrast to this, new social relationships try to recuperate the lost rooting, even if in new forms.

Both these fronts of change, disembedding and reembedding, the networks and the collective identities, constitute a fertile meeting ground with the possibilities of communicative reorganization offered by new technologies.

It is very interesting at this point to introduce Lievrouw's (2001) contribution, that finally brings the framework of social fragmentation to unite itself with that related to communication technologies.

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[1] On this point Moores (1993, 215) reveals that marketing discourses may be read as signs of fundamental changes that took place in capitalistic ways of production and consumption during the twentieth century. In marketing offices of media agencies, moreover, the concept of "fragmentation" has been common at least since the '80s.

She first of all proposes a fast review of the most recent contributions on some of the fronts of social fragmentation: "Recently, a wide-ranging scholarly and popular commentary has grown up around apparent declines in broad-based social participation, especially in the USA and other developed nations (Putnam, 2000). Some writers worry that whatever sense of a public sphere or civil society that existed in the past is giving way to a new Zeitgeist of social separatism and mistrust (Bellah et al., 1985; Gitlin, 1995; Hughes, 1993). Others, especially in Europe, see the change as a welcome break from the totalizing political trends of the past and their disastrous consequences, and hail the 1990s as a <decade without social movements> (Lovink, 2000)" (ibid. 8).

Subsequently, Lievrouw discusses the role of social differentiation from a neo-functionalist view. In traditional functionalist theory, she states, differentiation is seen as the distribution of complex functions among specialized groups that are coordinated among themselves. Integration, in contrast, is the cohesion that allows for cooperation of the separate parts.

The differences among social groups push either toward integration based on coordination and communion of some interests, or toward fragmentation and separatism. Lievrouw underscores how neo-functionalism, above all thanks to the work of Luhmann and Alexander, has incorporated attention for social change, conflict and above all, social differentiation while maintaining the strength of the original layout. Continuing to place attention on mechanisms that allow for the integration of complexity, Lievrouw says, these authors confront differentiation in a polyhedric way. This is seen no longer as a temporary situation that tends toward recomposition, but also in its permanent role within the social structure. For this, she maintains, the neo-functionalist theory of differentiation is a good starting point to inquire if ICT contribute to reducing or reinforcing social integration.

Reorganization of the Audience and Society

I will now try to close the circle and after having treated social and media fragmentation separately, I will discuss theoretical scenarios that may integrate the two phenomena.

Lievrouw (2001) notes how the sense of decline of a wide social participation has grown contemporaneously to the proliferation of ICT and that "instead of McLuhan's global village, some see the potential for new media technologies to be adapted by countless self-sufficient <neo-tribes> that need not participate in larger arenas of public discourse or social movements (Lash and Urry, 1994: 317-18)" (ibid. 8).

Even in Sunstein (2001) a central idea is that the growing possibility of choice, selection and personalization in media brings about a differentiation - and isolation towards the outside - of groups of users that Sunstein calls "enclaves". For example, through the information services that Negroponte (1993) defines *Daily me*[2], people start to request in advance of being informed on subjects of interest to them. In this way they circumscribe their use of media to areas that are more and more personalized.

It seems useful to me, first of all, to compare this distinction between "global village" and "neo-tribes" with the dialectic that I brought to light above, summing up Castells' and Giddens' contributions: the one between globalized networks and "cultural communes," between disembedded experiences and new re-embedded ones.

Lievrouw (1998) has examined the ways in which new communication technologies may be used to create or reinforce environments of interaction or separate subcultures. In a subsequent work, the author more explicitly argues that new technologies may push toward differentiation in

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[2] Negroponte (1993) calls "Daily me" the result of the extreme personalization of information services, where everything that you receive responds to a choice of interests made ahead of time by the user.

contemporary society (Lievrouw, 2001). The role of mass media, she says, is often perceived as integrative, a manifestation of common interest, of majority politics, of established social movements, of mass production and consumption. Today, to the contrary, new media seem sometimes to have more to do with distinction, difference, the minority point of view, local interests, a policy of specific interest, niche production and consumption. The core of her reasoning, however, is aimed at describing the forms that this differentiation takes, those that she calls "information environments". "From a neo-functionalist perspective, then, we can propose that social relations and social structure both shape, and are shaped by, different groups' particular information resources, communication relations and enabling technologies. Information environments are social settings or milieu in which these resources, communication relations and technologies undergo a structuration-type process of change called informing" (ibid).

Thus, it is possible to construct a theoretical connection between the creation of post-Fordist social re-aggregations about which Giddens and Castells speak, and the formation of groups characterized by homogeneous media consumption about which Lievrouw and Sunstein speak.

While they represent analyses that differ in structure and objective, Lievrouw's information environments and Sustein's enclaves on the one hand, and Castells' networks and cultural communes and Giddens' re-embedded relationships on the other, are in some ways a reading of the same phenomenon where dynamics of social and media regrouping can overlap.

With the increase in qualitative and quantitative possibilities of communication, the need also grows for a guide in the selection that inevitably the individual must make. The activity of selection on the part of the audience - that is at the basis of fragmentation - becomes more difficult as the communication universe becomes more vast. In addition to this, the selection performed must be relevant for the role and social position of the individual. Thus, the relationship between the increased need for a selection guide and for belonging to a group with which one identifies tends to be more explicit. The two things end up overlapping in part and the group may become the media "agenda setter" for those who belong to it. In conclusion, in this vision the social group becomes closer to an information environment. "People must first recognize the *relevance* of information, that is, whether it is interesting or useful to them personally or to others they know. Therefore, the presence of information can be distinguished from its perceived relevance among people in the environment" (Lievrouw, 15).

In reference to what he calls cultural communes, Castells (ibid. 67) speaks of another characteristic that comes from the sharing of information inside new groups. Next to a clear differentiation toward the outside, they show a marked internal homogeneity: "This negation of civil societies and political institutions where cultural communes emerge leads to the closing of the boundaries of the commune. In contrast to pluralistic, differentiated civil societies, cultural communes display little internal differentiation."

This is the same mechanism also described by Sunstein, who speaks of it instead in relation to media consumption, especially Internet. Sunstein is worried about the long-term consequences of such forms of communicative isolation through extreme personalization possibilities. By eliminating unpleasant subjects and opinions from their "media diet," citizens would become less integrated and would more easily develop forms of extremism. Sunstein even states that democracy requires that citizens should not be exposed only to ideas and arguments that they have chosen in advance: "Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself" (Sunstein, 2001, 8). The perspective of personalization of media consumption with the constitution of homogenized enclaves is, in this view, a danger for the shared cultural bases of democracy. Maximum rationalization of media consumption that is equivalent to the predominance of Gilder's "first choice," casts some doubts on its long-term effects: democracy and media personalization, for their own characteristics, could end up in conflict.

Conclusions: The Study of Audience from Fordism to the Network Society

The traditional mass audience, with which most of the tradition of communication studies has dealt, is the product of "several forces: urban concentration; technologies of relatively cheap mass dissemination (economies of scale); limited supplies of "software" (media content) and high costs of individual reception; social centralization (monopolism or statism); and nationalism" (McQuail, 1997, 128).

These forces largely coincide with those that define the form of society known as Fordist capitalism. The mass audience may thus rightly be considered the typical form of media consumption in this stage of development of western societies.

In this paper I tried instead to delineate the forces that may produce new forms of media consumption, typical of the Network Society as described by Castells. Thus I have proposed an integrated reading of the change in media consumption and the social change taking place. Analyzing authors who discuss two different fields (global social change and the change in media consumption) I find that the categories used in both fields are cut out on the same general principles and therefore offer the opportunity for looking at these two phenomena in a unified manner.

Concepts constructed on the world of media such as that of *information environment* (Lievrouw) and *enclave* (Sustein) betray their strict relationship with the social groups that Giddens and Castells talk about, those deriving from the phenomena of *disembedding* and *reembedding*, or the dominant networks and the *cultural communes*. A relationship emerges between social groups and media groups that becomes much tighter as the offerings of the media market increase quantitatively and become more complex qualitatively.

In this situation, in fact, the selection activity acquires greater importance than in a framework of audience concentration and limited offering of communication. Faced with the differentiation of informative worlds, it is the social groups to which one belongs that furnish a guide to the selection of information. This activity acquires social relevance for its role in social identity building.

From this comes the tendency for internal homogeneity in the new audience groups, and for stronger external differentiation, cut out on the same characteristics that distinguish the new social groups described by Giddens and Castells.

In the era of new media, audience segmentation occurs more and more on the basis of socio-informative differentiations, and media consumption will thus be more and more strictly linked to the dynamics of social groups. The latter will constitute one of the characterizing factors of audience formation, and audiences will be, for scholars, an important observation point onto society. The relationship between social groups and media groups presents the conditions for evolving in a partial overlapping.

Actually, there are reasons for not expecting a univocal demonstration of these phenomena. Forces at play against the trend toward such a fragmentation of mass audience may also be described. Van Dijk (2001, 2002) for example, underlines the counterbalancing power of agenda setting exercised by political and cultural institutions, that will continue to represent a barrier to the triggering of a vicious cycle of fragmentation. Media networks that constitute the communicative panorama, while presenting growing complexity, will always remain in part inter-related. In fact, fragmentation will be probably limited both by common themes that make up an inevitable convergence and by the few probabilities that a highly interconnected network can completely isolate some of its parts.

In any case, I believe that the reading that has been given here of the evolution in the socio-media panorama can be considered useful for explaining at least a part of the evolution in media consumption for the coming decades.

If this is true, there will be two new principal developments for inquiry in sociological research on the media. These are strictly linked to the explicit inclusion of the current social dynamics in the study of audience.

The first regards the problem of social cohesion which is based, especially in modern societies, on sharing of information and participation - even if passive - in public discourse. The restructuring of traditional mechanisms of mass communication that I described here means an increase in difficulty

for media "in structuring the cohesive nucleus of a society" (Wolf, 1992, 190). McQuail (1997) expresses the same worry when speaking of the consequences of fragmentation on the power of the audience: "On the face of it, such trends also entail a shift of <power> to media consumer putting the receiver more in charge and reducing the manipulative capacity of communication production and distribution organizations. However, it also means that there is no longer any mechanism for exercising this new-found power on the <collective> behalf" (ibid., 133,134).

In the Network Society, the public sphere seems to become more and more complex, since it is formed by many networks that only in part overlap. Among them, the media networks play a role that is increasingly important. Along with the increase in complexity in the communication offering, there will be an increase in the importance of unifying junctions that act as links between areas that otherwise risk remaining disconnected. Public service will be required principally to cover this function.

The second topic that appears to emerge from a possible framework of socio-media fragmentation regards the relationship between media and social inequality. As has already been brought to light from several sources (Di Maggio et al., 2004; Van Dijk, 2005; and in Italy, Sartori, 2006), the debate on the digital divide only regards a small part of a more general problem. It opens up in the moment in which the possibilities of media use (not only the computer) depend more and more directly on the cultural and social resources of the individual.

Having a certain "media diet" will come to mean whether or not one has access to some types of information and/or participates in specific social events. Moreover, while mass media were limited to entertainment and general information, the new media are the same with which we work, we learn, we participate in the life of social groups. Activities that were once very different thus converge in the use of the same communication instruments and the media become much more pervasive in daily life. The selection of a certain "media diet" will thus have an importance that goes far beyond the boundaries reserved for the old mass media and will influence (and be influenced by) the cultural, professional and social life of a person. The strategic selection of the offerings of new media is based on individual cultural and social resources and may thus become a new front of inequality, almost completely absent in the use of old analogical mass media. If in the era of television it was assumed that the literacy necessary to utilize mass communication was immediate (Meyrowitz 1991, 137), it is probable on the other hand that new media will define a new cultural stratification.

In the framework of the debate on the Network Society, the themes of inequality and social integration will for this reason become more and more explicitly a part of the study of long-term effects of the means of communication.

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