

Xingzhi Zhao*

Communication and Culture in the Meta-Media Era

A perspective from the semiotics of communication

Abstract: With the rapid development of digital media technology represented by the Internet and convergent media, human society entered the “meta-media age” at the end of the twentieth century. Regarded as the “media of media,” meta-media, or the terminal screens connected by the Internet, integrate all existing media forms and their communication patterns by translating, remodeling, and even re-forming their sign-texts. Accordingly, “remediation” has become the dominant way to construct the meaning of signs in meta-media. It should be noted that the remediation of meta-media changes not only the form of the existing media, but also the way we communicate with signs. Hence, from the perspective of the semiotics of communication, this paper considers the features and cultural influence of symbolic communication in the meta-media age based on Roman Jakobson’s six factors/functions of signs model.

Keywords: digital media; remediation; Roman Jakobson; symbolic communication

*Corresponding author: Xingzhi Zhao, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China, e-mail: snnjkk@163.com

1 New media or meta-media?

Technology and new media have changed communication at every level of society, which has attracted the attention of many scholars. However, the definition and features of the new media still need to be clarified, as the determiner “new” is vague, and we cannot distinguish “new,” “old,” and traditional media just by the timing of their appearance. Hence, it is necessary to redefine new media before discussing the variations in semiosis and media culture in the digital age.

The term “new,” belonging to the category of time, is a relative concept. For instance, written languages are new relative to verbal ones, as is printing

relative to manuscripts, television relative to radio, Internet relative to television, and so on. It is difficult to adopt a relative concept to discuss a trend in media evolution. Importantly, new media have not taken the place of traditional media, but instead have been integrated with the former, continuing to serve human communication in a refined form. For example, print media news can be digitalized and represented on a screen where readers can comment on or forward it. Unidirectional modes of communication have now become bidirectional. In this case, if the sign-text carried by traditional media (e.g. newspapers) reforms its mode of representation with the help of digital media, is it an example of new, old, or traditional media?

To solve the above problem, this paper advances the term “meta-media” to refer to all forms of digital media from the perspective of the semiotics of communication. The original meaning of the Greek prefix “meta-” was ‘after’ until Aristotle named his philosophical volume *Metaphysics* because it came after the volume entitled *Physics*. Thereafter, “meta-” gained a new meaning, that is, the generalization of the world’s principles, as physics is the study of the fundamental rules of nature. In this sense, all “meta-” theories can be regarded as discussions of the “layer-on-layer” mechanisms behind theories, terms, or phenomena. Hence, “meta-media” in this paper refers to the media of the media. Media are the vehicles that store and send the signs which are the physical carriers of the sign vehicle. In other words, signs and meaning cannot be communicated without media. However, media do not carry the original sign-text, but text that has been mediated by other media, and these are the meta-media.

Examples of meta-media and the semiosis mediated by meta-media can easily be found in the digital era. For instance, when a piece of news in a newspaper is transferred to the website, the screen as the medium now carries the text (originally represented by the newspaper) re-represented on the website. Similarly, a symphony recorded in a studio is now played on an Internet platform, and accordingly changed into a new form of music medium, that is, digital music on a computer or a cell phone. Based on this, we can safely summarize meta-media as essentially the media that replace or integrate with other media, and sign-texts on meta-media as a remediation of text from an original medium. Hence, all digital platforms, namely computers, smart phones, tablets, etc., belong in the meta-media category. The most significant feature of these meta-media is that all forms of media that appeared before them can be integrated with them in a mimetic or virtual form. For example, any social network such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, or WeChat also contains the other forms of traditional media, including characters, audio, video, and images.

Glazier (2002: 115–119) named the above meta-media “screen pages,” vividly summarizing their major features. The content on the screens of devices such as computers and cell phones originates from other media. In other words, the form and content of meta-media are translations, transformations, or remoldings of those in traditional media. The replacement of written text, television, or radio with screens as meta-media allows the audience to participate in content production and activates the interactive elements of texts, turning the semiosis of meta-media into a dynamic and bidirectional process (see Ellis 2009: 89). Briefly, the significance of the “meta” in meta-media lies in the way they integrate with secondary media via the virtual nature of digital technology, that is, the remediation of texts originating from secondary media. At the representational level, this not only integrates text, images, and sound, but also involves all of the types of mass and interpersonal communication, such as narratives, arguments, and games. Meta-media simultaneously contain one-to-one and many-to-many communication modes, which are widely adopted in today’s communication practices.

Marshall McLuhan (1994) seems to have foreseen the coming of the meta-media age in his media doctrine. He points out that “old” media provide the content of new media, which are at the core of meta-media: “The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph” (see McLuhan 1994: 19). He claims that the characteristics of traditional media blend into those of meta-media in the process of media evolution. The essence of his motto, “media is the message,” is that media themselves, not their content, model the meaning of communication and provide the driving force of human culture.

We can re-interpret McLuhan’s words from the perspective of semiotics as follows: meta-media in the digital age not only transform traditional media into content but also reform the process of signification and sign communication, in turn reshaping the cultural norms of communication. Communication is an interactive process by which sign-users convey and communicate their meaning by virtue of signs, and accordingly build or maintain the community of meaning. The meaning is the purpose of communication, the sign or sign-text is its essential condition and medium, and media are the vehicles of the communication. Hence, signs and media are indispensable elements of the process of communicating meaning, or in Peirce’s words, semiosis.

Based on the above, “meta-media are the media of the media” refers to the remediation by digital media of the sign-texts that used to be the secondary media, and their contents as a whole. Therefore, the sign-texts in meta-media are remediated texts, while the meaning they carry is a “re-representation” of the initial meaning carried by the secondary media. This definition is similar to

that of Yiheng Zhao's term "meta-sign": it is a re-representation of the representation of the meaning, that is, a sign that takes the place of the secondary sign. The secondary sign could be a sign that carries the original meaning when a human being faces reality (e.g. an apple), or the mediated sign-text (e.g. the word "apple" or a painting of the apple) (see Zhao 2017: 271). This definition indicates that a sign-text also belongs to meta-signs, as mediated signs, which are "upgraded signs," exist specifically in human culture.

Semiotically, the mechanism of remediation of a sign-text (e.g. secondary media) by meta-media plays a significant role in changing both the signifying structure and its semiosis in the digital age. Compared with the first representation, the re-representation by meta-media is essentially a cross-layer, and is accordingly more vivid because of its variations (see Zhao 2017: 272). This can promote the closeness of minds between communicators. For instance, it is different when a film is played in a cinema or on a video website (e.g. YouTube, Bilibili, AcFun). A film in the cinema represents the narrative on the screen, while video websites re-remediate the narrative on the audience's screen terminals, where they can use "bullet screens" or comments to take part in the process of meaning production and communication instantly. People in the digital age can also share, comment, or click "like" or "unlike" simultaneously when reading news on screens, while this kind of news communication is not achievable in traditional newspapers.

The above cases show how semiosis differs when signs are signified on traditional versus meta-media. Although meta-media are common in the digital age, scholars have seldom seriously discussed the sociocultural consequences of the resulting change in semiosis. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, meta-media reconstruct the sign-texts by remediation. This kind of remediation not only upgrades the modes of the original media, but also creates a brand-new mode of communication based on symbolic interaction or interactive semiosis. Moreover, this new type of semiosis in the meta-media age continues to remold the interactions between people and the media, and also media culture itself.

2 Variations in communication via meta-media

After clarifying the semiotic essence of meta-media, it is necessary to go deeper into the mechanism of remediation and the way it remodels the principles of symbolic communication in human culture. As mentioned above, the sign-texts in meta-media not only retain some of the qualities of the original media, but

also adopt unique signifying features from the meta-media. Hence, to ponder the principles of semiosis and communication in meta-media, it is essential to explore the signifying features of the texts that are remediated by meta-media, and also to consider how communicators negotiate their meaning based on those texts. To do so, this paper adopts and develops Roman Jakobson's theory of six factors and functions of communication.

In "Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics" (1960), Jakobson identifies six factors constituting semiosis, namely the addressor, addressee, content, message, contact, and code. These factors present a biased relationship in each semiosis. In other words, if one factor turns out to be dominant, it directs the interpretive process of the sign-text. Jakobson's theory further indicates that sign-users (both sender and receiver) are affected by these formal elements of the texts in the process of communication and interpretation.

In the meta-media, we can easily find sign-texts dominated by each of the above six factors. First, according to Jakobson, when the addressor is the dominant element, the text demonstrates a significantly "expressive" quality, such as in an exclamation in verbal communication. Selfie software or apps such as Meitu and Meipai in China are typical examples of expressive texts. Second, the communication is "conative" when the texts lean toward the addressee. For instance, the "forward" function and online donations and gifts can be regarded as this type. Third, in "referential" sign-texts the content dominates the other five elements in the communication. Digital journalism or digital journal databases are examples in meta-media. Fourth, the "poetic function" can be demonstrated in meta-media communication when text is dominated by message, and the rise of visual images in communication is one of the most representative examples. Fifth, communication can be "phatic" when making contact, or the medium itself, is dominant. In this case the aim of communication is not to convey information but to occupy the channel. The "like" buttons in social networks and live streaming belong to this type. Last, when communication focuses on the code, it performs a metalinguistic function (see Jakobson 1960: 356). This function is commonly found in meta-media, such as "Click here for more information" in Web articles, inviting the reader to interpret the text itself.

We can further develop Jakobson's theory from an evolutionary perspective. In his recent monograph *Philosophical semiotics* (2017), Yiheng Zhao found that Jakobson's six factors/functions can be combined into three pairs based on their growth versus decline: as one factor in the pair becomes more dominant, the other gradually declines in importance. Hence, the referential function pairs with the poetic function, as the former focuses on the object or content and the other on the textual form itself. Similarly, the conative function, which focuses

on the addressee, contrasts with the expressive function, which emphasizes the addressor. Furthermore, the phatic function contrasts with the metalinguistic function, as the former prolongs communication while the latter needs codes to interpret the text.

Zhao then considers the history of human culture, and finds that dominance in the above three pairs has varied over time. To summarize, the referential function (which peaked during the Enlightenment period but declined with the deconstruction of rationality), the expressive function (which began to decline after the Romantic Period because of the analytical turn), and the metalinguistic function (which peaked during the Enlightenment, before today's multiculturalism decreased the need for a unified interpretation) are increasingly losing their influence. In contrast, there is a dramatic increase in the other three factors, namely the poetic function (increased by pan-aestheticism which turns to entertainment as one of the most important leisure activities), the conative function (as the oversupply problem pushes markets to focus on stimulating consumption), and the phatic function (because the rise of digital media makes phatic communication the dominant cultural mode) (see Zhao 2017: 327–328).

The above principle can be adopted to describe the development of communication and its media culture in the meta-media age. Specifically, the following three functions are gradually declining in the meta-media age:

- **Referential function:** Peaked in the era of print and then declined because of today's media diversity.
- **Expressive function:** Peaked in the mass media era but is declining today owing to the rise of media users (versus audiences) in the meta-media age.
- **Metalinguistic function:** Peaked in the pre-print era, and declined because interactive communication makes standard or uniform interpretation unnecessary.

In contrast, the following functions are becoming increasingly important:

- **Poetic function:** Due to pan-aestheticism and the pervasive visual turn in the meta-media age.
- **Conative function:** Caused by the rise of recommended and commercial communication.
- **Phatic function:** Because interactivity now dominates meta-media communication.

3 Cultural variations in meta-media

3.1 Poetic-dominated media culture

The poetic feature of signs, according to Jakobson, is that the sign itself becomes the dominant factor affecting the interpreter's understanding of its meaning. "This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects" (see Jakobson 1960: 356). In other words, the sign in itself, instead of its object, turns out to be the meaning.

Accordingly, the poetic function dominates today's online culture largely because of the functions of the media and their ways of remediating the signs. It is obvious that any webpage contains both visual and audio elements, for instance, pictures, video, and audio. Although they are native to meta-media, online homepages continue to increase their visual elements, adopting more pictures in place of words to convey their primary information. Hence, even text news, when published in meta-media, is naturally converted into multimodal form with interactive elements.

The above phenomenon can be summarized as the pan-image or visual turn in the meta-media age, an important manifestation of today's poetic-dominated media culture. In other words, visualization, as a poetic factor, dominates semiosis in the meta-media. The most representative example is the semiosis of information-sharing social media, namely, Weibo in China and Twitter in the West. A "post" in Weibo is required to contain no more than 140 Chinese characters (cf. 280 English words in Twitter) and nine pictures or one short video. It is these formal characteristics that have made pictorial modes the dominant factor in social media communication. In other words, the appeal and impact of pictures or other visual elements have overtaken those of characters or content in determining the number of "clicks" on social media. This, in turn, has shaped a new poetic-dominant communication pattern in the meta-media.

The poetic culture is also the major reason for the prevalence of "visual journalism" or "data journalism" in terms of media practice. The development of streaming technology, by integrating all elements into one platform, including image, diagram, audio, and video, has made visual journalism the dominant way for today's media organizations to share news. For instance, *People's Daily*, China's largest newspaper, is a typical "quality paper" with a classical layout and few pictures in the print edition. However, its Weibo account has a totally different style. The majority of its news, although the content remains the same as in the print version, is published with "stickers"

that are popular among its young audience. Some of the print news, if transferred to the social media edition, is re-edited by adopting illustrations or short videos for better reception.

In terms of the audience or users of meta-media, these poetic factors lead the way in communicating social meaning. For instance, in online communication, young Chinese adults prefer using emojis or stickers to discuss public or political issues (see Tang 2016). And under-one-minute videos covering nearly every aspect of everyday life have become the primary form of meaning sharing on social media. According to *The 44th China statistical report on Internet development* (2019: 44), the number of short-video users has reached 648 million, accounting for 75.8 per cent of all Internet users. Hence, we can safely conclude that in the meta-media age, we speak our minds through visual signs.

Obviously, poetic-dominated semiosis has cultural consequences, the most salient being the trend of “pan-aesthetization” today. When every sign-text emphasizes art forms, especially visual forms, and different cultures turn to focus on the aesthetic function, the nature of the culture is substantially changed (see Zhao 2017: 303). Hence, when sign-texts are all aestheticized or form-oriented, it seems less important to interpret the meaning the text refers to. Accordingly, the sensation of the form has taken the place of meaning interpretation, becoming the new basis of today’s culture.

3.2 Conative-dominated media culture

The conative feature consists in all receiver-oriented texts. As many scholars of speech-act theory point out, perlocution is the “by-product” of any communication activity (see Watts 1981: 34), and can be used to distinguish meta-media from traditional media.

The mass media, such as newspapers, radio broadcast, and television, conduct mainly one-sided communication, and therefore the texts they carry are almost always sender-oriented, or in Jakobson’s terms, “expressive.” Accordingly, the content on mass media focuses mainly on the accuracy and authority of the information source. Its audience is relatively passive, as efficient ways to receive their feedback are lacking. By contrast, the text on meta-media is conative because it includes embedded interactive functions, namely “forward,” “comment,” “recommend,” and so on. These allow the audience (or “media users,” more precisely) to actively express their feelings or opinions and participate in meaning production through communication. Hence, from sender to receiver, from transmitting to sharing meaning, “being

received and re-created” become the dominant characteristics of meta-media communication.

Klaus Jensen borrows from J. L. Austin’s book *How to do things with words* to vividly describe the current situation of meta-media communication, that is, how to do things with meta-communication (2013). He further indicates that the most significant case of conative communication is the rise of recommended communication: “The focus of attention is on users as collectives or segments, who may or may not continue to communicate as they have done in the past” (see Jensen 2013). In other words, promoting user action by adopting sign-texts is the core of meta-media communication.

Examples of recommended services as conative communication can be found on Amazon for books, Netflix for feature films, and Apple Music for hit songs. Similar patterns also exist on online-shopping websites, where users, who are also consumers, and their communications constitute part of their sociodemographic profile (see Jensen 2013). The meta-media can analyze their users’ habits and social relationships, and then recommend or even “customize” content to them and to their social circle. They all belong to the conative communication category, as their aim is to persuade users to participate in specific communication or consumption activities.

Currently, more conative texts can be found in meta-media, and the most representative genre is advertising or the so-called “marketing accounts” in meta-media. This new advertising genre, unlike the traditional ones, aims to connect products to news, events, or trends, transferring the consumer’s attention to the products according to their interests. It is not rare nowadays for readership or click rates to be transformed into economic output. The meta-media can use their inherent interactive function to persuade users to forward, recommend, and share their content, and then be consumers of the content. All of these are good examples of conative communication and culture today. In short, the significance of the conative-dominated media culture is that the communication pattern is now led by media users instead of senders.

3.3 Phatic-dominated media culture

Modern culture is “meta-language dominated,” focusing mainly on the rules of interpretation. In pre-modern society, the clergy and theology controlled the rules, while in the modern period rationalism led the civilization process. However, the 21st century saw a huge change from metalinguistic to phatic domination. The reason is obvious: communication in today’s culture is biased

toward the media due to the development of meta-media technologies. Hence, the medium itself has become the dominant meaning of social culture.

As mentioned before, the phatic function is native to meta-media, and it is not surprising that it has turned out to be the dominant new rule in interpersonal communication today. For instance, we are now more inclined to use social networks to connect with people, and the number of “likes” or types of comment we receive can be the basis on which we value the relationships. In this case, most people care less about the content they post than about who hits the “like” button or how many “likes” they receive. This is how the phatic function works in maintaining new social relations in the meta-media: the aim of “likes” is to create or maintain contact. However, this action may result in social pressure if it becomes the only dimension for measuring social relationships (see Liu and Chen 2015). Other cases can be found to prove how phatic communication increasingly dominates the social meaning of our everyday lives. For instance, in the education area, the popular SPOC (small private online course) or MOOC (massive open online course) methods adopt various types of online and offline activities and encourage students to find more chances to maintain contact with their teachers and their knowledge.

Phatic-dominated communication can also result in greater cultural consequences. In the entertainment industry, actors and actresses now endeavor to maintain their exposure by posting pictures or short videos and responding to their fans’ comments on social media instead of presenting more works. As the importance of metalinguistics falls and the phatic function rises in contemporary culture, it seems that maintaining exposure or phatic communication is more important than the quality of the songs, films, and TV series they create. Another typical example is the boom in live video streaming. Many celebrities today like to broadcast their daily routines to their fans, which is irrelevant to their performing work. However, this is already a new way to achieve and retain popularity.

To sum up, the flourishing meta-media make re-representation the basis of the semiosis of sign-texts. This changes the dominant features of cultural communication and the rules of interpretation. Today the poetic, conative, and phatic features dominate communication patterns, the phatic function being the most fundamental due to the inherently interactive nature of the meta-media. That is to say, the medium in itself now increasingly takes the place of the content it conveys, dominating the process of cultural communication today.

Acknowledgements: This paper is supported by a grant from The National Social Science Fund of China (Grant Number: 18CWW002).

References

- China Internet Network Information Center. 2019. *The 44th China statistical report on Internet development*.
<http://www.cnnic.com.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201908/P020190830356787490958.pdf> (accessed 11 October 2019).
- Ellis, Phil. 2009. The body of the text: The uses of the screen page in the new media. In Susan Broadhurst & Josephine Machon (eds.), *Sensualities/textualities and technologies*, 50–64. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Glazier, Loss Pequeño. 2002. *Digital poetics: The making of e-poetries*. Tuscaloosa & London: The University of Alabama Press.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1960. Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In Thomas Sebeok (ed.), *Style in language*, 350–377. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Jensen, Klaus. 2013. How to do things with data: Meta-data, meta-media, and meta-communication. *First Monday* 18.
<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4870/3751>
doi:10.5210/fm.v18i10.4870 (accessed 6 October 2019).
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. London, UK & Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Sadock, Jerrod. 1974. *Toward a linguistic theory of speech act*. New York: Academic Press.
- Tang, Jingtai. 2016. Political participation and collective action of online community: Take ‘Expression Package Wars’ as a case. *Journalism Bimonthly* 3. 96–101.
- Watts, Richard J. 1981. *The pragmatolinguistic analysis of narrative texts*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Zhao, Yiheng. 2017. *Philosophical semiotics: The coming into being of the word of meaning*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press.

Bionote

Xingzhi Zhao

Xingzhi Zhao (b. 1986) is the associate professor at College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, China. His research interests include Peircean semiotics, the semiotics of communication and the social semiotics of gift-giving. He edited and translated the first Chinese version of *C.S. Peirce: On signs* (2014), and published his monograph *C.S. Peirce and semiotics of communication* (2017).