



MEDIA AND MODERNITY: THE ROLE OF THE PRINTING PRESS IN THE MODERNIZATION OF WESTERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

One of the influential factors in the formation of modern society in the Western world and subsequently spread to over the world has been the discovery of printing press which can be found in the form of printing method, printing company and print media. Since it was firstly used by Gutenberg in about 15th century AD, information which was previously delivered through oral medium with a limited audience, then through a method of printing can be reproduced in large quantities and can be read by more audience, across distance and time. Printing method which encourages the emergence of large printing companies and then print media has contributed in transforming modern cultural life of society.

In addition, the advent of the printing industries which has transformed into transnational corporations as well as the emergence of journals and regular newspapers also contributes significantly in raising public spaces as a medium for discussion and critical thinking amidst society. Ultimately, this information media transformation brings a change in the state system which is more open and leads to the emergence of ideas of nationalism which becomes an important milestone in transforming traditional societies into modern societies.

Key Words: printing press, media, modernization, modern society, communication technology

Abstrak

Salah satu faktor yang cukup berpengaruh dalam pembentukan masyarakat modern di dunia Barat dan selanjutnya menyebar ke seluruh penjuru dunia adalah ditemukannya printing press yang berupa metode cetak, percetakan dan juga media cetak. Sejak pertamakalinya digunakan oleh Gutenberg sekitar abad 15 M, informasi yang sebelumnya disampaikan melalui media oral dengan audiens terbatas, selanjutnya melalui metode cetak bisa direproduksi dalam jumlah besar dan dapat dibaca oleh lebih banyak khayalak, melintasi jarak dan waktu.

Metode cetak yang kemudian melahirkan percetakan-percetakan besar dan munculnya media cetak juga tercatat telah berkontribusi besar dalam mentransformasikan budaya hidup modern ke tengah-tengah masyarakat. Munculnya industri-industri percetakan yang kemudian bertransformasi menjadi transnasional korporasi dan lahirnya jurnal-jurnal dan koran berkala juga berkontribusi signifikan dalam memunculkan ruang-ruang publik sebagai media diskusi dan pola pikir kritis masyarakat. Pada akhirnya, transformasi media informasi ini membawa perubahan dalam sistem negara yang lebih terbuka dan lahirnya ide-ide nasionalisme yang menjadi tonggak penting dalam sejarah perubahan masyarakat tradisional menuju masyarakat modern.

Kata Kunci: percetakan, media, modernisasi, masyarakat modern, teknologi komunikasi.

Introduction

The invention of advanced communication technology, especially the electronic media in the modern era has resulted in modern society experiencing what McLuhan said a 'global village'.¹ It makes people around the world able to see and know what is happening in a particular place at the same time and take part in it together. It gives evidence that nowadays people live in the electronic culture replacing the past oral culture.² The tragedy of September 11, 2001, for example, could hypnotise people around the world, attracted simultaneously curse as well as encouraged them to show their sympathy and action all at once. This experience was never imagined long time before the emergence of the communication technology such as newspaper, television, radio and the internet which has brought this rapid changes in human ways of communication and receiving information.

The ways of human communication which can be delivered through speech as well as media have experienced the fascinating transformation from its early discovery. This began with the invention of the printing press in the mid fifteenth century (Thompson 1994) in which the information began to spread massively to the society, the various kinds of mass media begin to emerge. This invention did not only develop the ways people communicate, but also affect the modernizing society as well as the state institutions. Through globalisation and the invention of communication technology supported by industrialisation, this transformation achieves its prosperity.

This essay will look at the transformation of the early invention of the technique of printing as one of the form of communication media in the early modern Europe. By looking at the development of this technique printing following the rise of printing press in the Modern Europe, this essay also investigates the contribution of this invention to the modernization of Western society.

Communication Media: at a Glance

Communication, which Giddens defines as "the transfer of information from one individual or group to another, whether in speech or through the mass media" plays a significant role for society.³ It can be a bridge to deliver messages and build meaning and understanding between people. Similarly, Thompson (1994, p. 18) stated that communication is used to produce symbolic forms and convey them to people.⁴ Communication can also make people human and help them avoid feeling being isolated (Noll 2007, p. 1).⁵

Since traditional society, communication has become a part of people's everyday activity. At that time, people's communication was dominated by face to face interaction so that the presence of people was a primary requirement for holding communication.⁶ Therefore, Giddens argued that pre-modern society did not recognize the differences between space and place notions which later became two distinct terms in modern society, in which space means locality requiring the presence of people in communication while the absence of people becomes not essential to space. The invention of writing replaced this face to face communication and was able to facilitate the distant communication between people.

However, although face to face interaction was still the common model of communication until the modern period, the presence of mediator in which it is mostly presented in the form of writing has been also found as a model of communication since pre-modern society. Noll argued that a mediator is needed to facilitate the problem of physical distance in communication.⁷ Therefore, for this purpose, people need a "technical medium" to ensure the successful transmission of the messages from producer to receiver, in which the degree of fixation, reproducibility, time space distance and receivers' skills, competences and knowledge become its aims.⁸ By considering its effectivity to

transform the content of messages, since before the modern period, people have used various kind of technical medium for their communication.⁹

Thompson argued that for those purposes, pre-modern society used to use the wood and stone as a medium to write or paint their messages.¹⁰ This earliest technical medium was used by traditional society such as Sumerians and ancient Egyptians around 3000 BC related to the property ownership and trade.¹¹ Later, along with the growth of economic and political activities, the ways of communication, as well as their purposes, had varied. The technical medium in communication had developed into various types such as printing papers which was used not only for goods' exchange or economic activities, but also for exercising power for religious and political authorities.¹² However, since those have a low level of durability and limited space time distance, they had a low level of reproduction as well. Therefore, only a small number of people at that time and certain places can access them. Alternatively, by the invention of printing and then the development of the printing press, information can be delivered to broader audiences and spread across its locality.

The Great Invention of Modern Period: The Printing Press

The invention of the printing press has been considered as the beginning of the modern media communication in Western society, in which the messages can be recorded and spread physically across the world as well as can be saved for centuries.¹³ Thompson mentions that the technique of printing was invented by Gutenberg in the mid fifteenth century then spread throughout Europe. Then it developed rapidly as a press due to and as a part of the growth of the capitalist economy at that time.¹⁴ Long before the invention of the printing press, Thompson stated that there were four different communication networks within society.¹⁵ First is the communication which was established and controlled by the catholic church. Secondly, communication was established and controlled by political authorities of state and principles. Then third, by commercial organization in their commercial activities. The final one is within grass root society in which the information was transmitted by a network of merchants, pedlar and travelling entertainers. In the early era of modern Europe and later, those network communication developed along with the growth of more advanced communication techniques such as the postal services and then the printing press which is distributed in the forms of books, pamphlets, posters, weekly journals and weekly paper as well as newspapers.¹⁶

Although the technique of printing as well as paper was invented long before the modern period in China, using traditional techniques which were time-consuming and costly, the significant development of printing has been found in Europe rather than in Asia. By transferring this technique from China to Europe brought by the regular commercial as well as the diplomatic contacts between East and West, this printing has transformed into many techniques as well as produced for different purposes and productions in Europe.

The first use of printing in Europe was developed by Gutenberg in around 1440 by developing a method of combining the technique of replicating the metal casting and the screw press in order to produce a similar text in multiple numbers at one time and not for commercial purposes. Several years later, the skill of printing became a common skill for people due to printing workshops in Mainz and then in 1480 the presses emerged massively in Europe and encouraged the construction of publication centres and the printing of large numbers of books. In this early massive printing period, the books were dominated by religious books (45 per cent) and then philosophy, law and scientific subjects.

Along with the development of industrialisation in the early modern period of Europe, the printing industries had also begun to emerge. Since it was invented by Gutenberg and used for non-commercial activity, just years later, the printing press became a big industry which produced thousands of editions and about 20 million copies in circulation. This advent of technology not only encouraged the growth of presses in Europe, but also large quantities of wage labour. For this, Thompson gives an example of Anton Koberger of Nuremberg in the early sixteenth century who had 24 presses and about 100 workmen as well as a wide network of publishing throughout Europe. Furthermore, the significant progress of the printing press in early modern Europe achieved its significant production since the invention of more printing techniques, such as lithography invented by Senefelder in Munich in 1796, photolithography by Lemercier in France in 1852, the mechanical printing press in Germany in 1803 by Koenig as well as linotype composing machine in United States in 1885.¹⁷ This early form of reproduction also took place in the work of art in which Benjamin¹⁸ stated that the mechanical reproduction of printing also played a significant role in reproducing the art production which appeared in the form of lithography which was able for people to illustrate their everyday life. A few decades later, this kind of reproduction was replaced by photography and then film.¹⁹ These rapid developments of technology have brought about greater production of information as well as the rise of economic institutions at that time.

At the same time, the advent of printing also led to the emergence of symbolic and political power in which the church as well as the state tried to control the presses for their benefit.²⁰ However, while the censorship worked strictly under the control of church as well as state, the spirit of freedom to speak and think was seen. The euphoria of the printing reproduction at that time has passed by the ban of the Church as well as state. This was shown by the widespread notion of Luther's Reformation in the early of sixteenth century through the printing media which proved the difficulty of the church to control of printed materials trade.²¹ The euphoria of the advent of new technology has met with the capitalist economy and the euphoria of rationalisation in the form of new spirit of gaining new knowledge and information has led to the rise of the printed materials which reached its highest production at that time as well as explored broader subjects and focuses. Thompson pointed out that at this period the printing presses began produce various texts, both for natural and social worlds, such as medicine, anatomy, botany, astronomy, geography, mathematics, etc, as well as popular science such as almanacs and practical manuals and also methods of business texts.

Additionally, this growth of printing industries has also brought about the significant rise of media industries. Even though the trade of news had already appeared throughout Europe since the early fifteenth century in the forms of periodical publications such as journal, weekly paper, weekly newspapers, and then daily newspapers in the early eighteenth century, it was still restricted for the urban elite society and mostly widespread only throughout Europe.²² Conversely, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, by the development of advanced technology, the change of tax systems, which means the lowered production costs, the change of newspaper format of journalism which was tighter and 'livelier' as well as the strict competition among media industries, the printed media production especially newspapers has become more massive and widespread across the Europe. As a result, more people were able to access them and use them as a vital media for advertisement and selling goods.

Another significant development of media industries along the modern period has been the transformation of small scale organizations into large scale corporations which one of its forms is transnational communication conglomerates, such as Time Warner, the

Bertelsmann group etc. Even though their emergence has deceived the small scale organizations, they have brought the more widespread information as well as exchange it in a global scale. The global corporations also contributed to the interconnected and borderless world.

Printing Press and the Modernization of Western Society

As Giddens said, that modern era could be characterized by these three rapid changes: *pace of change* which one of the characteristic for this is the rapid changes in technology development; *scope of change* in which the world has become interconnected and borderless; and *nature of modern institutions* which were shown in the form of a political system of nation-state, commodification of labour and wage labour, then it has been argued that the development of the printing press has encouraged this significant changes in Western society.²³ The printing press has brought not only borderless nature of the modern world communication and people are more interconnected, but also changes in social, cultural as well as political life in modern society. For this, it has been said that the printing press has played a significant role in affecting and facilitating the modernization of Western society by contributing to the emergence of nation states as well as nationalism, media industries, the rise of public sphere and modern state, the notion of press freedom as well as the transnational corporations.

The invention of printing had taken a part in the industrial revolution in the modern period. Through its rapid development of the technique of printing, led to the growth of the printing press, printing production had become a big industry at that time. Furthermore, the fast growth of technology also encouraged the rise of capitalist industries from small scale organizations to large scale institutions and then transformed into big corporations conglomerates in a global scale. This is what Adorno defined as a culture industry which “the transformation of literature into a commodity” can be described for this phenomenon. Along with the development of economic institutions as well as capitalist industries, the trade of news would possibly occur.²⁴ Besides its dramatic development, printing press also contributed to wage labour absorption as well as the creation of labour within factory system which is one characteristic in capitalist industries.

Besides the advent of printing technology encouraged the growth of capitalist industries, it had also contributed to the cultural effects on Europe society at that time. Thompson stated that the emergence of publishing houses was not only for economic activities, but also places of gathering for clerics, scholars, and intellectuals. Habermas’ public sphere is a good description in which the rise of this printing press had brought about the emergence of public debate within society. By this time, people, especially educated individuals had regularly met and used the public spheres such as publishing houses, coffee houses as well as salons to discuss the contemporary news and events as well as criticize the state.²⁵

In addition, the widespread news circulation, such as weekly journals and newspapers within society, also strengthened that public discussion and has even brought about significant change in the state system. Thompson pointed out that these discussions became public which was stimulated by periodical press, Parliament has begun to open for critiques, more responsive to press and started to be constructive in creating public opinion. For this, the significant change of modern state style has occurred. The state could not have a full authority to control the press in the early development any more, but it then was controlled by press as well as society. The notion of freedom press also began from this period in which by the less of state power, the more increase of the free expression of

people as well as press. For strengthening it, this press freedom was then legalized as a protection for freedom of speaking and expression within constitution.²⁶

The invention of the printing industry also stimulated the notion of nationalism as well as the nation-state. The popularity of national languages which replaced the latin language due to the broader of the readership of the printed books has set aside the latin as a common language for about two centuries. This rise of popularity of vernacular languages was also supported by the succesful of Protestantism which began to use vernacular languages for bible and other religious texts. For this, the decline of the Church power in deciding latin as an official language and forbid vernacular languages which led to the massive use of vernacular languages and the popularity of official state languages has been argued as a pracondition of national identity as well as nationalism.²⁷

Another significant contribution of this printing press for modern society has been the rise of rate of the literacy. Compared to the seventeenth and eighteenth century which newspapers were stricted for educated people in the urban areas of Europe, by expanding the market of the printed materials, the more people can access the infomation given. Also, by the massive printing of many subject books in the early modern Europe and being circulated for broader society, more people can gain access to knowledge.

Conclusion

The invention of printing and then the printing press was a great work for modern society. It was not only a significant development of communication in human history, but also an amazing medium in the changes of social, cultural as well as political Western society. Since its invention in the early modern period in Europe, the technique of printing has tranformed many times along with the rapid growth of advanced technology as well as contributed constantly in people's social life. Along with the rise of the modern period, the printing press has also taken a part in modernizing Western society by enouraging the emergence of nationalism and the nation-state, media industries, rational thinking, public sphere as well as modern state system.

ENDNOTE

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 585.

² A. Assmann, "The printing press and the internet: from a culture of memory to a culture of attention", in Gentz, N. & Kramer, S., *Globalization, cultural identities, and media representations*, (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2006), p. 11.

³ Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 585.

⁴ J.B. Thompson, 1994, *The media and modernity: a social theory of the media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p.18.

⁵ A.M. Noll, A. M., *The evolution of media*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p.1.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 18.

⁷ A.M. Noll, A. M., *The evolution of media*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p.1.

⁸ J.B. Thompson, 1994, *The media and modernity: a social theory of the media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p.18-23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

¹³ A.M. Noll, A. M., *The evolution of media*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 16. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

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- ¹⁴ J.B. Thompson, 1994, *The media and modernity: a social theory of the media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 52-53.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63-64
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63-65.
- ¹⁷ A.M. Noll, A. M, *The evolution of media*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 17.
- ¹⁸ Benjamin, W. *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, (London: Jonathan cage, 1970), p. 220-221.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ²⁰ J.B. Thompson, 1994, *The media and modernity: a social theory of the media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 56-57.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 65-69.
- ²³ Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, (California; Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 6.
- ²⁴ Theodor W Adorno & Max Horkheimer, "The culture industry reconsidered", in Bronner, S. & Kellner, D. (Eds.), *Critical theory and society: a reader*. (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 130.
- ²⁵ J.B. Thompson, 1994, *The media and modernity: a social theory of the media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 70.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69-71.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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