0.1 31. Hausaufgabe

0.1.1 The „infinite amount of information" provided by cable TV and the Internet – a blessing or a curse?

Television and the Internet – or media in general – play a downright predominant role in our modern society. Television receivers exist in 95 percent of all German households and 98 percent of American households, according to [[WikiDeFernsehenInDeutschland]] and [[WikiDeFernsehenInDenUSA]] respectively; 68 percent of German´s adults have direct access to the Internet ([[Heise68]]).

Because of their plangent distribution, consequences caused by television and the Internet have to be reflected upon very seriously – much more seriously than would be needed in a society not permeated by medias.

In the following, I´ll ponder the question whether the „infinite amount of information" provided by television and the Internet are to be considered a blessing or a curse. This cannot be decided in general, of course; instead I´ll give several arguments for both views.

„Infinite amount of information" provided by television and the Internet as a curse

This section lists arguments for the view that the „infinite amount of information" provided by television and the Internet is a curse. It is divided in arguments concerning the quality of the obtainable information, the accessibility of television and the Internet, and miscellaneous other arguments.

– Quality of the obtainable information

To gauge the relevance of the „infinite amount of information" obtainable, one should first contemplate the quality of the information broadcasted on television and downloadable on the Internet.

Unintentional misinformation

The most common cause of wrong information on television and the Internet is probably constituated by unintentional oversights.

As it is acknowledged that it takes approximately ten years to become an expert on any given topic [unfortunately I have a lost the reference to a study supporting this statement], information is often compiled by laymen who have only a rough knowledge on the relevant area.

This argument is often used against Wikipedia, rendering Wikipedia as full of errors. Other examples include the presentation of scientific relations in so-called „popular science“; these explications are often simplified to a great extent – one popular misconception of natural sciences, namely that natural sciences Explain The World instead of just providing accurate (but in no case exact or true!) models, forms the root of the discussions on Intelligent Design in the USA.

Unrepresentative information

The quality of the information provided by television and the Internet is further downgraded by the unrepresentative assembly of the corresponding authors: The opinions and views broadcasted and displayed on television respectively the Internet are influenced by the views of the persons in charge.

This problem surfaces especially on the Internet – the people who publish on the Internet obviously belong to the group of people who have the ability to publish on the Internet. This means that the views of, say, the typical 90-year-old grandparents are underexpressed.

Directed disinformation

Directed disinformation has the potential to degrade the information quality in most severe ways. The sources of such disinformation range from companys which „exaggerate“ facts about their products over politicians to whole countries which enact over a consolidated apparatus spreading targeted disinformation.

A prominent example of such directed disinformation is the actively enforced censorship in the People´s Republic of China: If you search for „Tiananmen“, the name of the place the 1989 massacre took place (in which several hunderds of people were killed [[WikiEnTiananmen]]), Google Germany presents you with a host of pictures of tanks [[GoogleDeTiananmen]]. By stark contrast, Google China shows pictures of smiling tourists [[GoogleCnTiananmen]].

– Accessibility of the information

The Internet introduces new technological barriers to the accessibility of the information. To access all the information of the Internet, one not only needs appropriate hardware (which, of course, costs money), an Internet provider free of censorship, and the physical abilities to use computers, but knowledge on using computers as well.

This means that certain groups of people are excluded – for example older people who can´t read computer screens or handle the keyboard or mouse appropriately and disabled persons.

Finding useful information on the Internet is further impeded by its vast size; it takes practice to develop the keen sense necessary to use search engines effectively.

– Potential harm to children by pornographic content

To the „infinite amount of information" retrievable on the Internet and broadcasted on television, pornographic content are a part of. It is believed that pornographic pictures and movie constitute the greatest part of all Internet traffic [[PornTraffic]]. (But note that the amount of traffic as measured in (peta) bytes is not a good measure of the proportion of pornographic sites, as images and movies take up much more space (i.e., bytes) than texts do.)

Considering the television programme broadcasted at night, one obtains similar impressions.

Barriers to pornographic contents on the Internet can be circumvented even by the average child in many cases, as it´s technically challenging to automatically classify the raw information retrieved from the Internet as information with pornographic content – computers do not (yet?) have access to the semantic level of information.

The few necessarily-not-perfect-but-deemed-to-be-sufficient techniques to automatically block access to porn sites which exist today can easily be fooled.

– Sensory overload caused by the „infinite amount of information"

The probably most important problem caused by the „infinite amount of information" broadcasted on the 500-and-counting channels of television and retrievable on the Internet is probably the sensory overload intimately associated with the way television and the Internet are used.

Many studies show that in the so-called process of „zapping", in which individual channels are rarely watched for longer than a few seconds, the senses are overly stressed.

In the case of the Internet, the problem is slightly less severe, as active instead of passive use is necessary for the problem to manifest. Also, as websites used to be mostly visual-only, only the sense of sight was affected. With the increasing popularity of movie websites like YouTube [[YouTube]], this last point has lost validity, unfortunately.

„Infinite amount of information" provided by television and the Internet as a blessing

The previous section outlined arguments for the view that the „infinite amount of information" of television and the Internet are a curse. As with any technology, down- and upsides coexist; in the following, I´ll elaborate on some of the advantages of the „infinite amount of information" obtainable, with a slight focus on the role of the Internet.

I´ll not mention that television with its 500^{+} channels and the Internet with its millions of sites are superb examples of counter-measures against boredom.

– Economic advantages

One of the reasons for the wide-spread distribution of television and the Internet is certainly that they result in economic advantages. In societes governed by the principles of free market economy, economic considerations carry a lot of weight.

Economic advantages through the use of television and the Internet as means of distributing advertising material

There exists a wide spectrum of possible types of advertising on television and the Internet. More encompassing than ads in printed

media, thousands of targets can be reached very time- and cost-efficiently.

Economic advantages through the possibiliy of efficient transactions

Many companies, especially companies which operate in the logistical sector, profit from the very efficient conductability of transactions attainable on the Internet. Commiting and equating deals (i.e., effectively rolling back) are matters of seconds; one can act to new information in a timely matter.

– Quality of the information obtainable

Contrary to what I said above, the information broadcasted on television and receivable on the Internet is of a very high niveau – presuming that one knows the right ruses to distinguish high-quality from low-quality information.

Wikipedia, for example, is a source of very high quality. Barring few problem areas, Wikipedia is factual and actual (attributes stemming from the encouraged possibility that anyone can improve Wikipedia), and attains a good structure by the extensive use of links.

Grassroot and citizen journalism is covered on so-called blogs: independent journalists can publish their results without pressure resulting from commercial and political interests as they often influence more regularly edited print media magazines. [[WikiEnCJ]]

– Advantages – blessings – resulting from the decentral nature of the Internet

These new movements profit from the technical difficulty the creation of a point of central control over the Internet would have.

Because of the Internet´s decentral nature, it is infeasible that a single company or county could gain control over the entire Internet; thus the Internet is the ideal medium for guaranteeing the continued validity of one of the most fundamental human rights, namely the freedom of speech.

In addition to providing a great platform for asynchronous communication, i.e. the point in time of creation differs from the point in time of reading (mails, blogs), the Internet serves as the basis for a variety of real-time chat services.

Examples of serious uses of chats include real-time updates about the Gulf War in 1991 (an archive may be found at [[IRCGulf]]) and live reports about the unstable situation in Moscow during the coup against Boris Yeltsin in 1993, disclosed directly by the affected people and not layered through several news agencies. [[IRCRT]]

Finally, contemplated from an ideological point of view, one might have the belief that it´s better that information is stored decentrally, accessible to everyone, instead of being property of a few rich millionaires and heads of states.

Conclusion

I remark that **in conclusio**, the benefits of the „infinite amount of information“ provided by television and the Internet outweigh the downsides. To a more complete report on this topic advantages and disadvantages of television and the Internet itself, not the „infinite amount of information“ provided, would have to be considered.

Important parts of such an extended exposure to the topic would include: the social and sanitary consequences of daily use of television and the Internet; an **en detail** explication of threats emerging from the Internet (the corresponding buzzwords are „phishing“ and „cracking“) and risks for the Internet (including China´s ongoing censorship as a political component and various technical difficulties arising from the continued exponential development of the world population).

Literatur

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