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# **An Interdisciplinary Investigation of the Relationship between Media, Culture, and Society**

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First of all, I would like to thank Dr Mini M Abraham, head of the Department of English for inviting me to this online conference on Theory and Discursive Practices in the Age of Interdisciplinarity. Special thanks to Dr Rose Sebastian I met when she came to the conference I organized in Paris in December 2016.

Now, today I would like to talk about interdisciplinarity from the perspectives of my own research and academic field.

## **Abstract**

When dealing with the relationship between media, culture and society, interdisciplinarity has always been a major issue for researchers. As a matter of fact, a wide outlook crossing the analyses from different social sciences disciplines is a necessity to understand the social, political, anthropological and economic consequences of communication tools on our everyday life. This need for interdisciplinarity appeared very soon during the XX<sup>th</sup> century with the development of media and international cultural exchanges. This was the case with media studies and the emergence of academic interdisciplines like “Sciences of information and communication” mixing the contributions of political economy of communication, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, semiotics. Two examples illustrate what interdisciplinarity can mean when an investigation project appeals to researchers belonging to different academic fields : 1- minority languages groups struggling to protect their cultures and languages, 2- the making of television news as studied by the Glasgow University Media Group.

On that second slide is the plan of my presentation in six parts. I will be using simple illustrations on the other slides, mainly front cover of major books.

## **1- The emergence of communication studies : introducing the context**

The machine universe of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century's industrial era gave birth to the first investigations on the bias of communication [Innis, 2008] and on the anthropological and political consequences of an extensive use of technique on our civilizations [Mumford, 1950). In the 1930s, the academic community started paying attention to the psychological and social

effects of mass media as well as what will be labelled a bit later as Information Society, especially with the development of informatics and network society [Castells, 1997, 1998, 2001]. Right from the beginning, the researchers' concerns wavered between on the one hand the ability media have – and first of all cinema – to bring people closer, to entertain them and to break solitude [Cressey, 1932] and on the other hand the mechanisms – whether actual or alleged – influencing or alienating individuals: the use of movies by the Nazi regime greatly contributed to question propaganda methods [Reichel, 1993]. Many investigations will then privilege scientific approaches based whether on empirical works like field surveys in the perspectives of applied or administrative research [Lazarfeld, 1941] or on more critical investigations condemning the massification of behaviours caused by the cultural industry [Adorno & Horkheimer, 1994; Marcuse, 1964].

In this specific context and according to different temporalities and agendas, a wide range of investigations analysing the role played by media and communication technologies in modern society appeared, in the first place in North America mainly because of the early emergence of mass media and cultural industries. From the 1940s, sociologists (Paul Lazarfeld, Elihu Katz, Robert Merton, George Gerbner, ...), philosophers (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, ...), psychologists (John Watson, George Bateson, ...), semioticians (Charles Peirce, Roland Barthes), linguists (Roman Jakobson), economists (Dallas Smythe, Graham Murdock), political scientists (Harold Lasswell) started investigating on mass media until the need for an interdiscipline made it possible, both in a global approach and multidisciplinary perspective to gather researchers capable to deal with the complexity of communication phenomena and of the mechanisms linked to news making and circulation. Beyond a strong concern for specific topics – like political communication and propaganda, advertising, or the impact of media on people and especially children – what was expected from the academic world was to enhance and guide the social acceptability of information and communication technologies, i. e. a sector characterized by an endless change, making it even more difficult to draw up a clear line between what comes under academic investigation and social expertise. This dilemma was commented by the German Sociologist Max Weber in “The professor and the politician” when comparing science and politics as being two divergent vocations : the first one requires humility and intellectual availability while the latter, torn between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, is caught into an inextricable contradiction which leads to exclude scientific certainties.

## **2- Sciences of Information and communication as an interdiscipline**

Anyway, when dealing with the relationship between media, culture and society, interdisciplinarity has always been a major issue for researchers as I said in my preliminary words.

However, the notion of Interdisciplinarity itself has been much debated and competing with other similar notions like “Multidisciplinarity”, “Transdisciplinarity” or “Pluridisciplinarity. My purpose is not to make a choice, but rather to concentrate on what seems most important for the debate; i. e. a methodological and epistemological position against monodisciplinary approaches. Interdisciplinarity involves a work of contextualization of social events, the interconnexion with other academic fields and not just the mere juxtaposition of disciplines which would in the end keep their own autonomy but rather take the opportunity to question their own presuppositions, mixing macro, meso and micro dimensions and to use concepts, methods and tools that are common to all social sciences. To quote the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, it is “as impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole as to know the whole without knowing the particular parts.”

To take the case of my own interdiscipline, I would like to take the example of the French journal *Communications*, the first one in my country to get interested in the study of mass communications, journalism and the cultural industries. Founded in 1960 within the VI<sup>o</sup> section of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* at the initiative of Georges Friedmann, a sociologist who worked on the social impact of industrial labour, automation and technique, the journal opened up its columns to American investigators who were at that time pioneers in terms of mass media studies (Morris Janowitz, Robert Schulze who presented the research trends in the field of mass communication; or Daniel Bell on the forms of the cultural experience), and to a wide range of French Intellectuals : sociologists (Edgar Morin), semiologists (Roland Barthes, Tveztan Todorov or Claude Bremond), economists (Henri Mercillon), philosophers (Violette Morin) and many others as well as foreign researchers (like the sociologist R N Saksena on Indian movie or the Italian linguist Umberto Eco). The journal *Communications* confirms its interdisciplinary vocation in 1973 when changing the first name from CEMAS (Centre of Mass Communication Studies) into Centre of Transdisciplinary Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Semiology (CETSAS). *Communications* is still a major and well-known journal in the field of media studies.

There are other academic disciplines that were built around the idea of an interdiscipline gathering different scientific perspectives : among others, education sciences (pedagogy, sociology, psychology, educational policies, ...) or environmental sciences (biology, geography, climatology, ecology, economy, anthropology, ...) In all cases, the results of interdisciplinary investigations nourish a better global and accurate understanding of complex phenomena.

### **3- Interdiscipline versus interdisciplinarity**

Nevertheless, the existence of Interdisciplines dedicated to the study of what we call an object of investigation, like mass media or the relationship between media, culture and society is generally a new trend in the research agendas and most of them appeared rather recently after the 1970s. In other words, interdisciplinarity is also understood by some researchers as the only way to address the challenges caused by modern societies and especially what Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher called the *technological system* [Ellul], i. e. a society where technique inexorably invaded all the human activities and touches all aspects of modern life to the point where no other alternative is possible. Many people are aware of the many interactions that make the understanding of our society more complicated. Hence the need to multiply the scientific theories, methodologies and tools to tackle in a collaborative way such objects of investigation like the climate change, social inequalities, the GAFAMs and our privacy, the digitization of public services, i. e. topics that cannot be investigated from a single discipline, with a unique theory or concept, with a unique methodology and with a unique tool. Each academic discipline may bring a specific insight : I will develop this particular point in my two case studies.

Nevertheless, as an institution, the universities as well as many research-funding institutions, whether public or private, national or supranational, still favour monodisciplinary projects. Many researchers belonging to academic faculties still remain bound to their disciplinary, prefer to live in their ivory tower and are sometimes reluctant to work in a team.

Indeed, there are many factors that make it difficult to think research in an interdisciplinary perspective.

### **4- Interdisciplinarity at stake**

First of all, the academic field, according to Pierre Bourdieu, was built, in the course of time not only for scientific concerns (the myth of the scientist's altruism) but also in terms of internal power struggles. The way academic disciplines appeared also has to do with

intellectual traditions; for instance, it is often said that science is viewed in the North American academic world as a means to improve society – what is called *positivism*- whereas European researchers would be more in a critical approach inherited from their philosophical background.

Anyway, one of the first challenges Interdisciplinarity has to face is the increasing fragmentation and specialization of social sciences. As a matter of fact, even if each disciplinary field share specific founding principles, hypothesis, concepts, methods and tools – the field of analysis of psychology is in that respect very different from the sociologist's as pointed out by Emile Durkheim – each discipline is quickly organized in branches or sub-disciplines according to the level of specialization of the researchers and to the social and political demand.

In that respect, sociology can be divided into major branches : general sociology, historical sociology, sociology of knowledge, criminology, sociology of religion, sociology of economy, rural sociology, urban sociology, political sociology, sociology of law, sociology of family, sociology of culture, sociology of labour, of leisure, ... and the list is not exhaustive. As for psychology, the discipline integrates behaviour psychology, clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, experimental psychology, organizational psychology, health psychology, sports psychology, ... The same process could be repeated for other traditional disciplines like history, law, anthropology or geography. Under the code 300 related to *social sciences, sociology and anthropology*, the Dewey decimal classification scheme used by libraries lists 100 themes : the principle of the decimal system is to add a category as the development of new fields of knowledge goes on (hence the number of unassigned items in the list).

This wide variety of specialized sub-disciplines can be an obstacle. This is what the sociologist Bernard Lahire points out in a book “Plural World. Thinking the unity of social sciences” which sounds like a real manifesto in favour of Interdisciplinarity. For him, the increasing sub-division of academic disciplines leads to extreme scattering of the research works as many investigators study very particular aspects and small parts of what should be a more general programme consisting in reasoning in terms of social practices (actions, behaviours, etc) [Lahire, 2012 : 320] Instead, the researcher limits himself to a monographic approach which makes him a hyper specialist of a small part of the social and often makes him lose the sense of the *social totalities* and of the *interdependence links* between the different fields of scientific practice. The sociologist views this situation as the consequence of the division of labour existing in capitalism with the obligation to be more productive,

efficient and innovative in terms of providing concrete solutions or recommendations, in other words, he becomes a social expert.

Clearly, research institutions as well as political authorities foster a new image of social sciences, more receptive to economical and political demands, less critical and more in tune with the expectations of the capitalist marketplace. For the research institutions or private foundations that fund investigators, calls for proposals and tenders give priority to framework programmes around very technical or specialized projects generally determined by industrial or economical development logics. For example, within the programme of the European Union called “Connecting Europe Facility”, a project is being launched to modernize the railway network and reduce the noise of freight trains. All the projects usually run for two years with a maximum of 4-5 years. But the programme is split into different sub-programmes and includes one strictly dedicated to upgrade existing road infrastructures or another one on multimodal passenger hubs. Last example with the framework programme *Horizon Europe* “for research and innovation” (2021-2027). Here again, a new project dedicated to high technology and the development of floating offshore mill platforms is mainly aimed at engineers but still clearly claims a “multi-disciplinary approach”. However, Social Sciences are called to ensure the social acceptability of the project as mentioned in the preliminary draft: “Thus, it requires the effective contribution of SSH disciplines and the involvement of SSH experts, institutions as well as the inclusion of relevant SSH expertise, in order to produce meaningful and significant effects enhancing the societal impact of the related research activities.”

As for political institutions and governments, it has been a long time since they started attacking social sciences, generally for being useless or unproductive, but also because they were considered by many governments as potential clusters of protest.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, the Japanese Ministry of Education sent a letter to all public universities and advice them to cut down on the budgets allocated to the faculties of social and human sciences [Hash, 2015]. In Turkey, after the coup in 2016, many academics were dismissed *sine die* by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan; purges went on and the academic community went through a fierce suppression from the political power that condemned the investigators and teachers for being guilty of petitioning for peace in the world or supporting Kurdish claims [Weaver, 2016]. In 2019 in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro brutally reduced the fundings granted to the faculties of sociology and philosophy, pointing how useless their contribution to the country was [Silveira de Andrade Antunes, 2019].

At international level, many researchers are, in the best case, not allowed to do their fieldwork, as they could not get a visa, like in China for those who investigate on the Tibetans or the Uyghurs, two sensitive issues, in the worst case put in jail for breach to state security. This is what happened to the anthropologist Farida Adelhak who was arrested in Iran in July 2020 [Semo, 2020].

Such mistrust is not a speciality of authoritarian regimes and the liberal democracies also tend to blacklist social and human sciences. This can be explained by the general anti-intellectual climate promoted, as soon as 1983 by Ronald Reagan who was vilifying “social philosophy for seeing man as being mainly the outcome of his material environment”, away for the former president of the USA to show that social inequalities had less to do with the responsibility of States to ensure citizens’ welfare than the individuals’ inability to grasp their destiny. Within that context, the “excuse culture” is a term that can be found in most political discourses, whether left or right wing, in Great Britain, in the USA or in France and is aimed at denouncing the intellectual and researchers who investigate social movements. Social and human sciences are tolerated only when they privilege the trends that advocate the individual strategies of social actors rather than social determinations [Lahire, 2016 : 30-31], when they celebrate the virtues of the NTIC or the power of artificial intelligence rather than revealing the mechanisms of the digital divide.

In 2015, Switzerland again put forward the uselessness of SHS to the great displeasure of the dean of the faculty of arts of Lausanne, Alain Boillat who wrote an article entitled “SHS have never been so useful.” [Boilat, 2015] In France, the former prime Minister, Manuel Valls declared in front of the senator on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 that studying terrorism, just like sociologists or political scientists do, was a way to excuse it. In an answer to the prime Minister, Lahire wrote a book explaining what sociology was, i. e. a science aimed at disclosing the social mechanisms and at understanding the social rather than judging it. In the USA, on behalf of the *Patriot Act* voted after the 9.11 attack against the Twin Tower, many investigators were placed under surveillance and could no longer carry on their research projects [Jaeger, 2004].

These recurrent attacks from politician hit the bull’s eye in a context of crisis and insecurity due to terrorism and above all question the scientific legitimacy of SHS. It is also linked to the rise of neo-liberal policies advocated by Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher in their struggle for less state intervention (TINA “There is no alternative” was her motto) and imposed the criteria of performance and profitability to all public institutions and services, a



movement that finally reached the universities. Hence the emergency to gather forces in an interdisciplinary perspective.

### **5- Quid of Interdisciplinarity.**

Now let's go forward in defining interdisciplinarity.

As a sociologist, Bourdieu, considered by many people as the emblematic figure of the universal intellectual, was himself quite involved in commenting the results of others disciplines. In his book on *Language and symbolic power*, he questioned the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course on general linguistics*), Noam Chomsky (His books on *Syntactic Structures* and not on media control or "Manufacturing consent") and John Austin (How to do things with words and the theory of speech-acts), arguing that language should also be considered as a means of power and not only a means of communication. He also criticized journalism and produced remarkable essays on art.

For a long time, psychologists imposed the idea that everything related with the human psyche belonged to them, for instance when studying love relationships. Recently, an Israeli sociologist, Eva Illouz wrote a book about the end of love where she shows how contemporary capitalism plays a major part in practices of non-choice and unloving and how a new generation are consumers of ephemeral relationships that condemn them to remain alone. In the same way, Bernard Lahire, a French sociologist challenged psychoanalysis and documented with an extensive field survey how dreams are directly linked to our social life and particularly our jobs and how they express concerns about our professional universe or help us make a decision (*A sociological interpretation of the dreams*).

In the same way, political science has no longer the monopoly of studying political practices and campaigns or the electors' behaviours when linguists, media scientists or semiologists use discourse analysis or semio-pragmatics to work on political speeches or media representation, while sociologists works on taxonomies of the socio-economic profiles of electors.

So we can find examples of researchers who invest other disciplines, thus renewing both the interpretation of human behaviours and the scope of disciplinary boundaries.

Interdisciplinarity also implies to share common notions. Presently, notions like *identity*, or *representation*, or *minorities* appear in a wide variety of investigation projects. For example, *Identity* is meaningful in anthropology, in sociology, in psychology, in semiology, to quote some of the disciplines where the notion has been structuring investigations for quite a long time. *Identity* is now a key concept in media studies (works around digital identities on social

networks) or in studies about migrations (integration), in marketing and management studies (around e-identities and ethnic consumption), in gender studies, in post colonial studies, in cultural studies (hybridization of cultures, tourism and cultural identities), and so on. The notion as well as results from different investigations can typically be exported into other fields of research and has a heuristic scope.

Another factor that participate in extending the capacities of interdisciplinarity is the use of methods and tools. As far as methods are concerned, inquiries, questionnaires, surveys or interviews, life stories, mental maps, regularly used in sociology, anthropology or psychology turn out to be very fruitful to get quantitative or qualitative information.

Researchers also use informatics tools to process data and to produce, for instance, multiple factor analyses that allow to visualize complex phenomena; specific software facilitate the analysis of audio-visual documents, or making the inventory of the occurrence or frequency of terms in speech analysis is now easier thanks to lexicological programmes. All researchers now resort to online bibliographical databases, which considerably help drawing up state-of-the-art of the scientific literature. In the end, many digital tools are now part of every researcher's toolbox.

I would like to conclude on two case studies to concretely illustrate the advantage of interdisciplinarity when studying media, culture and communication.

## **6- Two case studies :**

### ✓ Cultures of resistance

In November and December 2016, I organized an International Conference in Paris called "Cultures of Resistance. Minorized Languages and People". When the call for proposal was launched, it was sent not only to the international and national associations related to the field of Media, Culture and Communication like the IAMCR (*International Association for Media and Communication Research*), the ECREA (*European Communication Research and Education Association*), the ALAIC (*Asociación Latino Americana de Investigadores en Comunicación*), the SFSIC (*Société Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication*), but also associations related to other disciplinary fields like anthropology, sociology, law, literature, linguistics, plus personal contacts through academic networks of international researchers.

Let me first remember the topic of the conference as mentioned in the call :

The international conference "Cultures of resistance, minorized peoples and languages" aims at questioning the way States deal with minorized languages and cultures within their national territory, as well as the modes of resistance minorized people deploy to defend their rights.

The building of Nation-States around a territory, a political project and a language led to a formidable linguistic normalization process, resulting in the exclusion from the public sphere of other languages spoken within the countries' geographic limits, condemning them to disappear sooner or later.

Faced with these mechanisms of "minorization", where such cultures and languages still do exist, they mainly owe it to the unfailing mobilization of their members who struggle so that their idiosyncrasies may benefit from official recognition.

Over the years, associations, communities and groups of activists dedicated to the linguistic cause have organized individual or collective actions, mobilizations and initiatives: demonstrations, development of alternative models in the fields of education or media, complaints to national, supra-national and international courts of law, promotion of cultural traditions (music, festivals, museum, literature, poetry, dance, ecotourism, pharmacopoeia, etc), struggles for specific rights (whether linguistic or territorial) or general rights (full access to citizenship, political representation).

The main issue was to determine what characterizes the range of collective actions mobilized by the minorized groups that are resisting in different historical and socio-political contexts, around four lines of research :

- the political dimension related to the way claims from minorized peoples are dealt with within the public democratic sphere set up by Nation-States,
- the legal framework of international conventions or national constitutions which try to organize the defence and protection of the languages and cultures of the world,
- the economic dimension around the tensions or conflicts between territorial rights/regional sovereignty and economic development,
- the different experiences and initiatives linked to social mobilizations.

The idea was to address other disciplines than my own and open the Conference to an overview of interventions in order to document the variety of issues minority languages and peoples have to face. In that respect, 31 papers were selected, including 4 keynotes speakers. Ultimately, 23 papers were published in a book edited in 2020.

Now, the contributions come from researchers belonging to 4 continents, 14 countries, 11 academic disciplines: Anthropology, Arts, Educational Sciences, Law, Linguistics, Literature, Media Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology and Sciences of Information and Communication. All the investigators have in common to work on minority languages and cultures but, from their specific disciplinary field, they bring to light a variety of situations, experiences, conflicts and initiatives and contribute to build a vast and contrasting overview of the social, political, cultural dynamics involved in struggling for cultural and linguistic diversity. For the reader, this interdisciplinarity-based book gives a better understanding of the issues related to revitalizing minority languages and cultures. A similar conference restricted to linguists would have led to a series of specialized monographies, i. e. something reserved to a small academic community of researchers in linguistics.

✓ Glasgow University Media Group

The case of the Glasgow University Media Group is quite symptomatic of what an interdisciplinary approach can lead to in terms of collective investigation. I had the opportunity to write an article about this original academic adventure in a book I edited with two other colleagues called “Materialism, culture & Communication.” [Guyot, 2019 : 195-211]

When in 1976, the researchers belonging to the newly-created collective called the *Glasgow University Media Group* (GUMG), wrote in the introduction of their first book, *Bad News*, that TV news was a cultural artefact and not a neutral product [GUMG, 1976 : 1], they started questioning one of the major dogmas structuring the journalistic activities of the British Television (BBC & ITN) whose editorial boards always claimed a balanced and unbiased treatment of information : according to them, television news would be more objective than the press. TV journalists would be careful in presenting the different points of view impartially, in giving equal speaking time to the participants, in using a neutral tone and vocabulary and in offering TV viewers the different competing arguments so they could make up their own mind. This vision of news making, very much in the style of the public sphere promoted by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, was widely questioned by the GUMG, which dissected and analysed, over a period of time spreading over 50 years, not only the content of TV reports and news bulletins, but also journalistic routines and practices, the social, academic and professional backgrounds of the journalists, the modes of reception of TV messages and in a more general way, the economic and political structures behind TV news making.

Therefore, in order to examine and put apart the sacrosanct myth of journalistic objectivity, or a least of a balanced treatment of information, the Glasgow University Media Group needed to gather a collective of researchers belonging to different academic areas, able to work in the long run, something that was quite new and original in the 1970s in media studies. This new approach involved deploying vast frames of analysis ranging from describing contents or images to political economy of communication. But the GMUG also had to experiment new innovative methods to study, for example, the audio-visual material that was, at that time, ephemeral and fleeting.

The research programme initiated by the GMUG is surely ambitious and was organised like a real work site. The researchers came from sociology around Greg Philo (University of Glasgow), surrounded by other sociologists and co leaders of the project Peter Beharell (Liverpool College of Higher Education), Howard Davis (University of Kent), John Eldridge (University of Glasgow) and John Hewitt (Liverpool College of Higher Education), others came from communication studies (Paul Walton – Goldsmiths' College), cinema studies (Brian Winston – State University of New York), literature and theatre (the freelance writer Jean Oddie). Other investigators joined the GUMG later like Mike Berry (Faculty of Arts – University of Nottingham), Jenny Kitzinger (Sociology – University of Glasgow), Kevin Williams (Communication Studies – University of Wales), David Miller (Sociology – University of Sterling), Philipp Schlesinger (Media Studies, University of Sterling). Other investigators occasionally join the group as contributors like Derek Bousé (Media Studies – Annenberg School of Communication, USA), Noam Chomsky (Linguistics), John Corner (Media Studies – University of Liverpool), James Curran (Communication Studies – Goldsmiths' College), Barbara Epstein (Historian – University of California), Andrew Gamble (Political Economy – University of Sheffield), Chris Hammett (Human Geography – King's College London), Angela McRobbie (Communication Studies, Goldsmiths' College), Jean Shaoul (Accounting and Finance ) Manchester University) but also professionals like Danny Schelter (Executive Producer of Globavision Inc or Hilary Wainswright, an editor of a popular new left magazine.

Indeed, the team has a broad range of disciplinary and practical competences which, brought together, brings a comprehensive and extensive understanding of the way news making and broadcasting work. Besides, most books and articles were published under the common signature of the group, thus giving sense to collective work and interdisciplinarity. The other advantage of gathering so many people is that the tremendous task to do could be

shared by all the members : let us only mention the unbelievable time dedicated to view all the news reels recorded on video tapes, to analyse them without forgetting the treatment of the collected data . Last but not least, the investigation results have been presented in about fifteen or so books plus a multitude of articles published in some of the best international scientific reviews in social sciences, thus punctuating this intellectual adventure over half a century. Each book was an opportunity to go back to theoretical and methodological updates that nourish, develop or summarize reflexions on Television news.

In the end, the interdisciplinary approach allows the members of the group to study the complexity of the processes used in the TV editorial boards without splitting the analysis of journalistic production from sociology of TV professionals and of audiences. In this particular context, TV news was studied both from the angle of contents, but also from the angle of the journalistic ideology, the news values claimed by the profession, the visual representations of the news and the political economic background which structures the whole process of information production.

Thanks for your attention.