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## Why Do We Miss Newspapers in the Age of Homo Super Communicatus? *Homo Super Communicatus Çağında Neden Gazeteleri Özlüyoruz?*

The history of communication technology has had a rather predictable line of progression. It could have been envisioned from the start that it would proceed in the direction of making *homo sapiens* an increasingly capable communicator. Yet, obviously, nobody had the foresight to see it could come this far:

Today we can communicate with anyone, from anywhere, using any sense organ, at any time.

Better than Superman!

Clearly, the communicative limits of *homo sapiens* as a species have been surpassed functionally if not biologically, and, in my opinion, we have evolved into a new stage of “development”: *Homo Super Communicatus!*

In a world full of dangers, humans had to be “*homo communicatus*” from the beginning, i.e. people who continually process and share information in order to survive. However, the Information Society and the Digital Age have engendered a gigantic leap. A qualitative difference has occurred: We are now capable of doing things that were previously unimaginable, feats that were considered beyond our nature or “making.”

On the long way to this point, the future was the subject of many dreams, fairy tales and science-fiction stories: Mirrors that showed distant places, wells that made far away sounds audible, wristwatches that could do both... Crazy dreams!

But no dream was daring or crazy enough to depict all the things we are now able to do as a normal part of our daily lives. Thanks to digital technology, the unimaginable has become a reality.

Now we are discovering the consequences.

The communicative ability and information-sending capacity of the new “improved” species, *Homo Super Communicatus*, is, as claimed, super. Yet, the Cryponite Metallo, the ever-present foe, is there, as well. As we have found out, *Homo Super Communicatus* is rather weak when it comes to making sense of all the “bits” and pieces of information reaching him.

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Neuroscientists tell us *Homo Super Communicatus*' information processing capacity is still badly limited and extremely selective (Marois & Ivanoff, 2005). This is why we may act like a moron, if not helped.

As philosopher Byung Chul Han, among others, has pointed out, *Homo Super Communicatus* needs bearings such as context, narrative and ritual in order not to get lost (Byung-Chul Han, 2022).

I would like to add another element: Closure. He/she needs them more now, in the age of constant connectivity, because all four have been eroded or demolished by it.

## Why Were Newspapers Important?

As a veteran communications scholar and practitioner, I believe, one factor that deserves particular attention in this process is the rapid passing of newspapers, which served as the most trustworthy and stable source of information for at least two centuries.

Newspapers functioned as a daily routine of life, especially in small communities, giving people a structure for the day. They provided a menu of actual happenings and a package of “true” information. Most people believed their newspapers. “I read it in the paper,” sounded like solid proof.

The world presented by newspapers was an orderly one. If a news story was on the front page, it was considered to be more important than a story on page eight; a story published with a large headline, more urgent than one with a heading bearing smaller typeface. There was consistency; you knew your way around like in your own neighborhood when looking for a certain piece of information.

The newspaper put the chaotic, ever-changing world in order, not only politically, but also geographically: Events nearby were more likely to be given prominent display than events far away. The farther, the smaller.

Newspaper editors made an effort to put isolated events into a context. They did this not only by interlinking them spatially and graphically, but also by explaining them in commentaries and editorials. Bits and pieces of information did not fly in the wind like sparks from a wildfire.

The newspaper presented happenings not as isolated events, but as a part of a big narrative. Most stories were continuous and repetitive; many could be read like installments in a serialized novel, like *The Pickwick Papers* of Dickens, or the *Crime and Punishment* of Dostoyevsky. There were heroes and villains, births and deaths, and weddings and divorces.

## The Need For Closure

For the “modern man”, newspaper reading was a daily ritual, almost a mandatory one. In some places, subscribing to the local newspaper was one of the first things people did as a

part of the “moving in” ceremonial, to be followed by visits from neighbors, housewarming parties, etc., to become a full member of the community.

The findings of the Users and Gratifications tradition of research in communications showed that the newspaper was perceived, first and foremost, as a companion, even as a close friend.<sup>1</sup> It was carried around, saved, clipped, written to for advice. It was missed like a buddy when unavailable. People were identified by the papers they regularly read. Newspapers were like name-cards and flags! They were more than information providers.

People who were of addicts to football games may remember the closure function the newspaper played. The paper heralded the event-package, by announcing its time and venue. It set a frame and generated certain expectations. The story reinforced or dispelled them. The headline, pictures and the narration completed the cycle. The game itself was often ambiguous, incomplete, and incoherent without it. Circulations rose the day after the game because it was read not only by those who had not been to the game, but also the very same people who had seen it. A lot of people needed the report to file it away before moving on.

In my view, the closure function of newspapers, which was not limited to sports events, was overlooked by communication researchers while newspapers were still a part of everyday life. Now that they are largely gone, we are beginning to realize that they were not only agenda setters, but also closure producers. People needed to see the curtains fall at the end of the act for their own cognitive comfort.

I am of course referring to what we knew from social psychology all along: Uncertainty and ambiguity are stress producers. Cognitive dissonance causes discomfort and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> The stress resulting from the onslaught of incessant, unverified and often contradictory bits and pieces of out-of-context information can lead to confusion, alienation, irrational denialism, bigotry and polarization – words that have become increasingly familiar to the *Homo Super Communicatuses* of the world.

That newspapers have been surpassed technologically is not uncertain – they are gone for good! But we are discovering that in an environment dominated by social media, it will be a while before some sort of new cognitive composure comes to prevail.

Looking at what is happening all over the world, this is a defining crisis. Context, ritual, narrative and closure are the qualities we need desperately in the new super abundant information environment.

And, realistically, they are not coming back with newspapers.

**1** See for instance Bernard Berelson’s (1949) early study of what people missed most during a newspaper strike.

**2** Cognitive dissonance theory stems from psychologist Leon Festinger’s studies on how people try to handle conflicting information. Festinger (1956) is considered to be a classic.

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