The Focus Is on the Process
Interview with Bas Könning

Geert van de Wetering

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GVDW *How does one become a media philosopher?*

BK In the 1980s I studied visual communications at the aki Academy of Visual Arts in Enschede. After that I went on to study philosophy in Amsterdam, for the most part as a ghost student, because I'd used up my university time. I mainly took courses in linguistic philosophy. Around that time I also became fascinated by the internet, which at that moment was nothing more than a collection of bulletin boards. Yet its users could already sense that it was going to turn into something amazing.

From 1994 onward I advised businesses and government and educational institutions on integrating the internet into their organizations. I handled the entire process, like a one-man band, from designing the websites and data structures to initiating the staff into its mysteries. Now that the other media have also become part of the digital revolution, these are really great times for a media philosopher. Incidentally, don't confuse a media philosopher with a media analyst. Aside from analysis, a philosopher lavishes most of his care on synthesis. I examine how developments in the media are changing the world and vice versa. A new media landscape is emerging, and I am sketching a picture of it. My day-to-day work consists of surfing the web a lot, and I work on various projects in conjunction with Nieuw Akademia, a network of academics, consultants and artists. At the moment I am involved, via Nieuw Akademia, with the NPOX [1] media festival organized by the Dutch public broadcasters.

What is the difference between the current excitement about the web and the internet hype of the late 1990s?

Back then we could see the potential, but it was not yet clear what the value of these possibilities was. One could see, for instance, that the supply of products and information was growing enormously. It was assumed that the audience would appreciate this a lot, because freedom of choice seemed a major positive at the time. Since then, it has been demonstrated more and more frequently that what we want is not a broad selection, that we in fact want things to be pre-selected for us. These days you can see that a lot more hierarchy is emerging than in the late 1990s, even though the amount on offer is several orders of magnitude greater, and so is the chaos. The present hierarchy is user-driven, that is to say the sender has made it possible for the receptors to apply a hierarchy to the content on offer, through 'tagging' (describing and labelling), 'rating' (validating) and 'sharing'. We encounter 'familiar strangers' – strangers, but with the same preferences. In this way, the web is evolving from a search engine into a finding machine, and that is an essential transformation, because most people don't enjoy searching very much.

The use of media has changed enormously. What is the most significant shift?

The most significant development, in my view, is the blurring of the boundaries between the various information and communication platforms. Familiar media such a television, radio, internet, newspapers and telephones are making way for a broad palette of hybrid

forms. There are more and more devices that can more or less do everything. Like a telephone on which you can watch video. The display screen will soon compete with the printed newspaper at the breakfast table. And slowly but surely, the possibilities of the internet are being made available on television. These are initially technological developments, but they are altering behaviour, as well as the expectations of the audience toward all media. For years, participating in television was not an option. We took that for granted, but the younger generations no longer do. Of the 100 per cent that consume video via internet, 10 per cent respond or participate. That does not seem like much, but the 90 per cent that do not respond themselves do find it very important that the possibility exists. Among these responses, after all, are familiar strangers, who represent their voice. And 1 per cent of internet users put their own material on the web. So at least 1 in 100 consumers becomes a producer if given the chance. This changes the perception of the media and therefore the role of the programme maker – he or she is now among equals, the audience is media-savvy and the programme maker will have to behave accordingly.

Is a change in mentality required for the majority of programme makers?

My short answer would be no, they should just go on making beautiful things. But it is a fact that beautiful things are not automatically seen by their intended audience. So it helps if programme makers become aware of new ways of reaching the audience, and better still, involve the audience in the production process.

What we do or do not watch is increasingly channelled through our own networks and communities. In these communities there are always key figures: people who are more present than the rest, who pop up all over the place and link the flows of information. Programme makers are well-advised to seek out these 'connectors'. They are worth their weight in gold to programme makers, for they know what's going on. And they also take care of distribution, for once connectors find out about something, it quickly gets around.

What is the difference in approach between a traditional programme maker and a programme maker who is abreast of all the new developments in the realm of media production, distribution and use?

The traditional maker handles the research phase from within his or her own network. His or her focus is a medium: it will be a television or radio programme in a specific time slot. The broadcast is mostly the first and often also the last contact for the audience. After the broadcast he or she uses his or her network to see whether something extra can be done with the programme: a discussion evening in the De Balie cultural centre, hiring it out to institutions or a presentation at a university. In short, he or she uses the structure, the platforms and the institutions he or she knows.

For a 'new' maker the time slot is an important climax as well, but the focus is on the process. He or she gets involved in networks related to the subject, sees this as the first audience to be won over and potentially turned into a source. He or she starts a blog, and responds to other blogs. He or she creates circles around his or her production process, adds familiar strangers to his or her address book, turns them into accomplices, puts raw material on YouTube and Hyves, provokes reactions.

Among traditional media makers you sometimes detect fear or at least scepticism in relation to processes of collective and collaborative intelligence. Fear of compromising the quality of the news gathering and the reliability of information. Is this fear justified?

Not at all. The debate that has always raged within journalism – about the vetting of information and about objectivity and subjectivity – is now often being waged by the audience. A much more intricate web of gradual truth has emerged. Every web user,

children definitely included, knows that doubt is permissible and imperative. Something is provisionally true, or plausible, or good enough to pass on, with or without source attribution.

The surfeit of examples in which nuanced gradations of the truth exist has made the audience increasingly more adept at assessing the news as to truth value. What used to be done solely by the journalist is now done by the receptor: collecting sources, weighing and testing. If possible he or she does this in consultation with other users, for without supplemental communication, information is less interesting anyway, whether it is true or not.

Geert Lovink, in his article elsewhere in this issue, is sceptical about the expected overthrow of the traditional mass media. He sees precious little evidence of it. What is your prediction?

The mass media have already sustained a major blow, particularly as a result of the expansion of supply, and are increasingly targeting specific groups or themes. In the 1970s, the Dutch television evening news reached 55 per cent of the public; now all the Dutch television channels put together can barely achieve that. Yet despite this growing fragmentation, mass media will retain a certain position. First, because we want stars, and stars exist and thrive by the grace of the mass media. A hit on YouTube only genuinely becomes a hype once the mass media start reporting on it. And I don't see this changing any time soon.

In addition, chatting about yesterday's media in schoolyards and office canteens is a widely shared pleasure, and therefore a programme watched by a lot of people will continue to exert a gravitational effect. Mass media are also indispensable for the creation of frames of reference. Without a regular experience of common ground, it is difficult to be one society. For this reason, governments will work hard to preserve the mass media. The commercial channels, however, are in for a tough time. Advertisers, en masse, are looking for new ways to reach the consumer, and the boom in store for on-demand television is a threat to commercial breaks. It is not yet clear what will happen, but that *something* is going to change is certain.

Which book or which blog is really of quintessential importance if you, as a programme maker/media maker, want to be thoroughly abreast of the latest developments in the media ecosystem?

Your own blog! With any luck you'll be automatically kept on your toes by your readers. And then you don't have to read all of those books about developments in the use of media. I haven't read Chris Anderson's best-seller, *The Long Tail*, but I know exactly what's in it. I followed various discussions of *The Long Tail* on the web and am now familiar not only with Anderson's insights, but also with those of his critics. And the critique of that critique. That is the blessing of participation in the media.

Geert van de Wetering (NL) is a journalist and programme maker. He worked for six years for VPRO Television, where he was the creator and producer of such programmes as *Nachtpodium* and *Picabia*. He has also written for the *De Volkskrant* newsaper and many magazines. He currently works as a freelance journalist and director.

Footnotes

1. On 19 and 20 November 2007, the NPOX Media Festival, intended for public broadcasters, will be held at the Institute for Sound and Vision in Hilversum. Current developments In the media are leading to numerous forms of fragmentation: fragmentation of media platforms, fragmentation of reach and fragmentation of society into subcultures. The answer to this is to create cross-overs: cross-media, cross-community, cross-culture. This has been the domain of public broadcasting from its very beginning – in fact public broadcasting is the precursor of the creation of cross-overs and the cultivation of new possibilities. This is not always recognized, however, whether inside or outside the broadcasting system. The NPOX media festival aims to change this, by showing what is already being done, to examine what the next steps might be and thereby provide a stimulus to further development of innovative products among public broadcasting organizations.

Tags

Media Society