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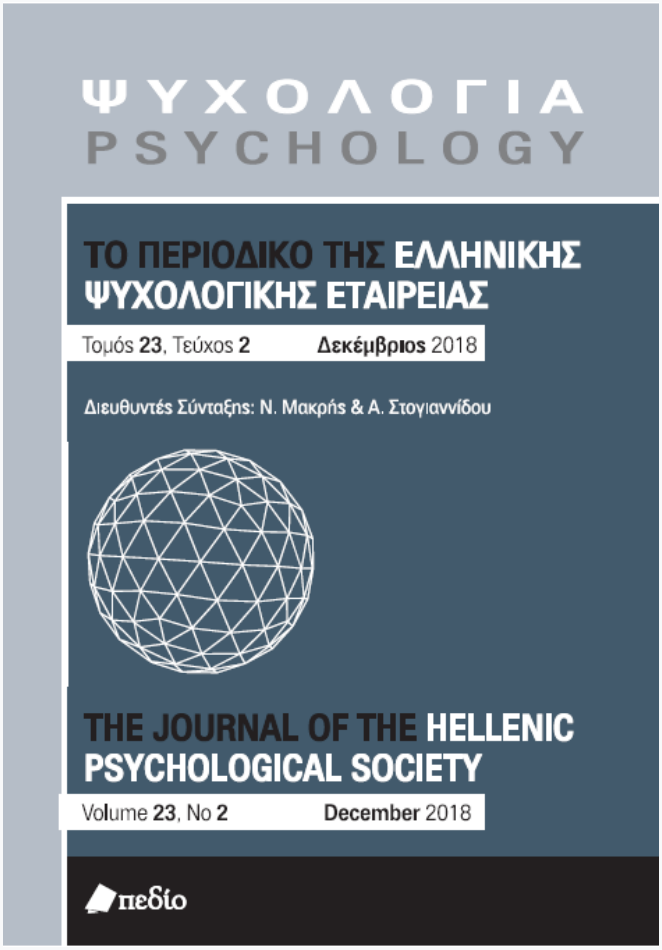

A challenge for media psychology and technology

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Commentary: A challenge for media psychology and technology

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What is "Media Psychology and Technology", the academic field that is being formally introduced in our country, with this special issue of *Psychology?* By tradition, the formal establishment of a new scientific division or of a clearly defined interdisciplinary subject of research is taken, respectively, as the date when the first textbook is published as for example, Neisser's *Cognitive Psychology* in 1967 established the homonymous field, or when the first scientific society is founded, as the International Society of Research on Emotions formally introduced the interdisciplinary study of Emotions in 1984. However, if we seek similar milestones in what we call today "media psychology", we shall find several different dates quite apart from each other, as well as several definitions of the discipline, ranging from the very simplistic "clinical psychologists active in popular media" to the more elaborated "using psychology as a tool to analyse and develop media" (Rutledge, 2008, 2014). Division #46 of Media Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA) was founded 1987, but only recently was upgraded to a Society[2], while the British Psychological Society is just now considering the possibility of forming an homonymous Division. Nevertheless, references to this –not yet labelled– field of research had been made much earlier, both in Europe (e.g. Rouquette, 1973, 1984) and the U.S. (e.g. Luskin & Friedland, 1998), and homonymous textbooks have long ago been published in both sides of the world (e.g. Wintershoff-Spurk, 1999; Giles, 2003). In their introduction, Kourti & Gazi (this issue) provide a detailed description of studies and research that functioned as precursors to the development of the field both in Europe and the U.S.

This variability of "milestones" is accompanied by a variability of academic fields, occasionally considered as part of "media psychology". For example, when our colleagues in the U.S. created Division 46, they incorporated research from overlapping disciplines, such as marketing, advertising and consumer behaviour from the 1920s, or television and media studies from the 1950s (Rutledge, 2014). In parallel, a kin discipline, Cyberpsychology, is developing through the years, especially after the wide diffusion of the internet. It is generally defined as the study of behaviour, cognition, emotion and relationships that individuals develop within the potential space provided by modern technology (e.g. Gordo-Lopez & Parker, 1999). Several years after the first relevant scientific journal, *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* in 1998,

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2. See http://www.apadivisions.org/division-46/about/history.aspx

however, authors still admit that writing about Cyberpsychology is "like painting a vertical stripe on a moving train", and researchers must "relax with their psychological need for closure" (Norman, 2008:x), since information and communication technology (ICT) is changing faster than researchers can follow. But what does not include ICTs in modern every-day life?

This short historical description of the field raises some crucial epistemological questions. If we conceptualize Media Psychology "as understanding the process and interaction between human experience and mediated communication of any kind" as Rutledge (2008) suggests, and given that most human processes and behaviour (from cognition, to emotion, and relationships), even the human body (Heggs, 1999), are today mediated by technology, should we accept that all psychology today *is* media psychology? And if not, is the opposite true? Is Media Psychology a division of a maternal discipline, Psychology? A discipline, that is, which has both a cohesive definition formulated by its founders (i.e. the study of consciousness as suggested by Wundt or the study of cognition, volition and emotion as suggested by James), and cohesive and well documented research methods and tools, such as clinical observation, experimentation, and the study of subjective experience, which dialectically converse to provide as better explanations as possible about human experience and behaviour? Or is Media Psychology a new interdisciplinary field of which psychology is just a component? Is using psychology to develop a computer game, for example, a sufficient and necessary criterion to include a particular research in the discipline of media psychology, as Rutledge's (2008) definition would imply? Or is it just a loan that Computer Science is taking from Psychology? One might claim that this is an artificial dilemma, given the current multidisciplinary trends, but it is not. Because, regardless of the various mutual loans and exchanges between disciplines and specialisations, what gives coherence in a particular discipline, above trends and developments at various different times, is its commitment to its subject and methods of research.

That Media Psychology is an eluding, quite diverse field is also apparent in the papers included in this special issue. Each belongs to a different sub-field of psychology and could have been published in a relevant specialised journal: the investigation of the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction, and of the definition of addiction per se (Soranidou & Papastylianou, this issue) could appear in a journal of psychopathology; issues on social capital, identity and friendship (Kourti, Kordoutis, Madoglou, this issue) could have been published in a social psychology journal; political behaviour and political participation in social networks (Gardikiotis, Navrozidou, & Euaggelou-Navarro, this issue) belong to the general field of political psychology; issues on young adults' capacity for gratification and fulfillment or new forms of anxiety in the cyberspace (Sidiropoulou, this issue) could appear in a journal of clinical psychology; and soundscape research on the emotional significance of various units of the urban environment (Gazi, Rizopoulos, & Christidis, this issue) could easily belong to environmental psychology. What these papers have in common apart from including ICTs as a variable in what they research or discuss, is that they all could stand in a different subdivision of psychology; i.e. they are all consistent in terms of the discipline's subject and methods.

In preparing this Commentary, I went back to my notes from the Inaugural Symposium of the Section "Media Psychology & Technology" of the Hellenic Psychological Society, during the 15th Conference of Psychological Research, in Nicosia, in May 2015, where I was honoured to have been invited as a Discussant. The first speech in this Symposium was given by Dr. Jerri Lynn Hogg, President

elect of the APA Society for Media Psychology and Technology (previously Division 46). What struck me in Hogg's presentation of media psychology advancements, in Nicosia of the 2010s, was that her enthusiastic speech stood at a diametric opposite of the skepticism expressed by one of the founders of communication and media studies, McLuhan's (1964) back in the 1960s; among other concerns, he had admitted that technologies do indeed contribute in expanding human senses and mental processes, but warned that at the same time they are necrotizing the physiological organs they supplant. What had changed within this half century? Was McLuhan too pessimistic or are modern researchers too optimistic? Or were the initial focus on humans and society as the centre of all research, and the initially cautious and critical attitude towards technological developments, gradually eroded by the ceaseless succession of technological objects-to-be-researched that dragged researchers, similarly as gadgets do to consumers, to their pace and rhythm, as Baudrillard's (2005) would put it?

It seemed to me that several of the media psychology advancements presented by Hogg were cut off from their psychological context and stripped of their implications for humans and society. Below are some of the concerns that arose to me, while I was very carefully listening to that inaugural speech[3].

- "The digital world helps us proactively create content and access real time data around the world". True. But that statement alone glosses over the various side-effects of the exaggerated speed and the vast amount of fragments of information modern individuals are exposed to (e.g. Eriksen, 2001), the confusion created and the severe time and accuracy costs of multitasking as people engage in parallel processing of real time data from around the world (e.g. Giedd, 2012; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009), or the costs in depth of processing (e.g. Duggan & Payne, 2009; Pfeifer, 2013; Shrestha & Lenz, 2007) which imply a general shift from critical thinking, comprehending and knowing to just being kept informed.
- "Technology can fuel the global reach to touch more lives and cultivate deeper connections". Indeed. The cyberspace expands our ability to connect with people, but this type of "lighter", poorer in terms of emotional cues encounters with physically absent others could gradually "educate" ICT users in a lighter investment on relationships. As Turkle (2011, p.154) nicely puts it, "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed -and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing". And as Suler (2015) adds, interminable symbiotic connectivity intensifies the formation of relationships which are perfectly controlled, imaginary and superficial. People do coexist with others both offline and in digital environments, communicating concurrently in both contexts in a degree of proximity that is neither too close nor too far (Davou, 2005, Turkle, 2011), and they indeed have more connections thanks to technology. But it is doubtful that these connections are "deeper", as was also indirectly shown in the work of Kourti, Kordoutis, & Madoglou (this issue).
- "Social media can be used for social good". Indeed, research has shown that FaceBook, for example, has an impact

3. Phrases in quotes are either verbatim from Jerri Lynn Hogg's oral presentation or as they appeared in the Summary submitted to the Symposium.

on the increase of collective political efficacy (Halpern, Vanenzuela, & Katz, 2017) or that political use of social media predicts political participation, as Gardikiotis, Navrozidou, & Euaggelou-Navarro show in this issue. At the same time, however, serious caution has been expressed about algorithms affecting news visibility and metrics, thus manipulating public opinion[4]; and solid evidence, even before the expansion of the internet, had shown that desensitisation from violent media images contributed to increased apathy and cynicism, and to a tendency to offer some donation to calm down guilt for other people's suffering, and then rest in the safety of one's home (Buckingham, 1996, 1998).

- "Wearable technologies and mobile applications are designed to build skills for lasting happiness". The most well-known technology of this kind is the "Happify", an application for smartphones, tablets, and computers that promises to teach users how to monitor, exercise and increase their "happiness" level. It claims to increase happiness from 45% up to 80%, while up to 86% of frequent users get happier within two months[5]. Apart from ideological reservations one might have about training people to the Polyanna syndrome without considering their personal individual and social problems, psychological evidence would question whether "ever-lasting happiness" is indeed what people need. Happiness, either as a complex state of existence or as a basic emotion is part of both human and non-human[6] organisms' system for communication, survival and behaviour regulation (e.g. Ekman, 1999); the remaining part consists of other basic emotions, such as grief, fear, anger etc. equally important for survival. Some researchers actually claim that a general ratio of 3:1 of positive vs. negative feelings per day are necessary for well-being, and it may be quite alarming for the individual if this ratio reaches up to 11:1 (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). So what really is the psychological significance of an "everlasting happiness" application, out of the contexts of personal experience and of the general significance of emotions?

One final note, prompted by the second speech in that Inaugural Symposium, entitled "The psychology of entertainment and emotion in games" by G. Yannakakis, which illustrated how both "emotion" and "playing" are usually operationalised in the general field of human-computer interaction. Most of the times, "emotion" is deduced to the physical arousal produced by the various levels of difficulty that a computer game requires, and is detected through physiological sensors (e.g. Peter & Urban, 2012). But psychologically speaking, physical arousal is just physical arousal, and can only be objectively interpreted either as stress or as anxiety. It is not an "emotion" unless the person who experiences it subjectively interprets it as such (e.g. Oatley, 2004). Not less frequently in game studies, "playing" is deduced to "gaming", i.e. it is being stripped of its rich psychological significance as a transitional activity during which the player has the power to imagine and create but also to release tension and rest, to a competitive, often compulsive activity, where frustration and anxiety are maximized as the player struggles to pass to the next performance stage.

These few illustrative points were made with one purpose: to accentuate that those of us who deal with Media Psychology are, above and beyond our areas of specializa-

4. See for example research done by the Computational Propaganda Project at http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/

5. See https://my.happify.com/

6. For non-humans, see for example Bekoff (2008)

tion, Psychologists; our focus is humans and societies rather than technological advancements, and our purpose is to assist humans and societies to critically put ICTs at their service rather than be at the service of ICTs.

ICTs are changing the social milieu in which humans inhabit, and offer infinite opportunities for knowing, feeling and connecting but people are finite existences. Cognitive processes can be exercised and expanded but within boundaries since cognitive loading may lead to burnout (e.g. Mark, 2015), emotional arousal can enrich experience but too much arousal affects immunity of the organism (e.g. Kemeny & Shestyuk, 2008), and relationships are extremely important for well-being but mostly at the deep face-to-face intimate level (e.g. Caciopo & Patrick, 2008) rather than at the superficial level of amount of "friendships" in social networks. Therefore, I think that the challenge for Media Psychology and Technology is to stay focused in its psychological perspective.

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