

What is pragmatic media philosophy in philosophy of media?

1. What is the philosophy of media?

Before I try to answer the question in the title of my paper, I would like to clarify a broader question – what is actually the philosophy of media?

The philosophy of media has been formed throughout the 20th century, and became an answer to the call of powerful development of technologies of communications. Rapid growth and change of various technologies demanded studying of history, of the content and effects of various news media and communications or media in a conventional sense. The contribution to development of media was made by such researchers as Walter Benjamin, Günther Anders, Marshall McLuhan, Vilém Flusser and others.

The philosophy of media, or “Medienphilosophie”, is a continental product, the formation of which started in the late 1980s, basically in the German-speaking intellectual space. The bases for the formation of a new direction are:

a) the problematisation of «materiality of communications» that takes place in the works of such literary critics as Friedrich Kittler, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht etc.;

b) reconsideration of relations of an image-text in the works of Vilem Flusser, William J. T. Mitchell (pictorial turn), Gottfried Boehm (iconic turn) etc.

Especially powerfully debate occurred in the beginning of the 21st century after a number of works using in the title the term “Medienphilosophie” were published. Here one can name a work by Frank Hartmann - “Medienphilosophie” (2000), where Hartman undertakes a historical-philosophical study of how media influenced philosophy; a work by Mike Sandbothe “Pragmatic media philosophy. The bases of new discipline of an epoch the Internet” (Pragmatische Medienphilosophie. Grundlegung einer neuen Disziplin im Zeitalter des Internet, 2001): and by Stefan Münker, Alexander Roesler und Mike Sandbothe (Ed.) “Media philosophy. Contributions to the clarification of the concept” (Medienphilosophie. Beiträge zur Klärung eines Begriffs, 2003), etc. The discussions basically were held around a question – what are media? What value do they have for understanding a human being, understanding stories and cultures, for perception and thinking, for the reality and activity? How does the philosophical discourse change together with changing media? And they were also about the necessity of institutionalization of the new discipline that is “media philosophy”.

In English-speaking space it is necessary to mention the work “New Philosophy for New Media” by Mark Hansen (2004), which is dedicated to the important problematics of interrelation of a human body and digital media, but, however, is also completely based on the ideas of continental philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The

problematics of body and medial actively develops now in English-speaking space (so-called biomorphic theory of media – Eugene Thacker etc.)

Thus, generally speaking, the main objective of “the media philosophy” is an attempt to rewrite the history of philosophy, the understanding of the human, of culture and politics through the prism of media and to comprehend the role of media in human perception and thinking.

There are many tendency and classifications that deserve a separate analysis, therefore we will not stop here, and we will go straight to the question that arises in case of any theorization of media. How can and should the theory today change the situation concerning media? What is the function of such theory? Both interconnected questions belong to the direction that can be named the pragmatic philosophy of media. Media are not stagnant, they change and develop and demand a constant contact with reality, which is the central moment of the pragmatism. The speculative approach is not applicable in this case.

2. Pragmatic philosophy of media 1.0 (after the linguistic turn)

Philosophy of media in the pragmatic key or the pragmatic media philosophy goes a middle way between a) abstract theorizing, b) prolific search for the definition – what is media? and c) many empirical facts of utilitarian studies of communications carried out within the frames of empirical media studies.

The book by Mike Sandbothe “Pragmatic media philosophy. The bases of a new discipline in the epoch the Internet” has become a call for a new fundamental discipline. Sandbothe makes the reception of “classical” Pragmatismus (Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey) taking into consideration its reversion – Neopragmatism – made by Richard Rorty and the declared by him linguistic turn. The anti-fundamentalist critical inventory of traditional philosophical questions undertaken in such a way leaves only practically important questions (PM, 2001, S. 26). Sandbothe defines the pragmatic media philosophy as an active interdisciplinary approach, as a “scientifically theoretical service discipline” for the arts and humanities, communications and media, which serves “Rehabilitation of the pragmatic self understanding of modern academic philosophy” („Rehabilitierung des pragmatischen Selbstverständnisses der modernen Fachphilosophie“ / PM, 2001, S. 48).

In opposition to speculative theorists of media, in particular to Marshall McLuhan, Sandbothe draws attention to the fact that the use of media is socially and historically constructed, and this is how it is used: “Media understanding of this use – the theoretical perspective – is not of perceptive technical extensions of the sense organs, but rather of social constructions” („Medien sind aus dieser gebrauchstheoretischer Sicht nicht als wahrnehmungstechnische Erweiterungen von Sinnesorganen, sondern vielmehr als soziale Konstruktionen zu verstehen“ / PM, 2001, S. 163).

He understands media first of all as tools for the coordination of inter-human actions. It requires thinking of media as not separate from these actions. It is through the media themselves

and not through the theoretical contemplation that one should follow the concrete, practical and experimental usage of media, carried out not only by media producers, but also by their users (both separate individuals, and social groups).

Sandbothe divides all media into three groups:

1. “sensory perceptions media” („sinnliche Wahrnehmungsmedien“) – for example, space, time, sense organs;
2. “semiotic communications media“ („semiotische Kommunikationsmedien“) – an image, language, writing, music;
3. “technical disseminations media” („technische Verbreitungsmedien“) – publishing, radio, television, film, computer, Internet.

All three groups are interconnected. Media are “practically” used in concrete rational acts of humans and in various relations and it legitimizes as if from within the new actions and relations. Media serve to change the world. These changes are mainly possible thanks to the Internet, which Mike Sandbothe places in the centre of his theory. Conceptualized as a “Transmedium” Internet allows us to carry out concrete rational practice to change the world.

Mike Sandbothe follows Richard Rorty in his affirmation of the political and moral standards of a liberal and democratic society. He proclaims the respectable goal – the accomplishment of the ideals, such as equality, tolerance, and freedom of research, discursivity and solidarity. Thereupon media are studied as the tools of information and communication, as the ends and means of constructing the possibility of such activity.

In our opinion the orientation of Sandbothe towards the linguistic turn, with the emphasis on the language (on its meaning and rational usage), limits the problematics of his pragmatic version of philosophy of media and reduces it to the superficial tool strategy: “We can understand words from a pragmatic perspective, as the media in a handicraft sense [...] used for a new work program, and as a means in the sense of a tool that can change the existing realities” („[...] können wir Wörter aus pragmatischer Perspektive als Medien in einem handwerklichen Sinn verstehen, indem wir sie [...] als, Programm für neue Arbeit und als Mittel im Sinn von Werkzeug gebrauchen, durch welche existierende Realitäten verändert werden können“ / PM, 2001, S. 109). Sandbothe perceives the Internet in political-cultural practice too optimistically. He considers only its linguistic component and practically does not pay any attention to its visual, audible and tactile content that frequently erodes and transforms the rationality of messages.

To consider media as just a tool applicable to knowledge, morals or politics means to amputate a part of human practice. Media being reduced to the tools of democratization and rational activity become a servant of other activity that is considered more valuable. Meanwhile media possess a relative autonomy and have an independent purpose. The medial experience is irreducible either to the aesthetic experience, or to any other kinds of experience. Medial experience directly influences our perceptions, thinking and imagination as it triggers the work of embodiment and free play of abilities.

Mike Sandbothe ends his book with the words that the book is just an introduction, “Prolegomena” to the future science about media: “The building itself is yet to be built. The pragmatic media philosophy is consistent with the present sketch that is only a beginning” („Das eigentliche Gebäude ist erst noch zu bauen. Die pragmatische Medienphilosophie steht mit der vorliegenden Skizze erst an ihrem Anfang“ / PM, 2001, S. 239). The construction is still in progress.

It is necessary to make the next step from the “language apriori” of the linguistic turn to the “media apriori” of the medial turn. It is necessary to include the bodily, the visual, and the auditory, which is not considered because it is not textual, into the pragmatic philosophy of media. In this case I consider it fruitful to re-read a book by John Dewey “Art as Experience” (1934) in a context of the problematics of media. Then to the front comes the problematics of experience of media, of fundamental experience in which both art and science, and everyday life can be included since media carry out de-autonomous function of these systems. Media are the environment that connects and permeates all systems.

3. Pragmatic philosophy of media 2.0 (after the medial turn)

In my opinion the task of the pragmatic philosophy of media is not in simple rewriting of a philosophical discourse and taking media into account and also not in being a service discipline for business media. The task of the pragmatic philosophy of media is in the study of concrete medial experiences and of concrete usage of media in order to understand better media effects, the positive and negative sides of media activity. The media influence is not just a linguistic component; it includes visual, audible, and tactile dimensions. Human experience is medialized. Media deliver us the world and pre-organize it. I think it is possible to bring together all dimensions of media in a bodily regime – in the dynamism of a live human body in its interaction with the environment. John Dewey described such interaction through the category of experience.

Dewey discusses “experience” in two major works – “Experience and Nature” (1925/29) and “Art as Experience” (1934). Both books unfortunately are not available in Russian in Russia: “Experience and Nature” is published in Russian in Georgia, and “Art as Experience” has never been translated into Russian. Dewey understands “experience” not as a bare subjective experience of a given actuality, which is essentially separated from perceiver, but as an active process of interaction with an environment. Then Dewey understands nature not as a certain reality, a confirmed order of things, beings and ways of existence, but as an open process of emergence, which develops within the boundaries of evolutionary interactions as an embodiment of natural potential in concrete situations. For Dewey human “experience” starts with natural interactions, since “nature” and “experience” are not opponents or enemies to each other but are essentially one and the same.

In my view Dewey expands the understanding of experience with empiricism. Empiricism understands experience as a subjective progressive accumulation of the sensual data of the past and of the present. Pragmatism adds the dimension of the future – experience of openness into the future, the prognosis as a kind of rule of behavior for accomplishment of the goals and formation of the self. Experience is not reduced either to contemplation, or to knowledge, which is only one part of it. Moreover, for Dewey “experience” is defined through the categories of continuity and interaction. “Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.”¹ The basis of his concept of experience is the activity understood as interrelation of action and suffering, during which the sense is actively produced.

Man influences the environment in consent with his own structure; due to this the changes made in the environment react to the organism and its activity. The live being feels consequences of his behavior and suffers from them. This close connection between action and suffering forms experience. It is a correlated action. It is experience that brings concrete sense into human life. It is directed to the positive as well as to the negative. Experience includes sensual experience, spiritualistic, religious, moral, aesthetic, social and cultural. For Dewey experience embraces all human life, including inter-relations of the human with nature and nature itself.

The concept of experience is valuable for philosophical reflection of media because it means both the physical conditions and the person who works, communicates, invents, uses things, suffers and enjoys. Experience means everything that is endured. Therefore, the specification made by Dewey is connected with the important understanding of experience as social practice, as actions of historically concrete individual. Experience may be yours or mine; it appears in the form of “industrial”, political, religious, aesthetic, intellectual etc. experiences.

According to Dewey, concepts emerge as ways to solve a problematic situation. Any concepts, including scientific, are not copies of any independent reality, but exist as tools and plans of action and are created by an experiencer. Concepts are tools for obtaining experience and are subject to constant calibration and updating when they cease to provide reception of the best experience.

Ideas are operational, because by their nature they are projects of intrusion into existing conditions. Ideas are always abstractions of some real problems. The truth lies not in an adequacy of thinking and life but in the reliability of principal idea to serve as a tool to solve vital problems. The true is a direction in which it is necessary to move. The true is historical and not eternal. It is subject to updates and changes in the light of new situations, worries, threats, and doubts.

Dewey develops further the concept of experience in his work “Art as Experience”. In the first three chapters of the book he gives examples of the aesthetic experience. He shows the connection between art and life, the continuity of the aesthetic experience that includes both the

¹ Dewey John. Art as Experience. New York: Perigee Books, 1980. P.35.

sphere of high art and the sphere of day-to-day life and popular culture. Dewey insists on indissolubility of traditionally oppositional categories – graceful arts / applied arts, high / popular, body / mind, man / nature, subject / object, ends / means. Sequestering and life fragmentation, strict distinctions bring the mobile dynamic material into rigid immovability, and finally, into idolizing separate fragments. It results in impoverishment of our understanding of completeness of experience. The danger of creating fetishes appears when distinctions acquire evaluative character, thus imposing restrictions on perception and obscuring the understanding of the case and of the situation in general.

Dewey's preferences are not to the material object – fetish – a product of art, but to dynamic, developing process of experiencing in the course of production and perception of these products of art. He distinguishes “art product” and “work of art”. The first is an external and physically created material artefact that exists separately from human experience; the second is a function, which is executed by this product in the course of its acquisition by men. Thus, Dewey understands art as the universal form of communication, which is means and ends simultaneously. It serves not only to the message, but first of all to manufacturing of sense. To reach the end – means to reach other ends.

Dewey's ideas about “Art” and “Experience” can be applied to media, which are embedded in human life. Media function as means. However, it does not cancel the fact that media can be a part of the ends. Media are integral parts of the ends of their usage.

Dewey's category of experience allows us to point out and to resolve a problem of means and ends, of the instrumentalism of media (widespread understanding of media as bare means). Dewey rejects the narrow utilitarian understanding of a tool as an effective means for gaining advantage. The dichotomy of the ends and means (as well as of the body and mind) stagnates thinking and human activity. The existing distinction should not lead to oppositions. Media are simultaneously the valuable means of satisfaction of human desires and its ends. Media serve life in a broad sense and not the ordered and limited way of life. The enrichment of experience is not only immediate, but it continues after the work of media is over because the senses are embodied in us. Media activate the work of our perceptions, they inspire/depress, charge/discharge energy and recover/lull.

Dewey demonstrated that the path to the true lies in reference to experience, life, functionality and context. The methodological rule considers the true as being made. Thus the pragmatic philosophy of media is not a speculative and dogmatic theory but the method of study that looks to concreteness and adequacy of the facts and acts.

4. The conclusion

Taking into account John Dewey's philosophy of experience it is possible to formulate some principles of the pragmatic philosophy of media:

1. One should view media as not static artefacts (technical devices) but as process of their work in direct connection with the human, as continuous developing process of action and change – as medial experience.
2. Medial experience is rooted in a socio-historical context and cannot be separated from its genesis in socio-political circumstances; the emergence of media themselves and their subsequent transformation are in experience.
3. Media are open to change and transformation, they are the product of constantly changing setting of the experience of their usage; it is an interactive game fluctuating the context of interactions (medium, environment, human).
4. Medial experience stimulates moving forward, getting something new, encourages new approach to environing and unity of various elements of experience.
5. Research into media should not be hemmed in and idolized in absolute formulas.

How can pragmatic media philosophy help us? What does it give us?

The pragmatic philosophy of media with its attention to experience becomes especially important now when we see the development of technological art such as media art, robotic, bio art etc. Old tools of aesthetics are hardly applicable to this art balancing on the verge of science, technology and art. Introduction of the category of experience sorts things out and gives us an understanding that while dealing with technological art we deal with new forms of experience. The medial experience includes an actual everyday experience and expands it on new non-representable areas in science and art. Thus dissimilar to popular “posthumanistic” ideas of prosthetics and “extensions of man” one can see deep correlation between the technological and the anthropological.

The fixation of medial experience – the experience of a concrete media that carries out the interaction with the environment, – establishes the importance of actions and their ultimate sense. The sense is sociable, the same as is the value of experience. Experience is always individual. Media provide a condition for experience in general; at the same time media change as a result of experience. These changes highlight the variability and contextuality, the socio-political constitution of thinking and acting shaped by chance and accident in the history of media. However, only media fill in the life and thinking of people with the real substance. For the reason that these conditions are not quite comprehended by people they influence them so effectively.

In the situation of rapid technological changes the pragmatic philosophy of media carries out a therapeutic function of contemplating technologies and their influence on various forms of experience. It demonstrates the lameness of a separatist approach claiming the autonomy of art, science and other public systems, their independence from each other and from everyday life. Media are more deeply integrating in our professional and everyday life. The understanding of how media work provides us an opportunity to control (temporarily) their implementation, to direct them to the key life interests and thus to make them more useful, providing pleasure and

expanding the sphere of experience. Hence, the role of pragmatic philosophy of media is not in the criticism of reality and in the affirmation of a certain “media reality” and similar speculative declarations, but in changing (creating) the actuality.