Book Review

Kim, Y.-C. (2023). *The Post-Mass Media: From Relevance Crisis to Super-Crisis.* Culturelook.

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Is the "mass media" era eroding? Mass media have been an essential part of society since the advent of newspapers, radio and television, serving as means to understand one's surroundings, offering guidance for actions and decision-making, and providing entertainment and relaxation. However, over time, the centrality and dominance of mass media has been decreasing and our media landscape has become more diverse. Internet platforms have rapidly emerged as central channels for communication, information, and economic transactions. Additionally, artificial intelligence is increasingly mediating our everyday activities. In such circumstances, Yong-Chan Kim's book, "*The Post-Mass Media: From Relevance Crisis to Super-Crisis*" published in Korean in 2023, offers a timely and insightful examination of the past and current media landscape.

Kim's 575 page-book chronicles the transformation of contemporary society from the era of mass media to the post-mass media age. Kim is a media and communication scholar with a sociological approach to understanding media and society. His areas of expertise include communication infrastructure and urban communication, new media technology, and public health and risk. In particular, Kim's conceptualization of media in this book is deeply rooted in communication infrastructure theory (CIT) proposed by Ball-Rokeach, Kim and others (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). CIT, with its ecological approach, comprehensively addresses communication across micro, meso, and macro levels as well as the communication action context surrounding it. Based on CIT, Kim views media as integral "infrastructure" within society, characterized by multidimensional and essential building blocks of society. By conceptualizing media as infrastructure, Kim articulates five dimensions of media, explores dynamic relationships among them, and introduces the concepts of relevance and crisis. His book showcases a comprehensive theoretical

foundation, drawing from a diverse range of literature spanning various disciplines. Kim's perspectives are firmly rooted in empirical evidence, providing a well-rounded understanding of the intricate interplay between individuals, media, and society. The book integrates critical media theories and empirical research.

The author notes that the term "post-mass media" does not mean the end of the mass media era. Rather, it signifies a phenomenon in which the "structures, trends, and habits" of the mass media era continue, but within which a qualitatively different media environment is being created. This transformation is characterized by the coexistence of different media types and messages at various levels, deviating from the predominant focus on the macro level. The prefix "post" denotes a significant influence from the preceding era. To illustrate, Kim draws parallels with the term "post-pandemic," clarifying that it does not necessarily mean the end of the pandemic, but rather an era shadowed by the changes induced by the pandemic. Kim delves into an analysis of these shifts in the dynamic between the mass media and the post-mass media era.

The book is structured in three layers: first, a multidimensional definition of media; second, an examination of the transformations from the mass media to the post-mass media era; and finally, an in-depth exploration of the issue of relevance crisis and super-crisis in relation to individuals, media, and society.

Kim initiates the exploration by reviewing varying definitions of media from the 20th and 21st centuries. In the 20th century, the term media was predominantly associated with "mass media" emphasizing their central role in society. Among the limited number of scholars who explored media distinct from the "mass" context, notable contributions were made by figures like Harold Innis (1951) and Marshall McLuhan (1964). Their work centered on viewing media forms as tools for amplifying human senses and wielding influence by embodying certain predispositions or biases. As the mass media matured over the course of the 20th century, coupled with the rise of the Internet, Kim introduces the concept of "media colonization" (p. 57). This concept symbolizes the circumstance where media progressively extends its dominance over broader domains in society that were once considered beyond its impact. It underscores the profound integration and pervasiveness of media within society, transcending the traditional confines of the mass media system.

The Definition of Media and Five Dimensions

As we transition from a mass media-dominated society to a more diversified media environment, numerous definitions of media have emerged, making it increasingly challenging to provide a concise definition. This is particularly evident when introducing the concept of media to students at the start of media-related courses in college. In this context, Kim's presentation of five dimensions for defining media is a significant development for educators, students, and others seeking a comprehensive and structured understanding of the term. The five dimensions include media as *tools, messages, institutions, person/people, and spaces.*

Considering *media as tools* involves examining the role and function of media for individuals, organizations, and society at large. There are two contrasting perspectives on approaching media as tools. Technological determinism posits that media serve as the driving force behind societal outcomes, often attributing praise or blame to media for social phenomena such as violence, inequality, and social relationships. In contrast, the social construction of technology perspective focuses on how media as tools are conceived and domesticated within the framework of social factors, including individual users, corporations, media organizations, and broader social systems.

Viewing *media as messages* has been a

predominant definition in the field of media and communication, particularly within the context of media effects research. Noteworthy communication theories, such as the two-step flow model, cultivation theory, spiral of silence, agenda-setting theory, and media system dependency theory, focus on the impact of media messages on individuals and society. The media effects tradition initially presumed strong persuasive effects of media messages, but subsequent empirical research has led to a shift towards recognizing weaker or more limited effects. Recently, there has been a growing shift towards studying the effects of content created, distributed, and consumed by individuals through digital media.

The definition of *media as institutions* concerns organizations, practices, norms, legislation, regulations, and policies related to media. This definition goes beyond viewing media as tools or messages, focusing on the broader system and practices that surround media. Such an approach is crucial for examining the dynamic interconnectedness of old and new media within the evolving media environment. This aligns with Henry Jenkins' definition of media as a set of associated social and cultural practices and protocols that have emerged around technology (Jenkins, 2006). As Jenkins describes, media are an integral part of the cultural system, where old and new media interact in increasingly complex ways. The legacy of media as institutions and cultural systems is transmitted to subsequent generations. For example, while broadcast television may occupy a less central role in people's lives, the production system and cultural norms that developed alongside television continue to shape newer forms of visual media.

The last two dimensions of media are less commonly defined aspects of media. *Media as a person/people* acknowledges the mediating role of individuals within a broader media ecology. Early studies of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) conceptualized opinion leaders as the intermediary link between mass media and individuals. In the current media environment, the boundaries between mass and interpersonal communications are becoming increasingly blurred (Castells, 2011), with individuals now serving as integral contributors to the processes of media production and distribution.

Finally, *media as spaces* entails viewing media as a context or environment in individuals' everyday lives. As activities in both offline and online become more interconnected and blurred, media become an indispensable component of physical and virtual spaces. This is particularly evident in the emergence of digital cities, smart homes, and automated spaces, which broaden the concept of media to encompass a wide array spaces and environments.

Mass Media and the Concept of Relevance

Having defined media in terms of five dimensions, Kim proceeds to delve into a discussion of the pivotal concept of "relevance" in his critical examination of individuals in the changing context of media and society. Initially, this concept may seem somewhat elusive. However, it serves as the fundamental rationale for the existence and significance of media in our society. Kim defines relevance as encompassing "who you are, what you care about, and what is close to you in time and place." Importantly, this definition does not pertain to a general relationship between multiple objects, but rather encapsulates psychological, physical, and communicative proximity from a first-person perspective, with the self ("I") at the center of the concept. Kim contends that when individuals perceive something as relevant, they are motivated to engage in communication. Expanding beyond the individual level, communal recognition of shared issues or problems as "relevant" has the potential to unite individuals in addressing collective challenges and reinforcing community identities.

Kim establishes connections between relevance

and the five dimensions of media to identify issues and problems surrounding media in both the mass media and post-mass media eras. People perceive and recognize their relevance to their surrounding through media functioning as tools, messages, institutions, people, and spaces. Media as tools gain relevance as individuals express themselves and narrate their stories through media. For instance, Roger Silverstone's (2006) concept of media domestication can be understood as how new media as tools become integrated into society and attain relevance in routine lives of individuals, organizations and broader society.

The relevance of media messages refers to the diverse contexts in which media messages are recognized as relevant to individuals. Personal and social contexts influence the likelihood of cognitively processing information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) or the perceived helpfulness of media messages (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Media as institutions play a role in regulating relevance through processes like gatekeeping and agenda-setting. Media as people become especially relevant when individuals actively select stories they wish to share on online platforms and draw boundaries in what is relevant to their stories. Additionally, the concept of relevance in relation to media as spaces is becoming increasingly fluid, as online and offline spaces become intertwined, and people's understanding of relevant spaces becomes more diversified.

The Post-Mass Media Era

The transition into the post-mass media era introduces a new set of challenges and issues surrounding relevance. The five dimensions of media in the post-mass media era exhibit distinct characteristics. In terms of media as tools, media have become increasingly diverse, targeted, digitalized, converged, portable, and automated. Such conflicting developments contribute to the fragmentation of people's time and space, deviating from a linear trajectory. Consequently,

there is a risk that individuals may experience a loss of control over their surroundings in this complex and multifaceted media landscape. When considering media as messages in the post-mass media era, two significant developments come to the forefront. First, there is the emergence of micro-level narratives facilitated by Web 2.0 technology and user-generated content. Second, the centrality of platform algorithms in governing the flow of stories leads to the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. This, in turn, amplifies individuals' exposure to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and perspectives, contributing to heightened disagreements about what constitutes truthful and reliable information.

Regarding media as institutions, the traditional mass media industry is witnessing a decline in its central role within the media landscape, while newly established digital platform companies are gaining prominence. The shift towards platformization challenges existing norms concerning public interest, objectivity, fairness, privacy, and intellectual property. Media as people have become increasingly prevalent in the post-mass media era, marked by the rise of user-generated content, networked individuals, and the influence of social media personalities. At the same time, platformization also brings to the forefront issues related to gig workers and users effectively becoming a form of labor for the platforms.

Finally, media as spaces have become more globalized, leading to a diminishing sense of physical and temporal boundaries (Giddens, 1990). Offline spaces are becoming digitalized and networked, further blurring the lines between the real and virtual spaces. Kim terms these phenomena as "hybridization" where seemingly contradictory elements, such as real-virtual, global-local, truth-non-truth, and production-consumption, coexist and intertwine. Within such a dynamic environment, traditional "boundaries" become blurred, rendering it

increasingly difficult for individuals to identify what is relevant to them.

Relevance Crisis and Super-Crisis

The concept of "relevance crisis" is defined in two distinct ways: first, when individuals perceive something significant to them as not relevant, and second, when individuals perceive something seemingly insignificant in their real lives as highly relevant (p. 280). To illustrate, news coverage of a mega-typhoon may hold overall significance, but its relevance is contingent upon whether it directly impacts one's local area. The challenge arises when mass media report on distant events, leading to a potential conflation of significance and personal relevance in individuals' perceptions. In the mass media era, the relevance crisis was closely related to the centrality of mass media. People faced a relevance crisis because mass media as tools became excessively intertwined and dominant in their everyday lives. This led to concerns about media addiction and discussions about how media negatively impacted family and social relationships. People lost their sense of what held greater relevance for them or not. Similarly, mass media messages presented centralized and macro-level news and information as significant to individuals, often causing confusion about what was more relevant to them. For instance, events happening far away were often seen as highly relevant, while issues in their local communities were not given the same relevance. Under the mass media system, there were limited opportunities for individuals and groups to talk about stories that truly resonated with them. Additionally, the urban city infrastructure, characterized by roads, apartments, shopping malls, and gentrified spaces, made it challenging for individuals to identify people, stories, and activities that held relevance to their lives.

Kim's concept of relevance super-crisis offers a thought-provoking analysis of the shifting landscape of relevance in the post-mass media era and prompts critical questions about the future of media and individual agency in the digital age. If there was a crisis of relevance for individuals submerged in mega-discourses and marginalized on the fringes in the mass media era, the post-mass media era brings a crisis of hyper-relevance. This is characterized by the proliferation of fragmented stories stemming from an "excess" focus on "me, us, and here-and-now." It becomes increasingly difficult to uphold one's values and boundaries amidst various platforms. Simultaneously, this excess can lead to individuals becoming isolated in a world where algorithms govern the content, flow, and connections (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Individuals find themselves constantly compelled to be available and connected, exemplifying the notion of "hyperconnectivity."

Media scholar James Carey (1992) argued that while the contemporary definition of communication emphasizes the transmission of information, a more significant aspect of communication is its "ritual" role in fostering connections among people and sustaining society. Kim's concept of relevance encompasses one's identity, relationships with others, ties to one's community, and identification as a member of society. The crisis and super-crisis of relevance may signify that the rapid advancement of communication technology and the ubiquity of media have placed excessive emphasis on the transmission aspect of communication. Consequently, individuals may find themselves adrift in a sea of media, struggling to reflect on their place in society and determine how to establish meaningful connections with others, communities, and society at large.

Several questions remain for future studies. The concept of relevance can be more clearly and concretely defined. Given its subjective nature, variations in individual perceptions regarding the scope of relevance are inevitable. How can such differences be reconciled in discussing relevance crisis and super-crisis? For instance, if an individual genuinely regards global issues as

significant and relevant but pays comparatively less attention to local matters, does this subjective prioritization constitute a relevance crisis? Another question pertains to the integration of strategic communication, such as advertising and campaigns, within the five dimensions of media. Understanding how these components fit into the evolving media landscape and contribute to shaping media messages and institutions is crucial, particularly in the post-mass media era. Examining instances of changing advertising strategies can offer insights into the transformation of media messages and institutional strategies.

Overall, this book not only offers a rich array of literature and insightful perspectives for scholars and students in academia but also furnishes general readers with a comprehensive framework for understanding the rapidly changing media landscape. Kim's book prompts us to ponder: What kind of media environment do we want to inhibit? What sort of media landscape are we endeavoring to construct? Who are we as individuals, and how can we engage meaningfully with others? By presenting a multidimensional view of media, offering an examination of past and current media environments, and proposing the concepts of relevance crisis and super-crisis, this book delivers a comprehensive and thought-provoking discourse on how individuals and society can navigate the evolving media landscape, asserting their agency and contribution to the creation of a meaningful and sustainable society.

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