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Implications for research

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New Media Society 2011 13: 517 originally published online 8 March 2011

DOI: 10.1177/1461444810373531

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OnlineFirst Version of Record - Mar 8, 2011

What is This?

The internet as a cultural forum: Implications for research

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Abstract

Twenty-five years ago, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch proposed a model for studying television as a cultural forum, as the most common reference point for public issues and concerns, particularly in American society. Over the last decade, the internet has emerged as a new communicative infrastructure and cultural forum on a global scale. Revisiting and reworking Newcomb and Hirsch's classic contribution, this article: first, advances a model of the internet as a distinctive kind of medium comprising different communicative genres – one-to-one, one-to-many as well as many-to-many communication; and, second, the article presents an empirical baseline study of their current prevalence. The findings suggest that while blogs, social network sites and other recent genres have attracted much public as well as scholarly attention, ordinary media users may still be more inclined to engage in good old-fashioned broadcasting and interpersonal interaction. Despite a constant temptation to commit prediction, future research is well advised to ask how old communicative practices relate to new media.

Introduction: media as a cultural forum

Twenty-five years ago, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (1983) proposed a model for studying the media as a cultural forum. Their article centered on television, which, at the

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time, could be considered the most common reference point for public issues and concerns, particularly in American society. A more general aim of the model was to shift the predominant focus of mass media studies from questions of transmission and effect (Lasswell, 1948; Shannon and Weaver, 1949) to questions of culture. Building on James Carey's ritual model of communication as 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey, 1989: 23), Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argued that television was not merely a source of images and texts impressing information and opinions on viewers, but also a repository and a resource – a forum – articulating and negotiating meanings and world views on behalf of the culture at large. While the cultural profile of television has changed, the question remains as to how one, or a few, central media enable distributed processes of communication that support the ongoing structuration of society (Giddens, 1984).

This article outlines a model for studying the currently emerging digital media environment. While broadly in line with the approach of Carey, Newcomb and Hirsch, we reconsider (in addition to one-to-many communication such as television) the role of one-to-one and many-to-many communication. If television, during the 1980s, constituted the center of the media environment, we suggest that this role is being filled by the internet and by partially overlapping networks of mobile communication. Whereas it remains open to debate whether the internet can be grasped in the category of a 'medium', which was developed to cover the 'mass media' (Peters, 1999) – it might also be understood as a meta-medium (Kay and Goldberg, 1999), extending the capacities of the computer as a medium – the internet at present constitutes an integrated infrastructure for the distribution of one-to-one, one-to-many as well as many-to-many communications. Importantly, Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) did not suggest that television was the primary originator of public issues from the 1950s through the 1980s; we are not implying that the internet has the status of a unified equivalent. In network terminology, however, television served as a key node in the flow of cultural forms across print and audiovisual media. As the field of *mass communication* research took shape during those same decades, this flow lent itself to studies of intermediality and intertextuality (for overviews, see Jensen, 2008a, 2008b); that is, the interconnectedness of different media, with each other and with other social institutions, as discourses and as organizational structures (see also Bennett and Woollacott, 1987; Kinder, 1991; Pearson and Uricchio, 1990). At present, a reconfigured field of *media and communication* research is still trying to make sense, conceptually and empirically, of the relationship between new and old media and between online as well as offline communication. The very idea of communication has been informed over time by the available media and by the hopes and fears associated with them. As demonstrated by John Durham Peters (1999) in his agenda-setting history of the idea, communication was only recognized as a general category of human activity following the rise of electronic communication media from the last half of the 19th century: 'mass communication came first' (Peters, 1999: 6). New, digital media present an opportunity to reflect on established concepts and models of communication. We address the internet as a distinctive social resource of communication in the perspective of the cultural forum idea in order to explore what comes after mass communication.

The first section below briefly describes a model that re-emphasizes the various basic forms of communication that can be seen to traverse different media types. Drawing on

a survey of web users in Denmark, the second section provides an overview of the kinds of communication that they engage in and to what extent. While giving most attention to the overall distribution and configuration of different communicative practices, we also note some variations in terms of age, gender and social status, especially regarding the kinds of participatory communication that have been associated with hopes for a new form of digitally enhanced democracy (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2002). In the third and final section, we discuss some implications (of the model and of the findings) for further research and with specific reference to the public sphere. Regarding a digital public sphere, one key question is whether and how the mass media that served as vehicles of the classic public sphere (Habermas, 1989) may be complemented, or in part supplanted, by communicative practices that flow one-to-one and many-to-many.

A matrix of the digital media environment

Six communicative practices

Digital media in general, and the internet in particular, have reminded media and communication researchers that a given medium may support several different communicative practices; that a particular communicative practice may travel quite well between different material support structures; and that certain familiar practices may come back in style and on a grand scale. Who would have thought, for instance, at the time when Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) published their article, that people around the world might want to spend time and money sending very many, very short text messages to each other day in and day out? To get at the political and cultural affordances (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001) of various media, we refer to six prototypical communicative practices, as summarized in Figure 1, which are instantiated both in face-to-face interaction and in digital as well as analog media technologies.

Along one dimension, Figure 1 distinguishes between synchronous and asynchronous communication. Time is of the essence in communication: there is a world of difference between talking to a family member on the telephone and listening to the message s/he left on one's answering machine or between watching the victory speech of a political leader live and as an edited portion of a later newscast. The point is not that synchronous communication as such is preferable to asynchronous communication, or vice versa, but that both are flexible means of expression and interaction for diverse social ends. A love letter might be valued more highly than a brief encounter with the beloved; a printed

	Asynchronous	Synchronous
One-to-one	Email, text message	Voice, instant messenger
One-to-many	Book, newspaper, audio and video recording, Web 1.0 / webpage, download	Broadcast radio and television
Many-to-many	Web 2.0 / wiki, blog, social network site	Online chatroom

Figure 1. Six communicative practices

drama lends itself to reflection and contemplation that is impossible in a theater or in front of any screen.

Along the other dimension, Figure 1 refers to the number of participants in a given communication and the nature of their interaction: who gets to say something to how many? It is, not least, the cells at the top and at the bottom of the figure that have attracted renewed attention with the coming of digital media. In the case of one-to-one communication, the extraordinarily rapid diffusion of cell or mobile telephony has made technologically mediated interaction between intimates, friends, colleagues and acquaintances a prominent factor of daily life in different cultural contexts (Castells et al., 2007; Goggin, 2006; Ling, 2004, 2008). Ordinary media users talk and text on the move to such an extent that these communicative practices help them to become and remain members of families and networks, societies and cultures. In comparison, the future of many-to-many communication on a massive scale, across different groups, institutions and sectors in society, is still in the process of taking shape. This is in spite of the undoubted success, for example, of open source programming and other peer production initiatives as well as remarkable collaborative achievements such as Wikipedia (Benkler, 2006; von Hippel, 2005). It is not just that the technologies for the purpose were unavailable in the past, but that such practices have had few institutional precedents; examples include, for synchronous communication, a marketplace and a sports stadium and, for asynchronous communication, graffiti and community notice boards. In the case of organizations, movements and communities such as political parties, labor unions, cultural interest groups, and so on, newsletters and other media have traditionally served as internal communications involving a limited membership and its leadership around specified issues; they, thus, appear different in kind from many-to-many communication as associated with digital media. The classic two-step model of communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) also highlighted the juncture of one-to-many with one-to-one – or few-to-few – rather than many-to-many interaction. If the internet, in principle, offers a more inclusive as well as differentiated cultural forum, it is of considerable interest to examine whether and how the public takes advantage of this participatory potential.

Digital lifestyles and methodologies

In order to begin to understand what people do with media (Katz, 1959) in the currently emerging digital environment, with implications for political participation and cultural representation, we looked for a base line of information about the different communicative practices that the average media user engages in. The empirical findings in the next section derive from a collaborative project between the University of Copenhagen and the company Netminers on 'digital lifestyle'. Whereas much academic, as well as commercial, research on media, lifestyles and the everyday, relying on various theoretical frameworks (Bourdieu, 1984; Inglehart, 1990), combines demographic measures with basic value statements in order to interpret and explain the social uses of various media, users crisscross media and genres in highly complex ways as part of their daily routines and interactions. With digital media, this complexity has been taken to a new degree. The aim of the project is to develop and refine analytical categories regarding the interrelations between different media from the users' perspective, specifically their characteristic and combinatorial uses of communication in everyday contexts.

Part of the exercise, for this and other comparative media studies, is to redevelop or reinvent the analytical methodologies and categories that were coined in the epoch of mass communication, when interpersonal and face-to-face communication were nearly synonymous (see Jensen, forthcoming). What, for example, are the perceived (individual and social) uses and gratifications (Blumler and Katz, 1974; Lull, 1980; Rosengren et al., 1985) of television today? What, indeed, is 'television'? One portion of the web survey presented here aims at tapping the lay theories (McQuail, 2005: 14–16) that inform users' interaction with different media. While a large majority of the respondents considered only traditional broadcasting under the heading of television, one-quarter took the viewing of programs on a computer to be a kind of 'television'.

Both the research design and the findings reported here are preliminary; the first iteration of the survey was administered in the summer of 2008. The survey included three basic sets of questions: one on *media uses*, including newspapers, radio, television, audio and video players, telephony and the internet; a second set on respondent *values* in a variety of domains, including politics, family life, shopping, work, leisure and faith; and a third set of questions registering standard *demographics*. In addition, the questionnaire referred to a variety of internet *genres*, addressing the extent to which respondents would employ email, online shopping or banking, file sharing, blogging, and so on. While the six communicative practices in Figure 1 capture certain broad prototypes of social interaction, genres introduce an additional level of detail regarding the social context of different forms of communication. Some genres travel well across media types and communicative practices, while others do not.

The questionnaire was designed to document the extent to which the respondents would use various media and genres in everyday life. In most cases, the spectrum of possible responses ranged from 'never' to 'several times a day'. While interesting in their own right and for cross-media comparisons, the responses were used, in the present context, to compute the intensity of use for each of the six communicative prototypes. This was done by, first, combining the responses concerning the various communicative practices constituting each type and, next, comparing the six types; for example, combining responses for voice communication and instant messaging, and for email and text messaging, so as to compare synchronous and asynchronous types of one-to-one communication. As discussed in the findings section, the outcomes of these analyses were index values capturing the intensity of use for each of the six types.

It should be emphasized that the measures do not, in most cases, address the precise amount of time spent on a given medium or genre per day. Instead, the measures suggest the perceived intensity of use, as witnessed by number of uses per day. Recent work has underlined the relevance of scales of *perceived* use for examining the social uses of multiple media (Ledbetter, 2009). The findings may begin to indicate the prominence and centrality of different forms of communication, as modes of accessing the cultural forum, from the users' perspective.

The survey was conducted online by a marketing company. The questionnaire was sent to a comparatively large sample of respondents ($N = 2733$) selected to ensure a representative spread across basic demographic dimensions (gender, education, age and employment status). Because the questionnaire in this first preliminary round of data collection was quite long, it was split in two and distributed (to the same respondents) with a two-week interval in May 2008. This procedure increased the N/A responses, so

that a substantial proportion (40%) of participants in the initial round did not reply in full in the second round. Thus, the sample cannot be considered genuinely representative of the Danish population: the large N/A group may be systematically skewed (for example, women are overrepresented in the group that completed both halves of the question-naire). In order to level out imbalances, a further reduction (to $N = 1425$) of the dataset was made for the purpose of the analyses in this article. In order to estimate the quality of the resulting analyses, responses from the reduced dataset have been compared with responses to key questions that had an almost complete response rate; no relevant differences were found. In addition, the reduced dataset displays a distribution on the demographic variables of the analysis that approaches the Danish population as a whole.

Findings

The big picture

Figure 2 provides a first overview of the perceived intensity with which the respondents engage in each of the six prototypical forms of communication. All the constituent measures have been normalized to the (0,1) interval (i.e. the findings are reported in the form of *index values* that are all located along a single and simple scale from 0–1), so that comparison becomes possible.

- *Synchronous one-to-one (S11)*. Speech is a primary mode of communication. Oral communication has maintained societies and cultures throughout human history. Broadcasting reintroduced what Ong (1982: 11) referred to as secondary orality, and digital media may be the source of a tertiary orality. We keep on talking, not necessarily more, but in different technological circumstances and changing social configurations. This is borne out by the fact that 80.3 percent of respondents have an index score of 0.5 or higher. The mobile phone, in particular, has made ubiquitous communication and the micro-coordination (Ling and Yttri, 2002) of our daily lives possible to a remarkable extent.
- *Asynchronous one-to-one (A11)*. Perhaps surprisingly, the index values here top those of the synchronous equivalent: 95.2 percent of respondents have an index score of 0.5 or higher. It is plausible, first, that text messaging is an especially convenient means of micro-coordination. People arrange their shared lives in an out-of-sync everyday, and the arrangements remain accessible for later reference on their screens. Second, text messaging is relatively inexpensive because it takes up little bandwidth. Talking may be cheap, but texting is cheaper.
- *Synchronous one-to-many (S1M)*. Good old-fashioned push broadcasting can be considered an integral component of the everyday lives and cultural practices of the general public. 96.2 percent of respondents have a score at or above 0.5 on the index scale, matching the level of asynchronous one-to-one communication. Whereas interactive and user-controlled forms of communication have frequently been described as ways of liberating and empowering audiences, it can be not only entertaining, but also engaging as well as informative to go with the flow (Williams, 1974).
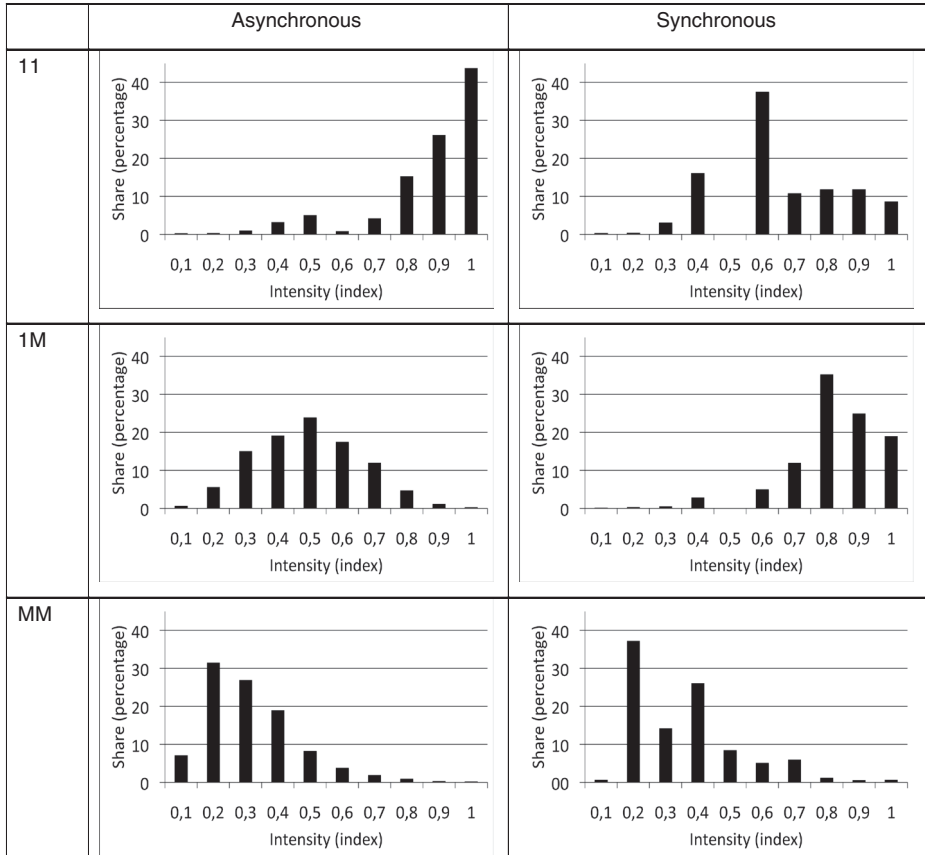
Figure 2. Distributions of communicative practices

- *Asynchronous one-to-many (A1M)*. In comparison, asynchronous mass communication lets the audience go for what they (think they) like or need. This applies to newspapers and traditional web pages, but also to recorded audiovisual material, whether downloads, time-shifted television or rented films and programs, which might be thought of as special events of everyday culture. Especially for recording and renting, pulling requires effort, which may help to explain why fewer respondents achieve high index scores: 59.6 percent score at or above the 0.5 mark.
- *Synchronous many-to-many (SMM)*. Both of the many-to-many varieties represent lower perceived intensities of use; in this first case, only 21.9 percent of respondents score 0.5 or above. On the one hand, the self-generated flow of a chat session might be considered particularly attractive. On the other hand, it requires, again, a certain effort and commitment and it involves an unpredictable sequence and set of participants, who may wonder, 'Is there anybody out there?' (*The Wall*, Pink Floyd, 1979).

- *Asynchronous many-to-many (AMM)*. This last variety has attracted a substantial part of public as well as scholarly attention, particularly in recent years. The political arena of blogging, the economic potential of peer production, the social relations of network sites – all have generated both hopes and fears. Available here are self-selected and, in part, self-generated fora of interaction for all manner of subcultures and subpublics. At least in the present survey, such communicative practices account for the lowest index values; only 15.4 percent of respondents achieve scores at or above 0.5.

In sum, the findings suggest that Danish web users engage in quite a differentiated range of technologically mediated communication. People talk, text and flow their way through everyday life; they may be less inclined, so far, to engage in many-to-many communications. In this regard, the cultural forum may remain relatively divided into a public domain of one-to-many communication and a more personal domain of one-to-one – or few-to-few – communication.

Demographics and communications

In order to assess the communicative potentials of the internet, it is necessary to go beyond the overall distribution and combination of the six prototypes and also to ask to what extent different segments of society can take advantage of them. One of the criticisms of the cultural forum model (Jensen, 1991) has been that it may tend to emphasize the openness of (television and other) media to various voices while giving less attention to the question of access: who gets to say something to how many? In this article, we begin to relate the communicative prototypes to classic demographic categories while leaving aside the third element of the questionnaire; namely, respondent values and their interrelations with patterns of demographics and communications.

Because of the nature of the first round of survey questions, it is not possible to describe with confidence separate additional or detailed variations for each of the six communicative prototypes in terms of demographics. A fine-grained analysis in this respect through parametric statistical tests will require another round of data collection with a modified questionnaire. However, when combined into analytical sets, for instance, all measures of many-of-many communication (SMM *and* AMM), these suggest a number of correlations with implications for theory and policy. Put differently, each dimension of Figure 1 can be seen to vary with standard categories of gender, age, education and income. In all cases, the resulting distributions fulfill the requirements of parametric testing and comparison (i.e. approximate normal distribution, comparable variances and standard deviations). (Unless otherwise stated, all reported findings below are significant at or above the .01 level.)

- *Age*. It is a common finding that media use in general, and new media use in particular, vary with age. As laid out in Figure 3, also these findings indicate that significant age differences exist in all dimensions and that the interrelations are negative: intensity of use declines with age. The exception is 1M or mass communication, most likely because newspaper reading is strongly and positively
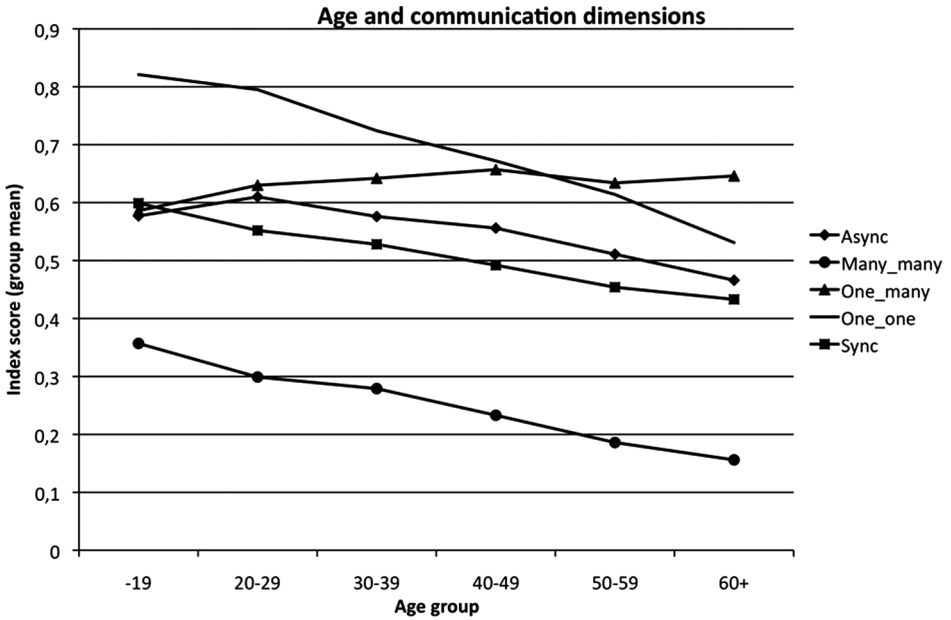
Figure 3. Age

correlated with age. Specifically with regard to recent forms of many-to-many communication, the under-35 year olds represent an intensity that is almost 50 percent higher than that of the above-35 year olds; this finding is significant at the .001 level. It should be added, however, that in both groups, the intensity of use is still modest in absolute terms.

- *Education*. It is noteworthy in Figure 4 that, in all dimensions, the perceived intensity of use drops along the spectrum of education. With few exceptions, longer education equals higher usage. (An exception appears to be 1M: mass communication might be said to unite people across educational groups.) In particular, education correlates with asynchronous media use and with one-to-one communication. Likely explanations are that newspaper reading (asynchronous dimension) and email use (one-to-one dimension) decline with shorter education. (In order to isolate the effects of education from those of age, this analysis only included respondents over 23 years of age. Relationships between education and many-to-many and synchronous communication were not significant.)

- *Gender*. Figure 5 suggests that gender makes some small contribution to explaining variations in the sample. Women report a level of intensity for one-to-one communication that is 6.8 percent higher than that of men. Women also have a slightly higher intensity (4.8%) of synchronous communication than men (but not of asynchronous communication). Men indicate a slightly higher (2.2%) level for one-to-many communication, but this finding is significant only at the .05 level.
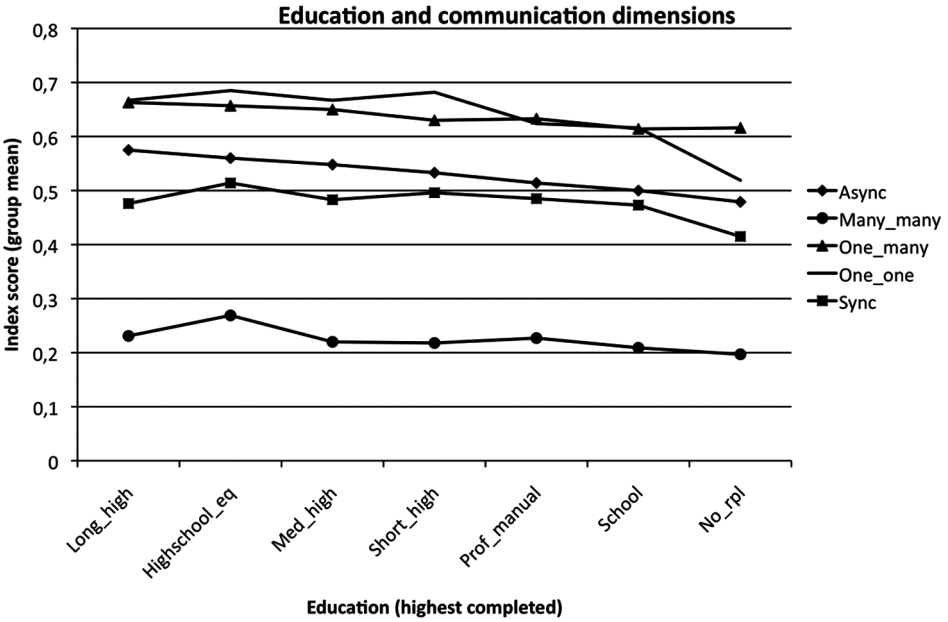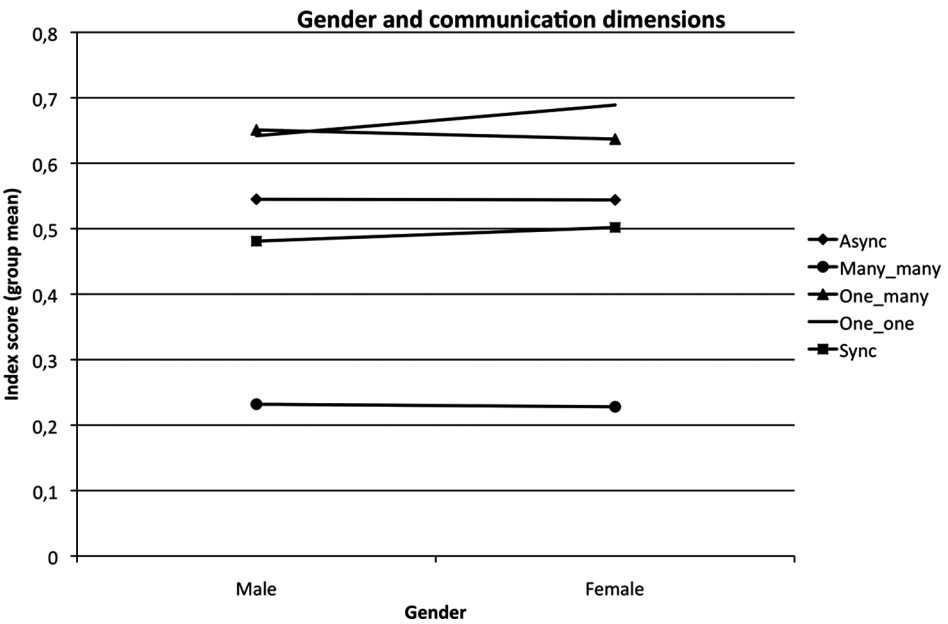
Figure 4. Education
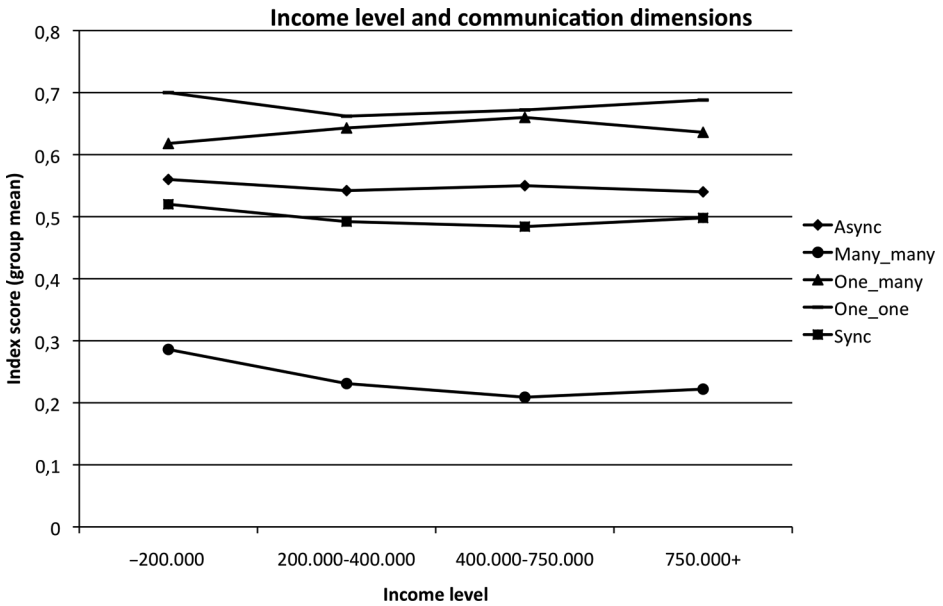

Figure 5. Gender

Figure 6. Income

- *Income*. Finally, income makes a limited contribution to explaining the present findings. Figure 6 indicates that, in the below-200,000 DKK group (approximately US$38,000), a somewhat higher intensity of use is found for all but 1M or mass communication. (These findings are significant at the .05 level, except for the asynchronous and one-to-one dimensions, which are not significant.) It should be noted, however, that this may rather reflect the age factor: low income correlates with youth, which correlates with a generally higher intensity of media use, as indicated by Figure 3. If the under-200,000 DKK income segments were removed from the analysis, no significant differences could be detected between the remaining income groups.

Implications for research

This article shares its subtitle, 'implications for research', with Newcomb and Hirsch's (1983) article. They were proposing a model for the study of the medium of television at its cultural peak, whereas the current challenge is to model and study an entire media environment in which the definition of 'television', 'internet' and other 'media' is in question. The present findings offer one contribution to a research agenda that reemphasizes processes of communication above media as either texts or institutions – the reconfiguration of long-established as well as potentially innovative communicative practices across different categories of media and across the online/offline divide.

The empirical findings have a number of limitations, as already suggested. First, the sample cannot be considered genuinely representative of the Danish population as a whole, even if it approximates known characteristics on the relevant parameters. Given the wide diffusion (Rogers, 2003) of internet use in Denmark (Agency, 2009), however, a web survey is an efficient and indicative research instrument in this setting. Furthermore, given that Denmark is among the countries with the very highest diffusion of both internet and mobile phone use (Castells et al., 2007), the present findings may be relevant in a future and culturally comparative perspective. Second, the questionnaire was not originally designed to tap the six communicative practices that emerged from this analysis. As a result, the analysis relied on various composite measures, as indicated. In the next round of the project, the questionnaire can be modified to take into account the lessons learnt. As is often the case, serendipitous findings prompt methodological adjustment and theory development.

These preliminary findings suggest a media environment in which one-to-one and one-to-many forms of communication remain dominant. Media and communication studies have traditionally found it difficult to integrate the two forms in research; the practice has been 'two subdisciplines of communication study' (Rogers, 1999: 618). This is in spite of the fact that, as noted by one standard textbook (McQuail, 2005: 18), one-to-one, face-to-face interactions presumably outnumber by far those interactions that are technologically mediated. People communicate their way through their everyday working and family lives; through the mass media, they remain part of larger imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), transcending themselves and negotiating their social relations.

The much-advertised coming of a third communicative prototype – many-to-many – if nothing else, presents a challenge and an opportunity for research to think again about the interrelations between basic types of communication. To the two dimensions that we have examined here should be added a third: offline versus online, or face-to-face and technologically mediated communication, including the embedding of (additional, absent) others into face-to-face encounters through mobile media (e.g. Humphreys, 2005). One central link between mass and interpersonal communication, as already mentioned, was identified by the two-step flow model of communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), which noted that the effects of mass media may be mitigated by local opinion leaders. Whereas the original finding was serendipitous, it came to inform much later research (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) and it holds implications for the study of the internet, other digital media and the network society as such (Castells, 1996, 2001). The contemporary media environment may be approached as a three-step flow of network, mass and interpersonal communication. Whereas the two-step flow comprised mass media and humans as embodied media, digital media have added a third type of step to the flow or process of communication, which thus extends into additional social networks and contexts of interaction (see Jensen, 2010).

We suggest three avenues for research. First, wait and see: if we are witnessing and studying a digital epoch or internet age in the making, it is helpful to return to some of the insights from media history about its *longue durée* (e.g. Briggs and Burke, 2005; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991; Thompson, 1995; Winston, 1998). Despite a constant temptation to make predictions, future research is well advised to ask how old communicative

practices relate to new media. New digital media present an opportunity for the current field of communication studies to reflect on its concepts and models in historical perspective.

Second, the ongoing differentiation of technologically mediated communicative practices invites studies of the middle range (Merton, 1968: 39), of the practices and genres by which social institutions are reproduced and modified and, thus, of the 'symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey, 1989: 23). The specific potentials of many-to-many communications are only articulated and worked out in political and cultural practices over time. Whereas such communications have few institutional precedents, one center of activity has been civil society (Edwards, 2004) on the margins of traditional conceptions of politics and economy, state and market. Moreover, both one-to-one and many-to-many communicative practices recall an often neglected point from Habermas's (1989) classic account of the public sphere and its negotiation of the relations between private initiative and public authority: the public sphere has a cultural component, beyond parliamentary politics and public debate as commonly understood, and this component anticipates and prepares politics by other means, through all manner of communicative practices ranging from the aesthetically sublime to the instrumentally mundane. As we suggest in the conclusion, the cultural forum model, as elaborated here with reference to one-to-one and many-to-many communications, holds a timely perspective on the public sphere as it is being transformed once again.

Third, and most concretely, the many links between interpersonal, mass and networked communication call for sustained empirical research. On the one hand, the present preliminary findings point to various demographic aspects of who communicates how through which media. Younger segments of the population came out as early adopters of new communicative practices, but not on a massive scale; more studies are needed of age groups as cohorts to establish the extent to which new technological resources and general life circumstances, respectively, shape communicative practices. It is worth noting, in addition, that income did not explain much variation in the present analysis. At least in affluent European countries, such as Denmark, communicative practices may relate more to cultural than to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The finding that women in this sample gave priority to one-to-one and synchronous communication also suggests issues regarding gender-specific communicative practices; in previous research on online interaction, Herring (1999) noted that women's interactional patterns might be said to reflect a traditional ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982).

On the other hand, qualitative and multi-method approaches are eminently suited to the study of communication in context and to the complementarity of different media for various communicative ends (see Jensen, forthcoming). This applies, for example, to research on the three-step flow of political agenda setting and public debate via the (still central) mass media, everyday conversations, as well as digital networks; on mobile media as means of virtual, yet practically consequential coordination of everyday life at a distance; and on the role of social network sites in communications that span both the online/offline divide and interpersonal and group communication. It is more than an academic courtesy to call for multiple approaches to the study of (new) media.

At present, communication research needs all the methodologies it can devise in order to make sense of a reconfigured field.

Conclusion

This article has outlined an approach to arriving at a baseline of who communicates with whom and how, through which kinds of technologically mediated interaction. We argue that such a baseline provides an important background to understanding how analog media migrate to digital platforms and what may be some more specific implications for political communication, representation and participation (for overviews, see Chadwick and Howard, 2008; Küng et al., 2008). Based on theoretical argument and empirical evidence, we have suggested that the internet, as a new type of medium or meta-medium of networked communications, is displacing television as the most widely shared cultural forum. Despite technological and institutional differences, the internet has come to constitute the sort of information, reference and communicative resource for political and cultural interactions that television had provided from the 1950s to the 1980s, affording themes, frames and agendas of public discourse in local, national and global arenas. This does not imply that the software formerly known as television will be unimportant when the analog switches are turned off in different parts of the world within the next few years or that future incarnations of the medium will not be a relevant cultural forum. It does mean, however, that research is called upon to account for a categorically different configuration of communicative practices across technologies and institutions.

In his seminal work on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1989) noted that the 18th century was the century in which many more people began writing both letters and diaries, which anticipated the novel – and public debate in a contemporary sense. Cultural practices cultivated political potentials, at least in the past. In a footnote to the published version of a recent keynote, Habermas (2006: 423) was surprisingly skeptical regarding the potential of current informal and distributed communications:

> […] computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context. It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines.

While we agree that societies have centers, at least for the clearing and coordination of common business, communication is distributed. It seems far from clear that networked forms of communication, in and of themselves, will tend to 'fragment' such centers, and for the worse. Political democracy and cultural engagement in a modern sense are inconceivable without a technologically mediated infrastructure of communication,

filtering information and interaction, and negotiating issues of access and influence. In a digital public sphere, both one-to-one and many-to-many communications complement the kind of one-to-many communication that television epitomized. The jury – history – is still out reflecting on what kind of public sphere and cultural forum the internet may become.

Acknowledgements

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