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Abstract

Interrogating the terminology of “mobile” communication, this article notes that media and communicative practices have been mobile for millennia. What’s mobile about cell phones and other current mobile media is a new range of contexts in which personally meaningful and socially consequential interactions become possible. Mobile media should be studied, above all, as resources of social action across physical space. Mobile media, further, provide the wider field of research with an opportunity to revisit the great divide between technologically mediated and embodied communication. Technologically mediated communication remains grounded in human bodies residing in local places. Humans can be understood as a first degree of media whose communicative and performative reach has been extended in time and space by historically shifting technologies.

Keywords

action, embodied communication, mobility, place, social structuration, space, ubiquity

Communication maintains social relations across time and space. While media do not in themselves create social relations, new technologies, institutions, and discourses of communication constitute resources which, over time, may reconfigure social relations in fundamental ways. The printing press, broadcasting, and the internet have all been central conditions in the development of modern forms of social organization. In each case, the medium has served to make physical space accessible and manageable for diverse political, economic, and cultural purposes. Media carve social spaces out of physical spaces. Different media facilitate different kinds of social spaces. Some social spaces prove more durable than others.

The cell phone has highlighted the relationship between space and communication (e.g., Castells, Fernández-Ardèval, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Goggin, 2006; Ito, Okabe, &

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Matsuda, 2005; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2008). Referred to in Europe as “mobile” phones, the concrete devices, evidently, are mobile. So are the individuals communicating in shifting locations. So are the constitutive elements of the general technology: information, interactions among distributed communicators, and the bit trails that they leave as they traverse local and global networks. What, indeed, is mobile in mobile communication?

The terminology of mobile media and communication might be taken to imply that previous media were not mobile. In fact, mobility has long been an issue for media and communication research. As suggested by Meyrowitz (1989): “All experience is local. ... We are always in place, and place is always with us” (p. 326). The question is how – in which respects and to what degree – different media enable us to reach into spaces beyond our places. Carey (1975/1989) noted that, until the invention of the telegraph and subsequent electronic media, “transportation and communication were inseparably linked” (p. 15). Any communicative interaction required the movement and local presence of humans, manuscripts, books, magazines, or newspapers. Media moved, communication followed. Depending on historical perspective, then, media have been mobile for millennia – perambulating humans were the first media of communication, later holding manuscripts and other writing surfaces disseminating fact as well as fiction. For centuries, print media have disseminated information and entertainment within and between countries and across continents, first to relatively small and elite groups, later to mass audiences. And, for decades, visual and auditory representations have been distributed, either synchronously or asynchronously, through sound recordings, cinema, and broadcasting.

What’s new about so-called mobile media is the scale and scope of their integration of communication into everyday practices in increasingly synchronous, localized, and individualized formats. What’s mobile about mobile communication is not so much the particular device, the individual user, or the general technology, but the social contexts in which these components come together in communication. Communication transports contexts of meaningful social interaction across physical space. In mobile communication, entire configurations of social relations move about at an accelerated pace. Mobile contexts come and go.

Mobile media and communication, thus, present an opportunity to revisit classic issues in the field, as addressed by the tradition of medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994) since the early work by Innis (1951, 1950/1972) on space-biased and time-biased media. How do different media and communicative practices condition human agency and social structures as elements of ongoing processes of structuration (Giddens, 1984)? In this perspective, mobile media and communication reactualize two foundational research questions: What is the relationship between communication and (other) action in specific social contexts? What is the relationship between media technologies and embodied individuals as they communicate in and across local contexts?

Mobile actions

Compared to concepts of information or meaning, categories of human and social action have been less central to theory development in media and communication research. To explore some of the implications of mobile media and communication, it

is helpful to distinguish three aspects of the general relationship between communication and action.

First, human actions can be considered communications in their own right. They may be intentional messages; they may be incidental expressions to which others ascribe meaning; or they may lie somewhere on a continuum between these prototypes. At the intentional end of the scale, opening or closing a door can be an act of communication that may have significant ramifications. Toward the incidental end, we constantly communicate with each other through clothing and general conduct. Not just humans, but any object, event, or action in the world may serve as communication. Humans never cease to ascribe meaning to their cultural as well as natural environments (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951/1987, p. 6).

Second, communication is itself a form of action. When we speak to others about recent events, or about the weather, we maintain and modify our social relations. This was one key insight of speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The performative conception of language has influenced contemporary human and social sciences profoundly. Language use, and communication generally, are inseparable from the social practices that they help to constitute. In the classic pragmatist formulation, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928: 572).

Third, communication anticipates action. Communication is a unique, self-reflective form of action, addressing and questioning both actions that communicate and communications that enact. Communication explores the interrelations between what is, what could be, and what ought to be. Communication is both in and out of time, oscillating between moments of reflection and moments of action. Mobile communication is both in and out of place, enabling distributed forms of reflection and action. Via mobile media, I may seek your advice about what to do next, in my context, or I may prevail on you to do something you had not originally planned or thought about, in your context. The occasion may be mundane, as in grocery shopping, or momentous, as in financial investments or political protests.

One important item on the agenda of mobile media and communication studies should be the relationship between communication, reflection, and action. Communication

can be understood in terms of the doubt and delay that it introduces into human activities, enabling reflection and negotiation – in the short or long term, through fiction, science, and other forms of experimentation – before individuals, groups, and entire societies do things that may have irreversible consequences. Communication is the human capacity to consider how things might be different, to be constructively critical, and to deliberate on alternatives. (Jensen, 2010, p. 6)

Mobile media may speed up both communication and action. They facilitate more action at a distance, but also more reflection before the act. The balance between reflection and action is a matter for both empirical research and sustained theory development regarding the kinds of social relations that mobile communication may maintain in the future.

Local communicators

A second opportunity for research on mobile media is to revisit the traditional divide between technologically mediated and face-to-face communication and, by extension, between mass and interpersonal communication studies (Rogers, 1999). For one thing,

cell phones are technological media that simulate face-to-face interaction in important respects. For another thing, cell phones are embedded in the flow of local interactions among embodied communicators. For too long, the field has shied away from recognizing humans, in the perspective of the history and theory of communication, as media (see further Jensen, 2010).

Like media technologies, the human body has a variety of communicative affordances (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001). Humans are versatile material platforms, hosting speech, song, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts more generally. The perceptual, cognitive, and interactive capacities of my body are the beginning and end of my communications. In phenomenological terms, my body is my “general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 146). Whereas phenomenology emphasizes the meeting of the self with an other and with the world at large, media and communication studies focus on the many distributed others that communicators encounter via a range of media and in diverse contexts of either copresence or absence. Even so, each communicator is grounded in a body and in a place.

It is this composite of human and technological resources that calls for detailed and concrete inquiry in different social settings. The breakthrough of the internet invited many references to an elsewhere of cyberspaces, cybercultures, and cybersocieties (Bell & Kennedy, 2000; Benedikt, 1991; Jones, 1998) and to the rise of cyborgs (Haraway, 1991) in a posthuman era of life (Hayles, 1999). Luckily, cell phones appear not to have prompted comparable conceptions in scholarship, perhaps because they are so manifestly embedded in the flow of their users across physical spaces. As the Japanese term, *keitai* (something you carry with you), suggests, cell phones are everyday artifacts adjacent to the individual user’s body. Nevertheless, the challenge remains to conceptualize cell phones as a distinctive kind of medium that is close to, and complementary to, human bodies as localized media. The wider category of mobile media ups the ante, challenging media and communication research to confront, once again, its founding metaphor of transportation.

Mobility and ubiquity

The research agenda addressing mobile media and communication should give at least some priority to the general category of mobility. In a historical perspective, mobile media occupy a position in between, on the one hand, the mostly fixed terminals of broadcasting and personal computers and, on the other hand, ubiquitous media (Weiser, 1991), which are variously integrated into natural objects, artifacts, and social contexts. Your coat calls to tell you where you left it; your car directs you to the right location. While still emerging, an “Internet of things” (ITU, 2005) presents additional questions concerning the mobility and materiality of media and communication.

By foregrounding mobility, rather than mobile technological artifacts or communicative events, research may be better equipped to examine both the similarities and the differences between current and previous media forms. Mobile media and communication studies are also in a position to explore some of the many ways in which communication both anticipates and accomplishes social action. An updated paradigm for mobile media and communication research might be: Who does what, with whom, in which

contexts, with what consequences for the communicators, the contexts, and the social relations which communication helps to maintain?

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