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Polymedia Life

Mirca Madianou

Goldsmiths, University of London

The Covid-19 pandemic will be remembered for a number of reasons, most notably the tragic loss of life and the steep inequalities it revealed both across the world and within countries. For many, the period between 2020-21 also represented a mass experiment of technological mediation. The successive lockdowns as part of the public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that millions of people resorted to communication technologies in order to work, study, socialize with others, and be entertained. The enforced physical distancing meant that online platforms were the only spaces where people could keep in touch with loved ones, attend school or university, or continue to work. While the ability to work and study remotely was asymmetrically distributed compounding existing inequalities made worse by the pandemic (Madianou 2020), millions of people experienced a form of ‘polymedia life’. By ‘polymedia life’ I refer to the intense technological mediation of everyday life. Like Deuze’s notion of ‘media life’ (2012), polymedia life isn’t just a life *with* media; it is a life lived *in* polymedia environments.

The theory of polymedia puts forward an understanding of media as composite environments of communicative opportunities. Rather than focusing on different platforms (for example, Facebook or Twitter) or hardware (for example smartphones, or laptops), polymedia shifts our attention to how users navigate communicative opportunities as part of an integrated environment in order to suit their needs (Madianou & Miller 2012). In this context, technologies and platforms including social media are defined relationally to each other from a user’s point of view. As a sociotechnical approach, the theory of polymedia places equal emphasis on the social relationships in question, the relevant cultural contexts and the architecture of technologies and social media platforms themselves. Choosing a platform over other alternatives in order to keep in touch with friends or family is a reflection of the relationships at stake, the prevailing cultural norms and the users’ interpretations of the technical propensities of platforms. For example, choosing to send an Instant Message, rather than have a conversation over a synchronous platform with rich visuality such as Zoom

typically reveals a lot about the relationship between two interlocutors as well as the sender's emotional intent.

Polymedia as language: Doing things *with* media

It becomes evident that at one level polymedia can be understood as an additional language, or a set of tools through which people express and manage emotions (Madianou 2018).

Choosing to communicate via a particular platform can carry as much meaning as the actual words exchanged. For example, choosing a platform with an asynchronous temporal structure can afford its user a heightened sense of control over how they present themselves (Baym 2015). Understanding polymedia as a language through which users express emotion, tonality and intent explains the relevance of the theory of polymedia for sociolinguistics. All articles in this Special Issue deal with this dimension of polymedia as language and deepen our understanding through their fine-grained analyses of interpersonal interactions and repertoires. Although the articles in this Special Issue report on research carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic, they reveal practices that were further amplified during the period of enforced physical distancing in 2020 and 2021.

Andreas Candefors Stæhr and Thomas Rørbeck Nørreby show how co-present family members use media to negotiate boundaries. For example, when parents use social media – instead of in-person communication – with their young adult children who live in the same house, the sheer choice of technologically mediated communication is a symbolic gesture of ‘giving space’, therefore easing the strains of cohabitation. In this example, in-person communication becomes one of the registers in the polymedia environment, alongside other technologically mediated options such as instant messaging or texting. Choosing not to speak to someone directly or avoiding having to shout for them to get out of their room, but sending a text message instead can be a sign of respect. In this example, polymedia can help explain interactions between family members who are in the same house or even in the same room. This example speaks to the experience of intense cohabitation experienced by family members during the successive lockdowns of 2020-21, when parents were often joined by their young adult children who returned home from university accommodation and found themselves stuck with their parents for several months. Even in situations of proximal co-presence, technologically mediated communication constitutes an important communicative resource. In fact, technologically mediated interactions can offer nuanced opportunities for

distancing and boundary maintenance which may be welcome in conditions of intense physical co-presence.

Intergenerational dynamics among family members are also part of the focus in Kristin Vold Lexander's article. Here the theory of polymedia is employed to analyse the multilingual language practices of a family of Senegalese background living in Norway. Drawing on a detailed ethnography of family interactions, both co-present and transnational, Vold Lexander shows that the way her participants navigate polymedia environments both reflects and further shapes multilingual practices. Exploring media modalities is inextricably linked to linguistic repertoires (for example, whether to communicate in Wolof or Norwegian) and to the management of family ties both within the household and transnationally.

Managing work and family boundaries through multi-layered 'polymedia repertoires' is one of the key observations by Caroline Tagg and Agnieszka Lyons in their article. Tagg and Lyons systematize the notion of 'polymedia as language' through the concept of 'polymedia repertoires', which maps out the different media used at any given time and their likely social effects. By delineating the differences between practices, devices, environments, modes and signs, and showing how these are combined in 'polymedia nests', Tagg and Lyons demonstrate how meaning is produced and expressed. Of course, their observations about how their participants negotiate and establish boundaries between work and family time became even more pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the physical boundary between the office and home collapsed – at least for those whose jobs allowed them to work remotely.

Similarly, Carmen Lee and Denis Chau's work on polymedia among academics reveals how choices between different platforms (e.g., private vs public) shape academic professional identities. Their argument is revelatory of developments in a post-pandemic world. While academic research has been based on online collaboration for a long time, the pandemic has accelerated the presence of digital platforms in all aspects of teaching and research. Higher education was hugely affected by the pandemic as lectures, classes and seminars moved online in most parts of the world. But the pandemic is also likely to entrench the uses of academic networking platforms such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate, which are both effects of, and contributing factors to the neoliberal logics of academia (Duffy & Pooley 2017).

All the above examples show how co-present and transnational family members as well as professionals navigate polymedia environments in order to manage relationships, boundaries and identities. Drawing on rich and incredibly detailed data, the articles of the

Special Issue reveal how people do things *with* polymedia. But polymedia are not just a language, or some of the other tools with which people express emotions, manage relationships and construct identities. They are also the environments in which such practices take place.

Polymedia as environments: Life *in* polymedia

At a second level, polymedia are the environments in which relationships unfold (for a discussion see Madianou 2018). This was particularly pertinent in the original study in which the concept of polymedia was developed (Madianou and Miller 2012). There, I developed the notion of polymedia with Daniel Miller in order to make sense of the practices of families separated by migration, such as those by migrant Filipina women in the UK and their families who remain in the Philippines. In situations of prolonged separation, often exacerbated by legal parameters such as the lack of visa documents, polymedia provide the space for relationships to unfold. Under such extreme circumstances, when family members do not meet for months, or even several years, polymedia are not just an additional language, but also the very environments in which relationships are experienced (Madianou 2018).

The way life is lived *in* polymedia is linked to the notion of digital presence. For a migrant mother who hasn't met with her daughter for one or more years, the daughter's digital traces in the social media *become* her (Madianou 2018). Elsewhere, I termed the peripheral awareness of distant others made possible through the ubiquitous availability of social and mobile media as 'ambient co-presence' (Madianou 2016). The notion of digital presence is also developed by Heike Greschke in her article on transnational family practices. According to Greschke, transnational families are constituted through the combination of different media forms and tools, which provide the registers for what she calls 'care-ful presence'. It is perhaps no surprise that the argument about polymedia as the environments in which relationships come into being emerges most clearly in the Special Issue article focusing on transnational relationships. Just like the original study from which the theory of polymedia emerged, the focus on transnational families and their prolonged experience of separation reveals the contours of a life in media.

Even in physically co-present family arrangements, polymedia practices combine with in-person communication to produce the canvas on which interactions unfold. Online and offline worlds are inextricably enmeshed and increasingly impossible to separate. This became particularly evident in the pandemic, which brought about a heightened dependency

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on online communication and a new vocabulary about ‘blended’ modes of existence (such as ‘blended learning’). But the entanglement between offline and online modes through which everyday lives unfold was presciently captured by all the present Special Issue articles reporting on research done well before the Covid pandemic took hold.

Culture, inequalities and algorithmic power: Making sense of the dual logic of media technologies

The concept of polymedia emerged through an ethnography of transnational families, yet its application in different contexts and settings and across disciplines confirms that the experience of migrant domestic workers crystallized something far more universal. Universal, however, doesn’t imply that the experience of polymedia environments is homogenous or uniform. On the contrary, the theory of polymedia emphasizes the importance of the cultural context and social norms which shape the idioms of media practice, or what Gershon calls ‘media ideologies’ (Gershon 2010). Ethnographies reveal that the uses of social and mobile media depend on local idioms regarding courtship (Archambault 2016), or privacy (Wang 2016) to name just two examples (see also the comment by Christian Licoppe in the current issue). In Mozambique, the notion of *namorar* (which means ‘to develop an intimate relationship’) shapes the use of mobile phones for flirting (Archambault 2016). Through her discussion of *yinsi* (the Chinese term used for privacy which literally means ‘something secret which should remain hidden from others’), Wang reminds us that there is no direct equivalent to western notions of privacy in China, which has implications for how her participants navigate WeChat and similar platforms (Wang, 2016, p.121). And across this Special Issue, the importance of cultural specificity is evident. For example, Carmen Lee and Denis Chau show in their article how norms in local academic cultures shape digital media practices. Their analysis demonstrates the extent to which academics are compelled to participate on digital platforms as the risk of being left out is too high.

The enforced social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic brought to the surface what migrants, such as the communities studied by Heike Greschke, had been facing for a very long time. But now, millions of people suddenly experienced a heightened dependency on communication technologies for almost all aspects of social life, including the most intimate and personal moments such as saying goodbye to a dying relative in hospital, or attending a funeral remotely. Yet the pandemic did not represent an equalising of experiences. Even though billions of other people suffered some form of restricted mobility and an

increased dependency on communication technologies, for migrants their precarity and immobility increased even further. Some migrant domestic workers who had participated in the original study on polymedia reported in informal conversations that they were forced to ‘shield’ with their employers for months - without days off or extra pay. Refugees stuck in camps experienced heightened forms of securitization and restrictions, as Hill observes in her ethnography of media practices in a refugee camp in Northern Thailand (2022).

Social inequalities contribute to the shaping of media experiences and to how individuals navigate polymedia environments. This does not imply that polymedia environments only exist in situations of communication and information abundance (Boczkowski 2021). In earlier work, we described transnational family practices such as letter writing and the sending of audio cassette tapes as polymedia environments (Madianou & Miller 2012:68). When writing to their loved ones in the 1970s and 1980s, participants exploited the contrast between letters and cassettes whilst treating both media as an integrated environment. A sparse environment of communicative opportunities, however, will limit the extent to which interlocutors can make nuanced choices when managing their relationships. To return to the language metaphor, having an environment with few media is like having a limited vocabulary. Crucially, when choices are overdetermined by notions of access or cost, users cannot be held morally responsible for their media choices. Nonetheless, studying polymedia practices in situations of inequality and scarcity is vital for understanding the stratified consequences of online communication and the extent to which it can compound disparities. The ethnography of the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (which struck the Philippines in 2013) revealed that the asymmetries in polymedia environments compounded the inequalities of disaster recovery (Madianou 2015). Arguably, we are seeing similar patterns emerging in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Madianou 2020).

Navigating polymedia is not a free-flowing practice. It occurs within conditions of power. Cultural norms, media ideologies, relationship norms and expectations, social inequalities, digital inequalities (including questions of access and cost) all constrain and shape users’ choices. Likewise, algorithms may filter, rank, and promote content. What users see on social media is not a mirror of their interlocutors’ input, but the result of a filtering process determined by computation. It is also impossible to ignore the business model of social media which extracts users’ data for profit. The logic of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) permeates online environments and requires to be considered. In their article, Tagg and Lyons recognise the constraining role of software design in terms of the user’s ability to make meaning. Additional questions can be asked in this context: for example, to what extent are

online practices shaped by the desire to protect one's privacy and by the objective to minimize corporate surveillance? In relation to Lee and Chau's article, what are the implications of surveillance for academic life in the context of the post-pandemic university, when remote learning and conferencing may be established as norms? More broadly, what are the implications of surveillance for marginalized groups such as migrants?

The pandemic revealed that we need an approach that will help us understand the dual logic of media platforms. Media technologies enable socialities and care, while at the same time being instruments of surveillance and control. Media studies have often been likened to a pendulum which swings every few years from theories that favour media power to theories that prioritize the agency of users. While the pendulum in 2021 is firmly on the side of media power (with emphasis on datafication and surveillance), the theory of polymedia can cast light on users' agency whilst being attentive to the inequality of the power structures. A polymedia approach can reveal the rich texture of everyday life which is vital for making sense not only of social relationships, but also of the workings of power from a bottom-up perspective.

Several of the papers in the Special Issue conclude that the field of sociolinguistics is enriched through its encounter with digital media studies, and with the theory of polymedia in particular. I argue that the process goes both ways: digital media studies has much to gain from sociolinguistics and pragmatics: the linguistic perspective is a reminder that language is the most basic form of mediation. The current Special Issue's inspiring collection of articles puts forward a fine-grained approach of how language combines with technological mediation, thereby revealing the micro workings of polymedia life.

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Biographical note

Mirca Madianou is Professor in the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her current research focuses on the social consequences of communication technologies, data and automation in the global south. She is the author of *Mediating the Nation: News, audiences and the politics of identity* and *Migration and New Media: Transnational families and polymedia* (with Daniel Miller).