ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Merging Mass and Interpersonal Communication via Interactive Communication Technology: A Symposium

Joseph B. Walther[1] & Patti M. Valkenburg[2]

1 Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, Singapore 637718
2 Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, 1012 WX, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This introduction to the special issue describes the impetus for a review of the merger of mass and interpersonal communication processes in light of recent developments in communication technologies. It reviews historical arguments about the need for integration in theorizing about communication processes. Then, it discusses the potential for communication technologies to combine mass and interpersonal communication in ways that obviate the traditional distinction between both types, and how interactive communication technology offers unprecedented analytic approaches for research. Finally, it previews the 11 essays that follow by identifying 4 types of convergence of mass and interpersonal communication: concurrence, integration, transformation, and evolution.

The communication field has alternatively extolled the potential, or lamented the lack of progress, in studying the merger of mass and interpersonal communication processes. Such a merger has been called for as a necessity to understanding communication episodes and sequences that involve elements of both processes (e.g., Chaffee, 1986; Reardon & Rogers, 1988), or as a requirement to make sense of emerging communication technologies that blend mass and interpersonal processes in potentially novel ways.

Thirty years ago, *Human Communication Research* (*HCR*; 1988, vol. 15, no. 2) hosted a "Symposium on Mass and Interpersonal Communication." In that collection, Reardon and Rogers (1988) argued that digital communication media were beginning to emerge that did not fit into pre-existing areas of study, and that a new epistemological approach to communication research was needed. These

Corresponding author: Joseph B. Walther; e-mail: joe.walther@cmcresearch.org

arguments echoed others' observations that new communication technologies defy categorization as either interpersonal or mass media channels (Gumpert & Cathcart, 1986; Pingree, Wiemann, & Hawkins, 1988), and the hope that "technological change may facilitate a long-needed paradigm shift in communication science" (Reardon & Rogers, 1988, p. 297). Despite the appeals for a merger of mass and interpersonal communication theory, and research then and since (e.g., Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; O'Sullivan, 1999; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2001), the field still lacks a thorough accounting of how, theoretically and phenomenologically, mass and interpersonal processes combine, in traditional or in newer digital platforms.

Interactive communication technology has in many cases broken whatever natural or artificial barriers between mass and interpersonal communication processes may have existed. They combine institutionally authored messages alongside individually authored messages, while social groups and networks of many sizes and natures are also frequently involved in the retransmission and reformulation of these messages (see Walther & Jang, 2012). In the articles to follow, interactive communication technologies include social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), news blogs and online newspapers with commenting capabilities, recommendation systems (e.g., Amazon, Netflix), online social support discussions, e-mail, texting, dating sites, multimedia streaming, medical information storage and retrieval systems, and messaging from unspecified intelligent systems. Interaction with virtual agents (e.g., Siri) and social robotics, while not systematically addressed in this issue, are also vital extensions of communication research. Rice (2017) captures a wide variety of interactive communication technology developments across numerous contexts.

As interactive communication technology has evolved and pervaded more facets of social life, researchers in many subdisciplines of communication (and elsewhere) have endeavored to document the uses, users, functions, and/or effects these media generate, and, occasionally, to try to make conceptual sense of the combinations of mass and interpersonal communication they often embody. These conceptual efforts, however, often appear in isolation and unaware of one another. It is now time for a new symposium in which to synthesize and review these research efforts systematically and comprehensively. In this special issue of *HCR*, "Merging Mass and Interpersonal Communication via Interactive Communication Technology: A Symposium," we aim to advance scholarship focusing on the merger of mass and interpersonal processes, by gathering reviews from visionary communication scholars in a variety of subfields, in an effort to synthesize existing research and invigorate future research. These scholars' essays describe effects of communication technology in the merger of mass and interpersonal communication on several processes and contexts, what these effects mean theoretically and methodologically, and what they imply for future research on emerging communication developments.

After consulting with the editor of *HCR* and soliciting guidance from colleagues whose vision helped shape our own thinking, we solicited manuscripts from accomplished scholars in a variety of relevant subfields of communication whose work had

addressed the topic of mass communication and interpersonal convergence related to a communication process of importance (although there are others as well). Authors met the stringent requirements for manuscripts under 6,000 words, which allowed us to feature more articles than a typical *HCR* issue contains. We, the editors, reviewed each manuscript extensively, and sought additional reviews from other authors who contributed to the special issue and from outside anonymous reviewers as well. We are grateful for the constructive comments we received from John Caughlin (University of Illinois), William "Chip" Eveland, Jr. (The Ohio State University), David Geertz (University of Leuven), Jeffrey T. Hancock (Stanford University), Joshua Introne (Michigan State University), Mary Beth Oliver (Penn State University), Richard M. Perloff (Cleveland State University), Charles T. Salmon (Nanyang Technological University Singapore), and Brandon Van Der Heide (Michigan State University).

New research opportunities

There have always been examples of communication phenomena that involve both mass media messages and interactions among people. However, in many traditional communication settings, some of these influences are ephemeral, elusive to observe, and therefore difficult to study. This difficulty may have contributed to limited examinations of transactional communication processes that are more complex than research is often able to investigate. As Berger and Burgoon (1995, p. x) wrote, even in face-to-face encounters, a "wide variety of communication episodes … do not comport well with a linear conception of the communication process. In face-to-face interactions … the distinction between influence agents and influence targets is virtually impossible to maintain. In these contexts … feedback loops abound."

Although interactive communication technology extends the loops and swirls of communicative (inter)action, it also provides new means of observing and analyzing communication phenomena. Interactive communication technologies offer ample access to traces of communication that feature both mass and interpersonal processes. Due to the persistence of messages they convey, interactive communication technologies make accessible the social interactions accompanying mass communication, offering greater ability to decipher the combinations of mass and interpersonal communication processes as well as their dynamics. These observable interactions also allow greater ability to investigate the potential mediating or moderating influences of constructs traditionally associated with one communication process or the other. Some of the contributions in this special issue illuminate how research on extant theories has changed due to the permanence of messages, new analytic tools, and new data afforded by new media.

Conceptualizations of convergence

Interactive communication technologies do more than reveal communication to analysis; they are the vehicles through which an increasing amount of mass and

interpersonal communication transpire. Flanagin (2017, p. 451) observes that new communication technologies now feature affordances that "disrupt the core distinctions that initially distinguished mass from interpersonal communication." If mass and interpersonal communications are no longer distinctive, the question remains, how do their formerly disparate functions combine, coincide, morph, or disappear when interactive communication technology becomes the vehicle for more and more communication transactions?

The answers to that question can be conceptualized in many ways. The articles in this special issue reflect a variety of approaches to the merger of mass and interpersonal communication, and we, the editors, made no effort to impose on the contributors a uniform conceptualization of mass, interpersonal, media, or the merger of mass and interpersonal processes. Consequently, a refreshing variety of conceptualizations of convergence emerge, which we tentatively classify into four different types: (a) *Concurrence,* in which mass and interpersonal processes typically occur simultaneously and in new electronic forms; (b) *Integration,* the blending of mass and interpersonal processes in a unified process in which certain communication functions take precedence over channels or traditional contexts; (c) *Transformation*, in which communication technology disrupts and transforms the traditional processes of interpersonal and mass message creation and exchange; and (d) *Evolution*, describing how the needs of mass and interpersonal communicators drive technological adaptation.

Concurrence

Some contributors emphasize the *concurrence* of mass and interpersonal processes, side by side, whether or not in the same device. For instance, Raney and Ji (2017) explain *second screening*, that is, socially shared television viewing while simultaneously exchanging reactions via social media about the TV content with coviewers. Raney and Ji explicitly describe the parallel processes of mass and interpersonal communication, and how their combination enhances the experience of entertainment. Likewise, Kreps (2017) describes a type of mass–interpersonal combination in the health communication context, the sequence of which essentially disrupts the directional assumption of the two-step flow: End users (in this case, patients) avail themselves of health information from published online sources, which then shape their face-to-face encounters with opinion leaders (in this case, health providers).

Lee and Tandoc (2017) also discuss concurrent combinations of mass and interpersonal messages and their effects on both news production and news consumption. At the news production end, they focus on the shift from the scant individual feedback that journalists formerly obtained (and dismissed) to journalists' newfound dependence on consumers' behavioral data and comments, inverting both the agenda-setting and gatekeeping roles that journalists traditionally played. At the news consumers' end, the comments that individuals append to digital news influence others' perceptions of the news, the news sources, and public opinion generally.

In a similar fashion, Neubaum and Krämer (2017) discuss significant changes in the performance of mass and interpersonal communication in various roles as

individuals form opinions and make decisions about expressing dissent. For example, Neubaum and Krämer depict how individuals now infer the climate of relevant public opinion by scanning the comments and affirmations on digital news articles from their online interpersonal networks, substituting interpersonal communication for mass communication as their primary source from which to infer opinion climate. Likewise, the potential for rebuke for expressing an unpopular opinion, also once vested in the masses, is now only as far as one's interpersonal acquaintances online. Neubaum and Krämer discuss the important role of online "mediators," the intermediaries that relay another source's opinions to readers. Although a single message can be "mediated" by an acquaintance or by an algorithm, the difference, when noticed, can affect individuals' response to the message. Neubaum and Krämer's analyses put mass and interpersonal communication processes side by side, so to speak, albeit trading their traditional roles and functions.

Integration

Other contributions to this issue depict mergers of mass and interpersonal processes that integrate the two into one. Valkenburg (2017) investigates the consequences of the integration of mass and interpersonal processes for self-effects, that is, the effects of messages on the cognitions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of the message creators–senders themselves. The study of self-effects has emerged in a variety of subfields of offline and online communication. With social media's seamless integration of the "mass" that characterizes mass communication with the interactivity that typifies interpersonal communication, Valkenburg suggests that self-effects are potentially more common and more potent online than offline. Her essay examines theories and assumptions from a variety of literatures, culminating in a unified model of self-effects that extends these theories. Coupling this model with various affordances of social media, Valkenburg sets the stage for research on the dynamics of a cyclical process that has elsewhere, for some time, been depicted as linear.

The essay by Walther (2017) argues that the merger of mass and interpersonal communication requires theory and research to integrate and analyze fundamental communication processes, or metaconstructs, from both domains, that may formerly have pertained only to one or another. His article traces a legacy of efforts to integrate mass and interpersonal processes, many of which underexplicated interaction or conversation dynamics, leaving black boxes in the models rather than potentially important specifiable moderators. The article nominates nine metaconstructs that may be critical for research in single studies or over the course of a research agenda. Consideration of these cross-contextual aspects of communication, Walther argues, can add rigor to explanations and precision to empirical findings of both traditional and contemporary communication episodes.

Transformation

Several articles in this issue see the merger of mass and interpersonal processes as transformational in nature. Flanagin's essay (2017) considers a variety of changes

in the communication landscape that traditional research perspectives cannot adequately explain, as foreground to discussing issues in social influence. An example early in his essay sets the stage for the impossibility of traditional analysis. A news story, he says,

> from a reputable mass media outlet … appears in print, is posted to the organization's website, and is disseminated initially to individuals through a variety of social media and other venues, either by prearrangement (e.g., subscribers or followers) or other means of selection (e.g., algorithmic selection for targeted communication). Readers and recipients then further disseminate the story within their offline or online networks (often quickly outstripping those personally known to them), and redistribute it on additional sites, venues, and online networks, occasionally reframing, repurposing, or juxtaposing it with additional materials. Along the way the initial story might be stripped of critical context such as its original author or source, intention, or goal; furthermore, it may also accrue robust and perhaps conflicting commentary across multiple venues, indicators of relative popularity (e.g., trending data), or various ratings, testimonials, or other forms of dis/approval … (I)t may ultimately bear little resemblance to its original form. (p. 451)

Flanagin's essay proceeds to discuss aspects of message control, audience scale, source ambiguity, receiver ambiguity, and temporal ambiguity, that transform social influence from its previous nature into its contemporary practice.

Cappella (2017) presents transformations of a different nature. He starts his essay by explicating how big data are changing insights into social influence and diffusion, and how new computational abilities to harness agent-based, multilevel modeling analyses provide new insights about the spread of innovations and opinions through social networks. Then he describes the workings and transformative qualities of recommendation systems. Recommendation systems predict individuals' preferences and predilections based on what they know of individuals' past choices and those of "clones," that is, others who are statistically similar to the targeted individual. As Cappella notes, it was once a defining quality of interpersonal communication that individuals formed their persuasive appeals on the basis of idiosyncratic knowledge about one another that developed in personal relationships over time. Now, recommender systems are used to "outsource" these very qualities: knowing what someone is like, assessing their psychological and behavioral dispositions, and tailoring message content and strategies to achieve maximal influence. Such systems are not only used to recommend movies but also to tailor health-related persuasive appeals. In this way, technology transforms the domain of interpersonal communication into human-machine interactions.

Evolution

A fourth vision of the merger of mass and interpersonal communication is an evolutionary one. Rice (2017) redraws the diffusion of innovations in the contemporary landscape. As users experience a limitation in one platform's communication capabilities, it is a short cycle until another platform innovation fills that gap. When media are

both the focus of innovation as well as the vehicles by which diffusion and adoption of innovations occur, the process of innovation and diffusion becomes an evolutionary, ever-expanding spiral. Rice illustrates this spiral with a tour-de-force of media innovations and examples.

A different evolutionary view appears in Parks (2017). Parks reviews theories and research on mixed-media relationships, relationships that are formed or maintained using a portfolio of interactive communication technologies, whether or not in combination with face-to-face interaction. A shortcoming of prior work, Parks argues, is that it neglects the driving evolutionary force that shapes mediated communication to this day: the fundamental dynamics of human relationships. "Social life, including important interpersonal relationships, may have become *mediatized*, but it is also the case that media have become *interpersonalized,*" Parks argues (p. 513), raising the possibility that relationships have shaped the evolution of communication technology, more so than technology has transformed the fundamental expressions of relationships.

The work by Shah et al. (2017) offers a counterpoint to Parks' perspective: Rather than interpersonal dynamics driving media evolution, evolutionary changes in mass communication have driven shifts in the merger of mass and interpersonal systems. Shah et al. take as a given that interpersonal conversations (online or offline) about political issues mediate and moderate the effect of mass communication on individuals' political cognitions and behavior. Interactive communication technologies simply multiply opportunities for these forms of conversation. What has evolved is mass communication, and as a result, the joint effects of mass and interpersonal communication differ from those which they formerly rendered. News content is more deliberately partisan, appealing to niche audiences rather than mass audiences as they once did. New media provide persistent and searchable information, which exacerbates the tendency for people to seek content consistent with their motivations and predispositions, making exposure to mass communication now more fragmented and selective. The consumption of online political news facilitates online conversations that propagate and reinforce these perspectives, extending skewed perceptions of reality, increasing cynicism and ultimately distrust in democratic institutions.

Conclusion

These four kinds of mergers of mass and interpersonal processes via interactive communication technology may not describe all forms of convergence that theorists have developed. More and different kinds of convergences may be apparent in other subdisciplines of communication, and without question some of the major advances in our theoretical thinking about technology and communication have emerged in contextual arenas of communication that are not represented in the essays that follow. The limitations of a special issue precluded us from reaching across all communication contexts or subdisciplines, or to venture even farther afield; as Cappella (2017) reminds us, the points addressed in this issue are the subjects of research in many other disciplines as well. At the same time, the recognition that the articles in this

special issue address only a fraction of the implications of the convergence between mass and interpersonal communication makes it all the more apparent that the issues they address are pervasive, widespread, intractable, and due for both retrospective reviews and prospective suggestions for the future.

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