

Mobile media: Coming of age with a big splash

Mobile Media & Communication

1(1) 50–56

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DOI: 10.1177/2050157912459494

mmc.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In a very short period of time, mobile telephony, tablets, and other hand-held devices swept the world. The world's first cellular network was created in 1977, but the mobile phone has made history as one of the fastest diffusing communication technologies, reaching nearly six billion subscribers by 2011. The time is right to define mobile media in an effort to better understand mobile communication technologies and their broad implications for the fundamental meanings of media, communication, community, social institutions, and especially society. In this article, I argue that the advent of mobile telephony as a wireless telecommunication system and portable platform for human communication has seemingly transformed the classical definition of mass communication. In fact, mobile media-supported communication, such as mobile news and mobile tweets, has accelerated what communication scholars have described as "the end of mass communication." The article ends with a call for a holistic view of mobile communication research.

Keywords

connected-presence, mass communication, mobile devices, mobile internet, mobile news, mobile telephony, network society, wireless telecommunications system

Making sense of new media

Making sense of new media that emerge from the vast array of innovative communication technologies is rarely clear-cut or simple. Is it really something new, a new version of the old, or perhaps a hybrid? Scholars need to think outside the proverbial box when attempting to classify or categorize innovations in new media. In defining the internet as a mass medium, Morris and Ogan (1996) argued that existing categories of media and time-honored classifications of communication types need to be refined and redefined to reflect the realities of the evolving new media landscape.

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Their approach is equally applicable when attempting to make sense of mobile media. In a very short period of time, mobile telephony, tablets, and other hand-held devices swept the world like crazy. The world's first cellular network was created in 1977, but the mobile phone has made history as one of the fastest diffusing communication technologies, reaching 50 percent of the U.S. population in only 14 years. In China alone, there are currently more than 1 billion mobile phone users; this is three times the total population of the United States. Globally, the total of mobile subscribers reached nearly 6 billion by 2011, accounting for 85 percent of the world's total population (Whitney, 2012). No communication technology in human history has penetrated so deeply in societies across the world. The time is right to define mobile media in an effort to better understand mobile communication technologies and their broad implications for the fundamental meanings of media, communication, community, social institutions, and especially society.

Mobile media and the end of mass communication

The advent of mobile telephony as a wireless telecommunication system and portable platform for human communication has seemingly transformed the classical definition of mass communication. American sociologist Charles Wright, the most cited scholar in defining mass communication, characterized it as:

an activity where 'communicators' in complex organizations use technological devices (called mass media) to quickly reach very large and diverse populations that are typically spatially separated, anonymous to the message senders, and often anonymous to one another. (Wright, 1959: 15)

Wright's characterization fits the context of a bygone era in history known as mass society – millions of city dwellers who were faceless, anonymous, and disconnected. Surprisingly, mass media models and conceptual definitions of mass communication have been relatively stable over the past 50-plus years. Mobile media-supported communication has posed a direct challenge to these established concepts. As a result, the one-to-many model of communication reaching a large and geographically dispersed audience has been rendered conceptually deficient.

In fact, mobile media-supported communication has accelerated what communication scholars described as "the end of mass communication" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Maisel, 1973). It strikes hard at the fundamental notion of the mass-ness of communication on two fronts: (1) people create and maintain social networks via the ubiquitous smartphone; and (2) individuals are connected by mobile phones that deliver what Licoppe (2004) called "connected presence" (p. 135) in mobile phone-saturated societies. Ling (2004, 2008) articulated this type of mediated connectedness via the mobile phone as mobile connection.

A network society refers to a post-industrial society in which patterns of work, communication, and social ties are characterized by networks (Castells, 1996, 2006). The rapidly expanding mobile telephony networks provide a backbone that constitutes an integral part of the network society. The social networks created and managed on mobile

telecommunications systems are fast-growing, dynamic and sophisticated. Here I would extend Wellman's (2001) proposition that "computer networks are social networks" (p. 2031) into a similar argument that mobile networks are social networks, connecting people, groups, organizations, and communities.

Furthermore, connected individuals form the most basic social structure in a network society. No medium does a better job of connecting people than mobile telephony, which enables users to have a sense of being together regardless of where they are physically. The portability of mobile phones makes "connected co-presence" anywhere any time. Therefore, even though they may be still spatially separated, individuals are by no means disconnected from one another. In his popular book *The Wealth of Networks*, which describes the transition from an industrial information age to a networked information age, Benkler (2006) argued that:

... emerging models of information and cultural production, radically decentralized and based on emergent patterns of cooperation and sharing, but also of simple coordinate coexistence, are beginning to take on an ever-larger role in how we produce meaning – information, knowledge, and culture – in the networked information economy. (pp. 32-33)

In sum, critics (Maisel, 1973) have long argued that the term "mass communication" has outlived its usefulness, and mass communication itself has declined in importance in society. Mobile media-supported communication appears to have hammered the latest, and perhaps the last, nail in the mass communication coffin.

Defining mobile media

What exactly is mobile media? For clarification, I would define mobile media (which encompasses a range of hand-held devices from mobile phones, tablets, and e-readers to game consoles) primarily as a personal, interactive, internet-enabled and user-controlled portable platform that provides for the exchange of and sharing of personal and non-personal information among users who are inter-connected.

Accordingly, mobile media-supported communication is communication via a mobile platform for the exchange of information between and among a small number of identified and connected users. Additionally, the mobile platform provides a means to access the internet because of media convergence. In the U.S., more than half of the population already has access to the Web through smartphones and tablets (Nash, 2012). There are 1.2 billion mobile web users worldwide. Industry observers and IT trend spotters predict a Web 3.0 era (if there is to be one) featuring the internet on a mobile platform.

What makes mobile communication fascinating is the experience of connected co-presence 24/7 – a mutually perceived expectation among mobile media users that they can instantly be there for one another around the clock. What Goffman (1963) imagined sociologically a half century ago, that "co-presence renders persons uniquely accessible, available and subject to one another" (p. 22), has come true thanks to advanced mobile media. My previous research (Wei & Lo, 2006) shows that the mobile phone offers a unique social reward: It confers instant membership to those who are poorly social-connected in a community.

A critical characteristic of mobile communication as compared to classical mass communication is the back-staging of social institutions (e.g. large media organizations) as producers and distributors of information to mobile phone users. Thus, mobile communication represents a new paradigm of human communication with mobile media as a user-generated communicative space. It is unlike the common carrier model of the plain old telephone (POT), which has no consideration for content, or the one-to-many model of mass media controlled by a few powerful corporations (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Mobile communication puts users at the center of interactive and participative communication for the experience of presence and co-presence. When politically motivated, mobile communicators can change a society. The role of the mobile phone in the 2011 Arab Spring serves as an appropriate footnote here. The “occupy movement” in the U.S. is another example.

Maybe a prime illustration of this new paradigm of human communication and its departure from the dominant mass communication paradigm comes from the popularity of mobile news and mobile tweets.

Mobile news

Mobile news, primarily in the form of mobile apps or mobile websites, has gained popularity. For instance, the American adult population using mobile devices to obtain news is at an all-time high of 27 percent, according to a study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The Pew study reported that 44 percent of American adults own a smartphone, and 51 percent of smartphone owners use their devices as their primary source for obtaining news. Additionally, 56 percent of tablet owners were found to use their devices as a primary news source.

The consumption of mobile news is highly personalized, subject to the preferences and whims of mobile device owners. Recent research (see Wei, Lo, Chen, Zhang, & Xu, 2011) found that following news is as common as getting news via the smartphone. Smartphone users are no longer satisfied with simply getting news; they often use the phone to follow a news organization or a specific journalist on social networking sites, follow a news blog or a news blogger, or to follow Twitter updates from a news organization or a specific journalist.

More importantly, mobile media enables users to bypass news produced by institutionalized organizations in order to receive updated and officially unsanctioned news. The widespread use of mobile tweeting (e.g., microblogs accessible via the smartphone) in news dissemination in China provides a case in point. Mobile internet has shown explosive growth in China over the past five years. The growth has driven demand for Twitter-like social media known as Weibo (微博) in the country. The total of microblog users in China increased from 63.11 million in 2008 to 195 million in 2010. Currently 34 percent of China’s mobile internet users have a presence in the cyberblog sphere through a mobile Twitter account, which offers them an alternative channel of uncensored news in China’s tightly controlled media environment. A number of high-profile corruption cases were first reported by mobile tweets posted by average citizens.

To fight for their relevance and keep up with the pace of 24/7 news demand, media organizations, large and small, have incorporated mobile media apps and websites for

distributing professionally produced content. Tom Curley, retired president and chief executive of the Associated Press, illustrated the shortened news cycle by noting that the diffusion of a news event went from three hours before September 11, 2001, to three minutes in the era of mobile Twitter and Facebook. Still, an increasing number of news organizations are struggling to adapt to the disruptive mobile communication technology.

The future of mobile media research

When I began researching mobile media (e.g., 1G mobile phone and pagers) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I encountered many difficulties in having my work published in the leading journals of the field. Reviewers often questioned the relevance of wireless telecommunications devices to communication, and they doubted if this research stream would be enduring. I sensed a dismissive attitude along the lines of “*what’s the point of studying mobile telephony? Who cares?*”

What a difference a decade has made. Mobile media came of age by making a huge impact on the communication scene. Global popularity of mobile telephony valorizes the research. In the context of mobile media’s influence on journalism, mobile telephony has been nothing short of a game-changer. Today, with 4G/LTE networks, the iPhone 5, and ubiquitous computing on the horizon, mobile media is at the forefront of people-to-people and people-to-objects communication (e.g., remotely controlling home appliances or starting a car via a smartphone) in the next five years.

Mobile communication scholars should be excited about this prospect. However, in pursuing future research to expand the literature on mobile media, they should guard against turning it into a niche field; that is, focusing narrowly on the technical aspects of the technology and studying use of mobile media in isolation.

Addressing the crisis in journalism, Briggs (2009, p. 5) suggested that “Journalism is about people, not technology.” I concur in stressing the importance of putting people at the center of future mobile communication research. People have integrated mobile media into their everyday lives (Leung & Wei, 2000; Wei, 2006, 2008); they make sense of happenings and seek meaning in interacting with others and in viewing the mobile phone as reflective of the self (Wei, 2007). In mobile phone-saturated societies, their interactions tend to take place in the contexts of their kinship networks, their community, and various socially connected groups. Structures and patterns of interaction will emerge from mobile communication. This people-as-active-user-and-meaning-producer approach will help us address the fundamental question: What difference does mobile communication make for a society?

To sum up, the major challenge facing mobile communication scholars is to strive for a holistic view. In an article titled “Why American sociology abandoned mass communication research,” Katz (2009) sharply criticized mass communication research for being narrowly focused and abandoning the sociological thrust in analyzing mass media. Social contexts were given little consideration, and use of media was studied as an isolated behavior among disconnected people. Lang (2011) typified mass communication research as a one-variable field (e.g., focusing on exposure as a single variable in examining media effects). Mobile communication scholars should go to great lengths to avoid repeating these flaws.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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