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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Merger of Mass and Interpersonal Communication via New Media: Integrating Metaconstructs

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The convergence of mass and interpersonal communication requires integration of underlying processes, or theoretical metaconstructs, that originated in formerly separate research domains. Several previous efforts to integrate mass and interpersonal communication fell short in this regard, and correspondent empirical work provides limited explanations. The article nominates 9 metaconstructs: distribution capacity, message persistence, audience, channels and cues, relationships, temporality, interactivity and mutual influence, message characteristics, and social goals. It suggests how these metaconstructs, in manifestations afforded by new media, can affect communication in important ways, with examples of studies that benefited from their inclusion. Consideration and integration of these metaconstructs, in individual studies or in streams of research, can expand the explanatory power and precision of research involving new media.

Keywords: Convergence of Mass and Interpersonal Communication, Distribution Capacity, Audience, Channels, Temporality, Interactivity.

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If new media bring together processes that were formerly ascribed to mass or interpersonal domains, theoretical integration requires us to recognize those essential processes now co-occur, manifest, emerge, interact, and affect one another in any particular setting. Many previous efforts to theorize or test convergent models have inadequately explicated important processes within one or the other (mass or interpersonal) domain. As a result, treatises that explicitly attempt to merge the two domains often end up with mass or interpersonal communication as a “black box” in their models (and empirical studies derived from such models yield quite limited explanations). Even though the forms of mass and interpersonal communication appear novel in new media settings, their fundamental functions and operations still shape communication episodes, even more so with formerly interpersonal versus mass communication phenomena now inextricably wedded. Consideration of these fundamentals

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can generate more thorough and meaningful study of the complementary, interdependent, or transformational combinations of processes than much previous research has provided.

When theorists formally consider these fundamental processes, we may refer to them as communication metaconstructs. Metaconstructs are essential, cross-situational properties and processes that are likely to affect any instance of communication. The exact operation or manifestation of these metaconstructs depends on the specific theories, contexts, and technological routines and symbols that shape their appearance and their influence in any specific examination. Yet ignoring their potential impacts limits the depth of explanation that research can ultimately provide. This article aims to promote more robust research on the integration of mass and interpersonal communication by urging researchers to attend more carefully to a number of metaconstructs in communication: distribution capacity, message persistence, audience, channels and cues, relationships, temporality, interactivity and mutual influence, message characteristics, and social goals. These are not new ideas; these metaconstructs appear and reappear throughout the history of the field, albeit in different incarnations. There may be other metaconstructs (such as usability or controllability; see Kreps, 2017) and some of those suggested here may ultimately turn out to have less utility than expected. No matter which metaconstructs ultimately are the most useful, the central argument of this essay nevertheless is that to advance theory and bridge the separation that no longer exists between mass and interpersonal communication, research needs to focus on metaconstructs arising from both domains, that are (now) applicable and operational across contexts.

The article begins by describing how the historical legacy of efforts to study the convergence of mass communication and interpersonal *relations*, and oversights within those efforts, have influenced contemporary thinking about convergent communication processes. It then examines metaconstructs originating from mass and interpersonal communication that warrant consideration in the study of contemporary mediated communication, with select examples of research in which they make important differences. The essay ends with recommendations of how future studies of the convergence of mass and interpersonal communication may consider communication metaconstructs more comprehensively in order to achieve greater explanatory depth and precision than we have in the past.

Benchmark approaches to mass and interpersonal convergence

Calls for research on the merger of mass and interpersonal communication often reference historical landmarks in the field, yet many of these landmarks offer little focus on dynamic communication processes. The most frequently referenced landmark seems to be Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*. That volume refined the two-step flow hypothesis describing how the persuasive potential of mass messages is influenced

by *interpersonal relations*. Yet its approach to interpersonal relations is quite different from that which most contemporary theorists of interpersonal communication take. The processes they attributed to interpersonal relations can be categorized as psychological and sociological influences from group dynamics and sociometry. Although they remain very important in contemporary media settings, they tend not to invoke interpersonal communication *processes* on which the latter field has come to focus: how individuals construct different messages depending on their goals and relationships; how different messages reflect and affect relationships and compliance; and how the reciprocal mutual influence that occurs in dynamic conversations—online or offline—affects the acceptance of ideas and changes in attitudes. In fairness, Katz and Lazarsfeld's work predated the field of interpersonal communication as we now know it; the point is not to criticize their work, but to suggest that characterizing its focus on interpersonal *relations* as reflecting interpersonal *communication* is a misnomer.

Later works that explicitly advocated the integration of mass and interpersonal communication also sidestepped dynamic communication constructs. McLeod and Chaffee's "Interpersonal Approaches to Communication Research" (1973), for instance, focused on the development of accurate *interpersonal perceptions*—knowing what others truly think—over time. Although they argued that interpersonal perception should improve through communication, they offered no consideration of the nature of communication, interactions, or messages other than the vague suggestion that whatever messages communicators exhibit in the development of shared perceptions could be coded (with reference to a coding technique for the analysis of group discussions).

The dawning of digital communication technologies prompted scholars to argue that emerging media synthesize communication processes conventionally relegated to mass communication or interpersonal communication research. Among them, Rogers (1999) pointed out that new media are *interactive*, whereas traditional mass media are not, signaling that "the Internet, the World Wide Web, and e-mail may be inadequately studied by communication scholars in either subdiscipline ... and will be a force for the closer integration of the two" (p. 627). Beyond interactivity, however, Rogers identified no particular qualities of communication that might be important to integrate. He described interpersonal communication, in a footnote, as "face-to-face exchange of information between two or more people," the province of rhetorical theory and criticism and several contextual approaches to communication (p. 628; cf. Reardon & Rogers, 1988). Thus, a number of influential papers on the importance of integrating mass and interpersonal communication processes left unspecified what processes warranted integration. What other processes, one might have asked Rogers, does interactivity affect? What other constructs span communication settings, taking different forms and values, in the merger of mass and interpersonal communication?

Contemporary reflections

These relatively underexplicated approaches seem to have laid the foundation for some contemporary treatises that also claim to integrate mass and interpersonal communication. Several recent theories of political communication, for instance, argue that, following exposure to mass communication (via mass media or new media), interpersonal communication moderates mass communication's effects on individuals' attitudes and behavior. While this blanket assertion is undoubtedly true in many cases, it says little about how moderation by interpersonal communication occurs, that is, what causal influences interpersonal communication renders, not to mention how they might vary in systematic, relevant ways.

Empirical tests of such models, and the measurements they employ, are similarly simplistic. Such studies generally collect individuals' self-reports of exposure to mass media regarding a certain topic such as politics, and the frequency or duration of their exposure to, or participation in, interpersonal discussion on the same topic (offline, online, or both). Although such an approach meets Chaffee and Mutz's (1988, p. 24) admonition "to examine both mass and interpersonal communication side by side using comparable measures," focusing on exposure or participation ignores the question of what discussion *does*, as a theoretical mechanism. Rather than try to measure each process evenly and equally, a more productive alternative is to ask what and how important conceptual factors that originated within traditional mass/interpersonal domains exert influence in episodes that involve the convergence of mass and interpersonal communication.

In rare cases there are informal speculations of how interpersonal communication moderates mass communication effects (e.g., Scheufele, 2002). For instance, it may provide more information than individuals get from mass communication. Or, because face-to-face contacts are proximal, interpersonal sources provide mobilizing information about how to participate in local political activities. These and other speculations tend not to appear as formal propositions about causal mechanisms, however. Nor, when several of these speculations appear in a single paper or by a single author, are they tendered as rival hypotheses. Most often they are only vague possibilities in the black box of potential effects of interpersonal communication.

An uncommon and promising approach appears in Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens (2011). Inverting the traditional sequence of mass-to-interpersonal influences, they recommended studying what motivates political conversations among acquainted partners, how disagreement is avoided or addressed, and how "the nature of relationships affect all of the above" (p. 1086). Commensurately, they suggested that researchers replace frequency-based measures of interpersonal conversation and mass media exposure, with affective- and message-oriented measures. These suggestions move us closer to imagining and investigating how constructs originating in one domain of communication research become integrated into another.

To further imagine the integration of formerly disparate communication domains depends on what metaconstructs we consider that influence complex communication

processes. While different constructs will be relevant in different theory-driven investigations, a number of metaconstructs may figure in most communication episodes. We turn to consideration of nine metaconstructs: distribution capacity, message persistence, audience, channels and cues, relationships, temporality, interactivity and mutual influence, message characteristics, and social goals; and a discussion of where they came from, how they pertain now, and how some existing research has employed them.

Metaconstructs

Distribution capacity

Despite the association of mass media with mass communication, Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) suggested that media include any channel that transmits messages between any number of communicators. Media properties, therefore, can be critical to understand mediated mass/interpersonal communication. Media differ in distribution capacity. Whereas large distribution was once the province of institutionally owned sources (such as TV, radio, and print), the Internet, the Web, and social media allow individuals similar levels of distribution.

Message persistence

Persistence of messages over time was also once the exclusive affordance of mass communication content, due to the physical media's capacity for storage and retrieval. These qualities are now also afforded by individuals' webpages, profiles, and online comments. As will be more clear below, the constructs of distribution capacity and persistence are important to understanding new forms of communication.

Audience

Mass communication is traditionally defined in terms of unidirectional transmissions of messages from a source to a large, relatively undifferentiated, unknown, and anonymous audience (McQuail, 2010). These qualities not only describe traditional mass communication in newer media forms; they also describe much contemporary communication by individuals. The notion of individually generated mass communication, antithetical to traditional definitions of mass and interpersonal communication, appears when individuals exploit the distribution capacity and persistence of new media to publish websites, blogs, social network profiles, and other electronic publications to potentially undefined and unfamiliar audiences.

The construct of audience, rather than source, may now have more bearing on whether a message's intent, function, and articulation is more mass or interpersonal in nature. Research on the "imagined audience" social media writers address finds individuals sometimes envision their readership to be large and undifferentiated "like *The New York Times*" (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 121), or at other times, a well-known set of acquaintances with whom reciprocal interaction is expected. Facebook users seek different gratifications when posting messages in public than in private subchannels,

and their linguistic patterns differ between these two fora (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2012).

Channels and cues

Communication channels, and the communicative cue systems they support, was formerly a defining construct in many approaches to interpersonal communication (see Burleson, 2010, for review). Reductions by media to face-to-face interaction's provision of kinesic, vocalic, proxemics, and haptic nonverbal communication cues was once considered deleterious to most communication processes. Recent approaches provide more nuanced perspectives on communicators' adaptation to different cue systems online, and there is growing recognition of how verbal cues sometimes make online communication more rewarding than comparable face-to-face encounters (e.g., Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015). How cues are used is often more important than which cues are available, and cue systems afforded by different channels interact with variations on other metaconstructs, such as those below. As a result, communication channel differences often offer a necessary, but seldom sufficient, explanation for mediated communication effects (see for review Walther & Parks, 2002). Research is far from conclusive with regard to whether the influence of online cues from language, voice, graphics, photos, and video operate as they used to offline, from private and intimate online conversations, to online public discussions, or virtual representations.

Relationships

The relationship of an individual to other communicators online is a significant factor that affects interpretations of and responses to others' messages. Communication differs as a result of the impressions (appealing or unappealing), evaluations (credible, attractive, similar, trustworthy), and roles (promoter or consumer) that are inferred from strangers' online self-presentations and the topography of the displays on which they appear. Among communication partners who are relatively more familiar with each other, Miller and Steinberg (1975) asserted that individuals tailor their messages based on knowledge of the partner's individual psychological makeup, susceptibility to relational obligations, affinity-seeking, and other factors. This approach parallels the essential hypothesis of "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM) research: Individuals forward mass-communicated messages to others appended with comments they tailor to the recipients' personalities, which may be more persuasive than if the original message appeared without comments (see for review Flanagin, 2017). Affective dimensions of relationships also matter: Relational partners in dissatisfying relationships interpret and attribute electronic messages differently than do harmonious relationship partners (e.g., Kashian, 2015). An online comment from one relationship partner may affect a receiver positively, whereas the same messages from a different relational source may garner reactance; not all relationship partners have the same influence.

Another form of relationship is based on social-category impressions and social identification. The relevant basis for one's experience of and responses to others is

often based on stereotypes, prototypes, or ingroup/outgroup perceptions. Some have argued that this form of relating is more pervasive than idiosyncratic perceptions of well-known partners (see Dragojevic & Giles, 2014), offline, and potentially online. Social identification takes many potent shapes in online social dynamics. Readers of online product reviews, for instance, identify more strongly with reviewers and commenters who seem, without reflection, to be people like themselves, compared to institutional content creators such as advertisers.

Walther, Tong, DeAndrea, Carr, and Van Der Heide (2011) argued that interactive Web 2.0 pages can be considered a juxtaposition of possible relationship types, the deciphering of which allows researchers to apply different relationship-based theories of social influence. A web page may feature both an advertisement, consumers' comments about the ad, and yet other users' ratings of those comments; elsewhere, an individual may post a video clip on Facebook and include her comment, garnering comments from her friends, her friends' friends, and mutual friends. Each of these sources can affect a reader differently, based partly on who they are in relationship to the reader (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Once we label the sources as advertiser, peer, friend, and so forth, we can apply extant theories to predict the potential influence of each source, as long as the theories endure the complications of multivocality and new symbol systems that Web 2.0 employs.

Temporality

Time frames affect communicators' experience of interaction in significant ways. Different temporal frames affect how people get to know and like each other online, even from the inception of online interaction. Individuals who anticipate future interaction with others communicate differently than those who do not expect future interaction online, to a greater extent than offline (Walther, 2002). Anticipating how far in the future one will meet a prospective date face-to-face may affect the degree to which individuals distort their online dating profiles (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012).

As in traditional communication studies, exposure to a single message may be sufficient to test certain kinds of message effects, but a one-shot exposure is a questionable methodological shortcut for longer-term, potentially iterative events, that are occluded in abbreviated studies. Impressions and relationships often develop more slowly online than they do in other settings. Research that adopts different temporal frames (e.g., one-shot, cross-sectional, or longitudinal) to study online processes gets divergent results, which are often questionably attributed to channel effects rather than time-by-channel interaction effects (Walther, 2002). Consideration of temporal dimensions is also critical for understanding more about synchronous versus asynchronous communication, made possible by various forms of message persistence in new media. Time ordering of the appearance of messages from different sources (see Flanagin, 2017; Raney & Ji, 2017), the order of the traditional "two steps" (mass → interpersonal vs. interpersonal → mass; see Shah et al., 2017), and sequences of media switching (see Parks, 2017) can also render temporal effects.

Interactivity and mutual influence

New media's capacity for interactivity does not ensure that interactivity occurs—that communicators incorporate and reflect one another's message input in their own subsequent messages—but the capacity for interactivity offers the potential for mutual influence, which may be the heart of communication in an interpersonal sense. Cappella (1987) defined mutual influence as the likelihood that Person A's behavior followed Person B's behavior, over and above the likelihood that Person A's behavior would have occurred without Person B's influence (i.e., Person A's behavior was a consequence and not a coincidence), and vice versa for Person B's behavior. Mutual influence concerns how strings of reciprocal messages shape conversations and the affective and attitudinal outcomes they produce.

Interactivity, as a term, has been applied to a variety of media, computational systems, and perceptions (see Sundar, Bellur, Oh, Jia, & Kim, 2016, for review), but its core communication quality is the responsiveness and interrelationship of the messages communicators exchange over the course of a conversation. Little research assesses changes in threads of online discussions resulting from the introduction of different political news messages, for instance, and how dynamic changes in interactive exchanges correspond to participants' perceptions or attitudes. While it is difficult to trace how one statement affects the thoughts and statements of others in conversation, online or off, methodologies for doing so appear in traditional communication literature (e.g., Poole, 1983), and computational communication research is developing methods to study the diffusion of ideas through messages in large-scale online discussions (e.g., Introne & Goggins, 2012; see Cappella, 2017).

Cappella, Price, and Nir's (2002) study involving a series of online political discussions shows indirect evidence of mutual influence and interactivity over time. Participants met monthly in real-time online groups to discuss candidates and issues in the 2000 American election. Results of postdiscussion questionnaires showed that the online discussions increased participants' "response repertoire," that is, the number of arguments not only supporting individuals' own positions, but also those supporting contrary positions, that they presumably learned from other discussants. The results suggest that the process of sharing pro and con messages through online deliberative discussion rendered mutual influence that increased political knowledge. The authors acknowledged that message-analytic work is needed to demonstrate the precise mechanism of the effect. Interactivity and mutual influence also seem well-suited to the study of incivility in online comments, assuming incivility is cyclical and reciprocal (see, e.g., Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992).

Message characteristics

Message research in both mass and interpersonal communication involves content, strategies, argument forms, styles of language, and nonverbal behavior that correspond with the goals of a communicator. Message research also addresses how message qualities affect the emotional, instrumental, relational, and empathic responses of

receivers. Message qualities may be antecedents or outcomes in relation to metaconstructs such as relationship states, channels, or relationship-by-channel interactions.

Message analysis examines overt and covert qualities in statements. Early research on computer-mediated groups, for example, coded online and offline conversations into 12 task-oriented or socioemotional comment types (as dependent variables) to detect differences in demeanor between online versus face-to-face group discussions (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986). The well-known Computers as Social Actors research (Reeves & Nass, 1996) tested qualities of messages (as independent variables) uttered by computers that lead individuals to attribute interpersonal and psychological characteristics to them.

Relationships and temporal factors also effect variations in the production of messages and those variations' potential effects. With respect to minority opinion expression on social network sites (see Neubaum & Krämer, 2017), might an opinion dissenter among friends adapt his messages that persist, online, to be more equivocal, reflecting a mix of supporting and dissenting arguments in relation to the group's prevailing opinion (see Hayes, 2007)? Might mixed messages stimulate friends to reconsider their own position? These possibilities are consistent with online group discussion research that supported Crano's (2001) minority leniency contract hypothesis: Opinion dissenters who expressed a mixture of pro and con arguments were better liked and more influential among the majority than were dissenters who offered a more one-sided set of arguments, as long as they were part of a group rather than a perceived outsider (Bazarova, Walther, & McLeod, 2012).

Goals

Social goals drive differences in communication behavior. The desire to promote sociable conversation among acquaintances can drive individuals' selection, consumption, and repetition of media content (Atkin, 1972; see Valkenburg, 2017), offline or online. When social goals are salient, they shape individuals' strategic selection and creation of messages, and they affect the outcomes of conversations to which they pertain. Recent work (Berger, 2014) suggests that sharing and commenting about news articles online may less often be prompted by persuasion and information-sharing goals, as they are done for impression management, emotional regulation, information acquisition, or social bonding. Berger's notion is consistent with Duck's (2005) assertion that many messages we exchange in established relationships are mundane observations and opinions about things we encounter, designed to do little more than elicit partners' confirmation or extension. Others' responses provide the initiator with validation and ratification of his or her own perspective. A Facebook friend's "like" or reply to one's comment might satisfy the validation goal Duck theorizes.

Syntheses and conclusion

The metaconstructs presented above are not mutually exclusive. Any of them might exert some influence, or interact among themselves, in any communication sequence

or any study. Understanding new media processes may be enhanced by systematically considering and potentially testing a variety of these constructs in the study of a particular online social phenomenon, discovering how they operate, how they affect other theoretically specified factors, to rule them out if not rule them in, and to develop more comprehensive, integrated explanations. This is by no means an easy challenge. Research advances not by looking at every possible intervening variable within a theoretically focused inquiry. What is a researcher to do? Two general strategies seem available.

First, when possible, a single study should ask which of as many as possible of these metaconstructs can frame the substantive, focal theoretical constructs under consideration. The more that reasonably can be, the more a study can offer conceptual linkages to others' research, to central principles of communication, and to a greater accumulation of knowledge. A single study should also consider what metaconstructs cannot be varied within a particular research effort, make decisions about which it can hold constant or control, and to articulate those controls explicitly in their reports. The report of a single research effort may also discuss its unstudied metaconstructs in presentation of the study's limitations, not gratuitously, but in terms of their actual potential to extend explanations in future studies.

And then, those future studies should be undertaken. The second strategy with which to deal with potentially important metaconstructs is to conduct progressive series of related, coherent, evolving research efforts that deepen understanding of a theory by subjecting its predictions to different manifestations of relevant metaconstructs. To see how effects may change when communication occurs among strangers or different kinds of relationship partners, asynchronously rather than synchronously, when broadcast to thousands of readers rather than to close partners, or in a manner that persists rather than dissolves.

One example of the first strategy—a single study that integrates several metaconstructs—is Hancock, Toma, and Fenner's (2008) examination of the interplay of durable public messages, goals, message effects, relationship development, and interactivity. During experimental online chats, one dyadic participant could view a partner's Facebook profile, although the partner was unaware of it. Participants who saw the other's profile subtly referred to its content during chats, to test partners for deception in the claims they had made, or to ingratiate via the appearance of common interests. Messages of both types led partners to like their inquisitors more strongly. Individuals' exploitation and appropriation of durable, mass-audience-oriented messages—public profiles—as strategic conversational fodder for information-seeking and relationship goals provides an innovative view of the interdependence of mass and interpersonal communication, increasing the depth of understanding that accompanies inclusion of numerous metaconstruct processes.

An example of the second strategy appears in progressive series of studies on the generation of social capital via Facebook (see Ellison & Vitak, 2015, for review). This research initially applied sociometric principles, studying the simple correlation between number of Facebook friends and degree of social capital. Adding

relationship factors, research segmented “friends” into different relationship types, providing more precise accounts of the provision of social capital. Temporal analyses showed that social capital increased with the use of Facebook over time. Eventually, research identified certain message types and reciprocity characteristics that provide even more nuanced views of how Facebook users garner support from one another. With the addition of each metaconstruct, the explanatory links between Facebook use and social capital became more precise.

Although any one of the metaconstructs suggested in this essay may or may not be relevant to any one particular theory or theory-driven investigation, if left unexamined they may nevertheless affect the operation of the other constructs that comprise a study’s primary interest. Conversely, systematic attention to important communication metaconstructs that are likely to be relevant in a communication episode may enable researchers to identify potential sources of extraneous variance or confounding influences on hypothesized communication factors. Recent thinking about media effects research urges us to consider that individual differences lead some media users differentially likely to consume or respond to different media messages; inclusion of such factors in media research can surface systematic moderators and mediators of mass communication effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Likewise, systematic differences in durability and publicness of messages, imagined audiences, channels and cues, relationship types and quality, temporal dimensions, mutual influence and interaction, message factors, and social goals—as they appear in new and emerging forms—have the potential not only to refine theoretical understanding, but to identify moderators and mediators of other theoretical processes.

Consideration of the underlying metaconstructs, the original forms of which formerly differentiated mass from interpersonal communication, warrant integration in new media settings. In some of the studies mentioned above and elsewhere, we can see the communication constructs that researchers examined, and how certain integrations are emerging either within or across studies. Such efforts differ markedly from those treatises that argue for the importance of the concurrent operation of mass and interpersonal processes but offer less discernible attention to explicating the constructs that comprise either domain. Those approaches miss how content is appropriated, reconstituted, reflected, and reified, or rejected in interaction. Their empirical tests make it difficult to answer the question, *why* did this happen? To conclude that because communication occurred (through face-to-face or mediated activity) that we understand the nature of its operation and influence, leaves us wanting in terms of an informed, theoretically integrated perspective on how communication works. Research cannot identify the integration of mass and interpersonal communication processes if the relevant communication constructs are unarticulated. More comprehensive and integrated conceptualizations of the communication metaconstructs that evolve in new media lead to more, and more interesting, plausible hypotheses, that can ultimately expand the explanatory potential and precision of theory and research.

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