International Journal of Communication 7 (2013), Feature 188–196 1932–8036/2013FEA0002

Communication as a Discipline
Views from Europe

Communication Research Paradigms

Permanently Online: A Challenge for Media and Communication Research

PETER VORDERER
MATTHIAS KOHRING
University of Mannheim

Media and communication research has developed and flourished mainly as a discipline that investigates what the media do to people. In the 1970s, this question was turned upside down and gave way to the opposite question: What do people do with media? The underlying assumption that led to this new paradigmatic question was the model of a person who is not only capable of resisting persuasive messages but who individually selects, understands, interprets, and, lately, even produces such messages in a way that is difficult to predict and that seems to be dependent only on the given situation and the personality of the user. Along this line, media effects research has become a scientific endeavor about people's exposure to media content, focusing on psychological and sociological processes that moderate and mediate what happens between a communication intention and a communication effect. With the Internet, this situation has again changed fundamentally. The Internet allows people to communicate seemingly independent from time and place—that is, potentially always and everywhere. People are no longer subject to individual messages; rather, they seem to communicate and interact almost permanently.

Why they do this and what the long-term effects of it are, however, are questions our discipline has not yet started to study and to debate. Following media effects research from the 20th century, we tend to believe that media users use the media in ways that serve them best—that is, in people's best interest. However, in light of more recent observations about people's online behavior, this assumption seems increasingly questionable. We discuss in this article why media users tend to be online almost permanently and how this question—and the possible answers to it—challenge the discipline and affect (or should affect) its development and future.

What Are We Talking About?

A great deal of what communication research has been dealing with since its very beginning are basically human acts as well as products of these acts—more specifically, acts of communication, both with and without various media. Such acts may or may not lead to certain effects, such as persuasion,

selection of media or communication content, or changes in how individuals, groups, organizations, and sometimes even a society may think, feel, and behave. As diverse as these manifestations or effects of communication acts are, they all have one thing in common: We think of them as starting at one point in time and ending at another, later, point in time. Media effects research has described and explained what happens to a media user who is exposed to a certain message that was available to him or her at a certain time and that was read, understood, processed, interpreted, thought over, and so on by its users for some additional time after exposure but that has eventually been completed (see, e.g., Berger, Roloff, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009; Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Nabi & Oliver, 2009). To measure whether a certain message has had any impact on its user, communication scholars have usually compared the attitude, knowledge, and feelings that a user held or felt before and after exposure. Any difference between these two measurements that could not be attributed to external factors (i.e., factors other than the message) would signify a change in attitudes—or a media effect. This way of reasoning has been plausible as communication scholars have been used to the fact that people start using media at one point in time and end at another.

However, this type of communication situation has changed substantially (see also McQuail, this issue). Although we do not yet have reliable data regarding this change, we propose two major differences in how people use media today—that is, how they communicate in their daily lives. Instead of using media simply to receive information and/or entertainment only at certain points in time and for a specific amount of time, many (and particularly younger) people have developed the habit of being online almost permanently. And while online, they sometimes do not even need to deal with explicit messages; they are just "there"—online and with others.

To provide a rather stereotypical example of the change in how people use media, consider this scenario: Not long ago, a person might drive home from work with the radio on in the car, then switch on the TV in the living room when arriving home, and later use the phone to talk to someone about an issue that is worth the money that the telephone service cost. But today communication never ends. Nothing is really switched off, and everybody keeps in touch with everybody else and everything else that could potentially be important. Although there is not much reliable data to count on, anecdotal evidence suggests that people at the beginning of the 21st century check e-mails on their smartphones as soon as they wake up in the morning, if not in the middle of the night if they happen to wake up. They might still turn on the radio or the TV as they prepare to leave the house, just as people 20 years ago or so used to do. But now they might also check their Facebook account, read tweets, and check their favorite online community sites.

And this does not end when they leave the house. No matter whether they sit on a train, a tram, or a bus, or are waiting for one of them, sometimes even when driving their own car, they continue to be online, checking, chatting, reading, talking, writing—in short, communicating. Employers complain about employees being distracted as they seem to repeatedly use their smartphones or computers when they are at work to stay informed about what is happening in the various communities with which they are connected. In fact, this behavior of staying attached all the time now extends into the off-working hours, which has been identified by organizational psychologists as problematic since it impairs employees' recreation possibilities and, in the long run, also their productivity (see Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011;

Sonnentag, 2012; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). And little seems to be different on weekends. People may still go to a ball game, but they are not able to exclusively focus on the game, because they need to simultaneously use their handheld devices to process information and communicate with those who are not present. Even romantic dinners sometimes include a mutual acceptance of two people sitting across the table from each other, each having his or her smartphone on the table and being willing to pick it up whenever something "comes in."

This trend of almost permanently being online becomes reinforced as people now think that they can deal with various acts of communication simultaneously. On several German TV talk shows, for example, we have lately seen representatives from the new, so-called Pirate Party who send, receive, and read messages on their smartphones while participating in a panel discussion that is followed by a few million TV viewers. When challenged by other panelists or the moderator of the show on how they could communicate with their followers while being active in a panel discussion, they have argued that this is no problem for them because they simply "multitask."

And this seems to be the second major change in how communication seemingly works: Not only do many people communicate almost anytime and anywhere, they also tend to believe that they can use more than one source of information at any given time, yet stay on top of what is happening in all the different social situations in which they participate. From what we know about people's capacity to multitask, there is little evidence that they can in fact process different information simultaneously (see Koolstra, Ritterfeld, & Vorderer, 2009; Wang & Tchernev, 2012). This novel phenomenon—being permanently online, constantly changing between reception and communication, thereby focusing on connection per se rather than on content, and dealing with different media simultaneously—confronts media effects research with almost paradigmatic challenges (Valkenburg & Peter, this issue).

Popular books, some written by journalists, have appeared over the past few years that lament this development and describe what we will lose if this trend continues (e.g., Schirrmacher, 2009). For example, the experiences that only "deep reading" provide will be gone if in the future we use the media as described (Carr, 2010). Turkle (2011), a well-known advocate for new forms of communication and media use, has identified a state of being "alone together" in this new world of permanent communication. Others have deliberately decided to go offline for a certain time, and they describe their experiences as irritating at first but very rewarding after some time (see Rühle, 2010; Schirrmacher, 2009). What they cannot explain, however, is why they eventually all go online again after a certain trial period, given that the experiences they had while being offline were so rewarding. Hence, they do not provide an answer to the fundamental question of why we all seem to be online more and more even though it apparently doesn't work to our full advantage. The questions we would therefore like to address in this article are rather simple: Why do we consistently increase the time we spend with communication media not only to the point where we are online frequently but in fact almost permanently? And what does this question—and what do our ways of dealing with this question—tell us about the state of our discipline?

Why Do We Want to Be Permanently Online?

We'll approach this question on two levels: the individual and the social. We believe that the reasons for most human behavior lie in both individual situations as well as in the social context of the situations. People are agents of their own behavior, even if they are not always aware of why they do what they do. They act for reasons that lie within themselves and that we may call motivations, intentions, or plans. And although such motivations may and often do differ from other reasons that also guide and prompt humans' behavior (see Groeben, 1986; Kahnemann, 2011), they do matter. Therefore, on an individual level, we will suggest one possible motivation for people being online almost permanently. Subsequently, we will also argue on a social level that people are never independent from the world around them—that is, the social context in which they are embedded. Following Max Weber, we would always call their actions "social actions" (Graumann, 1979), and, therefore, this social context needs to be taken into account as well.

To explain the behavior of being permanently online at the individual level, we draw on the research that Williams and his colleagues (Williams, 2001, 2007; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) have conducted on ostracism—a sense of being ignored and excluded by others. These psychologists have demonstrated how strongly ordinary people respond to a situation in which they first felt as if they were part of a group and then all of a sudden were ignored by the other members of that group. Most of the experiments they conducted were set up as a fake waiting situation, where subjects were told to wait in a group of three before the actual experiment would start. In fact, the other two people in the waiting group were confederates of the experimenter. In a typical situation, one of the confederates proposes to pass some time while they wait for the experiment to begin by throwing a little ball (or something similar) between the three people in the waiting area. Because this seems to be a good idea, the subject is usually willing to participate, not knowing, of course, that the other two people are confederates. After about 10 minutes, the two confederates exclude the subject by throwing the ball back and forth only between the two. A camera usually follows the behavior and facial expressions of the subject. The subject always recoils in pain before responding to the others and the situation in various ways. What is of particular interest to us in this context is not so much what the subject does in terms of trying to be included again but how he or she responds emotionally. And this response is nothing short of intense fear, independent of the age, gender, or cultural background of the subject. This response also can be seen in situations where the confederates are not humans but avatars on a computer screen or even simple dots ("balls") that seem to play with other dots or with the subject, who sits in front of a screen and keyboard that allows him or her to virtually throw the ball back. Williams assumes that this fear felt by the subject is a hardwired automatic response that everybody easily feels because it signals the danger of being excluded from a community. While exclusion from a group may not mean that much to us today, for our ancestors, whose very survival depended on group cooperation, ostracism was the equivalent of a death sentence. Williams's argument is that the subjects do not really respond to what is happening to them at this very moment, but they respond automatically to a real danger that at a much earlier time was indeed life-threatening or a signal of imminent doom.

Applying these observations and insights to the situation of being permanently online in a media-saturated world, it is plausible to assume that media users more than anything else try not to be excluded

from their social world. Rather than having reasons to be online almost permanently, they—after having been online for some time—now have reasons not to enter a situation again where they are suddenly offline. Interestingly, some people (particularly the elderly) who have never established a habit of being online also do not lament it; they simply don't miss anything. But once they go online and get used to it, they, too, can't stop because it would feel like an exclusion. Even if they go offline for some time—like the authors who report on their (always very positive) experiences of having been offline for some weeks or months (Rühle, 2010; Schirrmacher, 2009)—they eventually turn back to their online lives. The argument here is that media users have simply learned and gotten used to being connected with as many people (and sources of information) as they like almost all the time. And once this feels normal, they simply cannot give it up, because a termination of it would feel like being excluded and would therefore trigger the fear of being ostracized.

At the social level, we refer to the diagnosis of modern societies as it has been elaborated by Rosa (2005, 2012). Rosa describes in detail how modern life has been speeding up, particularly but not exclusively by means of new technologies, and how it has now passed a critical point beyond which both social synchronization and social integration fail. According to Rosa, the essential experience in modern life is a sense of acceleration of every dimension and every process of which we are part. Rosa identifies this acceleration as the fundamental principle of modernity. The extent to which it impacts our ordinary and daily expectations in regard to those with whom we interact can be illustrated by a detail from the World Internet Project. This project comprises a longitudinal study about the use and the effects of Internet technology in more than 20 countries (http://www.digitalcenter.org/pages/current_report.asp). Among many other findings, it confirms that most users' acceptable length of elapsed time until they receive an answer from a communication partner to whom they have sent a message is steadily shrinking. And this is true around the globe, although people's initial acceptable time until reply varies by country and culture. While this project remains descriptive, Rosa has been seeking explanations for developments like these that refer to more global processes of social and cultural change. According to him, modernity has provided individuals with an ever-increasing number of social options, which after all has been a way to emancipate the individual from given constraints. The problem now, however, is that the acceleration of almost all social and individual processes does not leave those individuals any time to apply these newly gained possibilities. What seems to be appropriate and even necessary for the individual today is to become a "drifter"—someone who can adjust quickly and easily to constant and ever-accelerating changes in social status, work, friends, and habits—in short, everything that helps people understand who they are and who they could be. In fact, being permanently online (falsely) appears to provide these individuals with an opportunity to do it all at the same time. There is no need to decide about what to do now and what to do later, and who and what kind of information is preferred over someone or something else. Instead, there is an illusion of being with others all the time, no matter where they are, and subsequently an understanding that the obvious requirements of our time can be mastered.

Of course, many other reasons exist for media users to go online more often than ever before, to stay online as much as possible, and to feel awkward if they are forced offline. But we believe that two important causes for this behavior are the individual fear of being excluded from a community to which one once belonged and the sense that this sort of behavior is suitable to meet the communication requirements of our time. Because this behavior seems to affect younger people more than older ones,

there is also speculation now that we have only seen the beginning of a new way of how people deal with media and communication in their everyday lives. One could argue that this behavior is in its development, not unlike the behavior that many, particularly younger users, showed in respect to computer and video games a few years ago.

Similar to being online permanently, video games first attracted (mostly male) adolescents and thereby raised some concerns among psychologists and communication scholars. These researchers thought (and many still do) that playing these often violent games will harm their players not only because of the content the players are exposed to but also because of the long time periods youngsters spend playing them (for an overview, see Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). One of the reassuring assumptions in this discussion, however, was that adolescents will eventually grow out of it—that is, they will spend less and less time with video games as they grow older. Today, however, we know that this was a false expectation. What has happened instead is that players tend to select and play different games as they grow up, but they do not necessarily spend less time playing.

It seems plausible to assume that something similar will happen to people's state of being permanently online. Although today this still affects younger people more often than older people, it is likely only a matter of time until adults and the elderly will live more of their lives over the Internet. According to our argument, not only will the youngsters grow up without giving up what they have become used to, the possibility to interact with others over the Internet will also affect age groups that have not been exposed to it before. E-mail and Skype have already become popular among the elderly because they provide what many in this age group certainly miss: social interaction with family and peers. And in contrast to those who are busy running their daily lives, the elderly often have the time to interact with those who are not present. But even for those who try to live their lives in times of enormous acceleration, when a professional job (which, today, could mean working several jobs) has to be combined with family life and individual needs such as recreation, there is a growing sense of knowing or feeling what seems to be necessary: being in-line with the necessities of modern life—that is, being available, reachable, at almost any time, anywhere.

What Does This Mean for Communication as a Discipline?

Given how widespread is the behavior of trying to be online as much as possible and in how many different countries and cultures it can be found, it is puzzling that communication as a discipline has looked into this phenomenon only along old tracks—from only one of two available perspectives. We have become used to bifurcating the field into the social-scientific and humanistic approaches, and we usually decide early in our careers which perspective to take and which track to follow. Pleas for a more comprehensive approach have often been expressed and have equally often been ignored (e.g., Vorderer & Groeben, 1992). Most recently, Calhoun (2011) has pointed out how little progress we have made in that respect and concluded that "the notion that there could be a common method to communication research is laughable" (2011, p. 1485). Indeed, we agree with Calhoun that "the study of communication is clearly an interdisciplinary field, but it is anything but clear what that means" (2011, p. 1490). Nevertheless, there are some steps that have been made in this direction. One way to make progress is via what Cappella (2011) calls transdisciplinary work, where "people from very different points of view

cannot themselves answer the important problems that we face alone from their limited disciplinary perspectives" (Cappella, 2011, p. 1477). This is what we have tried to do in this brief article: to look at a phenomenon that seems to be of utmost importance to (particularly younger) media users and that we believe should be equally important to the discipline. To approach this phenomenon as a problem that needs to be described and explained in a scientific way (so that the question of why people show this kind of behavior can be answered) we have—again very briefly—referred to two different disciplinary perspectives: a psychological and a sociological one. While this might not yet fully answer the question of why media users go online more and more often, it should bring us closer to such an explanation. The questions media and communication research have been dealing with—and will be dealing with even more—are too important to view only through a narrow lens that any single discipline provides. After all, "changes in patterns and media of communication are more and more clearly key dimensions of global change. This field literally studies ways in which the world is made" (Calhoun, 2011, p. 1495).

References

Berger, C., Roloff, M., & Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of communication science.* London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Bryant, J., & Oliver, M. B. (Eds.). (2009). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Calhoun, C. (2011). Communication as social science (and more). *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 1479–1496.

Cappella, J. (2011). Bridging diversity through problem-based collaboration. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 1476–1478.

Carr, N. G. (2010). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*. New York, NY: Norton.

Graumann, C. F. (1979). Verhalten und Handeln—Probleme einer Unterscheidung [Behavior and action—Problems of differentiation]. In W. Schluchter (Ed.), *Verhalten, Handeln und System* (pp. 16–31). Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp.

Groeben, N. (1986). *Handeln, Tun, Verhalten als Einheiten einer verstehend-erklärenden Psychologie: wissenschaftstheoretischer Überblick und Programmentwurf zur Integration von Hermeneutik und Empirismus* [Action, doing, behavior as unities of comprehending and explaining psychology: Overview of scientific theory and program design for the integration of hermeneutics and empiricism]. Tübingen, Germany: Francke.

Kahnemann, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. London, UK: Penguin.

Koolstra, C. M., Ritterfeld, U., & Vorderer, P. (2009). Media choice despite multitasking? In T. Hartmann (Ed.), *Media choice: A theoretical and empirical overview* (pp. 234–246). London, UK: Routledge.

McQuail, D. (2013). Reflections on paradigm change in communication theory and research. *International Journal of Communication* (this special section).

Nabi, R. L., & Oliver, M. B. (Eds.). (2009). *The Sage handbook of media processes and effects.* London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Park, Y., Fritz, C., & Jex, S. M. (2011). Relationships between work-home segmentation and psychological detachment from work: The role of communication technology use at home. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *16*, 457–467.

Rosa, H. (2005). *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* [Acceleration: The change in temporal structures in modernity]*.* Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp.

Rosa, H. (2012). *Weltbeziehungen im Zeitalter der Beschleunigung* [World relations in the age of acceleration]. Berlin, Germany: Suhrkamp.

Rühle, A. (2010). *Ohne Netz: Mein halbes Jahr offline* [Without net: Being offline for half a year]. Stuttgart, Germany: Klett-Cotta.

Schirrmacher, F. (2009). *Payback*. Munich, Germany: Karl Blessing Verlag.

Sonnentag, S. (2012). Psychological detachment from work during leisure time: The benefits of mentally disengaging from work. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 21*(2), 114–118.

Sonnentag, S., Kuttler, I., & Fritz, C. (2010). Job stressors, emotional exhaustion, and need for recovery: A multi-source study on the benefits of psychological detachment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 76*, 355–365.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2013). Five challenges for the future of media-effects research. *International Journal of Communication* (this special section).

Vorderer, P., & Bryant, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Playing video games—Motives, responses, and consequences.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Vorderer, P., & Groeben, N. (1992). Audience research: What the humanistic and the social science approaches could learn from each other. *Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Literature, Media and the Arts*, *21*, 361–376.

Wang, Z., & Tchernev, J. M. (2012). The ''myth'' of media multitasking: Reciprocal dynamics of media multitasking, personal needs, and gratifications. *Journal of Communication, 62*, 493–513.

Williams, K. D. (2001). *Ostracism: The power of silence*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Williams, K. D. (2007). Ostracism: The kiss of social death. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 1*(1), 236–247.

Williams, K. D., Cheung, C. K., & Choi, W. (2000). CyberOstracism: Effects of being ignored over the Internet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*, 748–762.