

1 *New Media and the New Worlds of Communication*

It is the 2014 year-end holiday season in Calgary, the largest city and a business centre in Western Canada. I walk in through the imposing broad entrance of a huge hall that can easily accommodate at least 500 people. The reception desk cannot be seen from the entrance and was situated far away in the distance. It is a shop of a well-known computer and cellphone manufacturer in North America that has espoused a novel strategy to expand its customer base. A short walk traversing through the well-placed tables in rows, tablets, cellphones, computers and people got me to the reception. While waiting for an attendant, I turned to my left where four children were playing around a low-level brightly coloured table. No adult was around them. They were not the only four kids playing with the modern gadgets; other tables were also taken by kids.

These children must have been around four to five years old. In front of each was a new tablet, placed on the table and not in their hands. Their small hands could not hold a tablet and play on it at the same time. I thought that they did not actually know what they were doing; they just kept stroking on the screen with the tiny fingers of both hands. The images and their movements were ample enough to keep their attention pinned on the device. This is the beginning of their association with a piece of technology that can both entertain and make communication possible. This technology has become an integral part of life in the modern world of communication. This is the new world of communication with the new media and technologies.

I thought of two things. The first was that these kids of the net-generation are being initiated to a new technology that has the potential and capabilities to perform the function of communication. Shortly these young children would learn to operate these devices before they are even able to speak clearly and cogently. The second was that the producers of the technology are experimenting with creative forms of expanding and enlarging their domain, adding new customers. It will

eventually increase the user-base of the technology that can perform the forms of communication (texting, voice calls, emails, voice over Internet protocol (VOIP-based communication, chatting and the like)). Electronic media, which are undergoing rapid innovation and developments in communication, are capable of changing the way individuals interact (Mansell, 1995). Predestined to re-invention, these communication technologies bear a bundle of functions and services for a vast variety of applications (Wirth et al., 2008).

The world we live in today is one with an unprecedented abundance of media and unlimited opportunities for communication (Thierer, 2010). The impact of technological change on different realms of human life has been a topic of debate. It brings in both pessimists and optimists and applies when new modes of communication techniques emerge (Thierer, 2010). The future is promising for the technological media that will supersede the conventional forms of communication to which individuals have become accustomed.

Communication and the New Media

The World Forum of Communication Rights held in Geneva in 2003 defined communication as a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all human social organisation (cited in Raboy and Padovani, 2010: 157). In this social process, communication cannot be realised without the use of the new media. New media are tools that work along with the conventional means of face-to-face communication. They are omnipresent and are now an integral part of human life, taking up a major chunk of people's time and activity.¹ In numerous ways and means, the media that cover the latest construction of the new media attract a great deal of attention from different quarters.

The term 'new media', which was first used in the later half of the twentieth century, is a vague term for communication technologies that are not exclusively digital (Peters, 2009). New media are emerging communication and information technologies undergoing a process of 'contestation, negotiation and institutionalization' (Peters, 2009: 18).

¹ For US children, for instance, media use is the single most common activity for which more time is allocated with the exception of sleep (Roberts and Foehr, 2008).

The definition of new media avoids emphasis on the purely technical and formal. It has also been operationally defined in terms of those new media forms that emerge from the convergence of communications and traditional media (Pavlik, 2013). It is also pertinent, in the view of Pavlik (2013), to consider certain dimensions such as innovation, adoption and mobility to understand the role of new media in contemporary society. New media, as Marvin (1988) elaborates, include the use of new communications technology for both old and new purposes. New ways of using old technologies include all possibilities for the exchange of social realities. Despite definitional disagreements, scholars have generally considered that new media are those emerging new communication technologies that include the cellphone and the Internet (Doyle, 2008; Gane and Beer, 2008; Gershon and Bell, 2013; Lister et al., 2009; Marvin, 1988; Peters, 2009; Tomasello et al., 2010; Zhou, 2011).

The advancement in new media technology has been substantial if not phenomenal in communication media. When media are in their constant path of development, transformation and expansion, sociological studies that look at the multidimensional aspects of media in varying social and cultural settings are the natural consequence (Sooryamoorthy, 2008). Interest has been growing in how media affect communication and how people understand the uses of the media (Gershon and Bell, 2013). The new media drew both commercial and academic interests and concerns.

Looked at from different angles, perspectives and standpoints, interest in new media proliferated. These interests could be summarised as those relating to access, adoption, usage, patterns, digital divide, challenges, effects, impacts, consequences, growth, development, communication and networks. But even this list is not exhaustive. Many new areas of both academic and industrial values continue to surface rapidly. The emergent literature in this field is proof of the growth and the significance of the new media in varying social, economic and cultural contexts (Sooryamoorthy, 2015b).

The term ‘new media’ is extensive in its coverage, under which scores of themes are subsumed. However, serious interest has not been shown in certain crucial areas of media and communication that deserve intellectual engagement. Although telephony, one of the most prominent means of communication, has been in existence for more than a century, not a great deal of attention has been paid to the mediated

forms of social interaction (Rettie, 2009). Most of the studies available in the literature are concerned with the use and meaning of the cell-phone for specific population groups, namely, the young (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2007). But as Soukup (2000) encourages, it is worth considering the effects the new media have on society. For instance, how media – new and old – are facilitating or hindering the creation, maintenance and frequency of social contacts and networks has not received enough reflection and thought. From one end of the means of communication, namely, face-to-face, to the other end of online communication, the media have expanded the scope and options for widening and reinforcing social contacts. Until recently, contacts and networks were possible only through the time-consuming but not always easy means of face-to-face interaction or through no real-time means of communication mediated through the postal or snail mail.² Studies that looked into this dimension – the connection of the media, communication, social contact and networks – indicate that it will have beneficial applications. The benefits can be expected and derived not only for the industry, which is now investing and reaping millions of dollars in return from its communication products, but also for all those who are keen on communication studies. Current research in the area concedes that individuals employ multiple media, new and old, to maintain their personal contacts and networks, but the extent to which (and how) these media are used warrants further research (Boase, 2008). On the one hand, one needs to know about the ways multiple media are applied today; on the other hand, how is the media building contacts and networks?

The limitations in the studies of communication technologies are the lack of personal network measures (Boase, 2008). Boase (2008) explains this further. First, the existing research examines only the frequency or duration of contacts rather than examining the personal ties that were created using communication technologies. This constructs the boundary of the knowledge of additional communication made over landlines, cellphones and email. Second, the personal network measures that are currently employed in the literature are typically confined to contact with unspecified numbers of relationships in

² This will soon be history as many countries have taken steps to wind up the postal services. The next generation will only hear about this means of communication, which was wonderful and was the only means to contact people dispersed in distance, from their grandparents.

family and friendship circles. This does not help understand whether individuals have large and diverse or small and dense networks (Boase, 2008). This book seeks to address these limitations in the measurement of personal networks. First, the use of the technological means of communication (landline, cellphone and email) is examined along with the traditional means of face-to-face interaction. Second, the book explores the extent of the personal networks and the diversity of networks of the respondents established via all accessible media of communication.

The book presents a study that makes a modest contribution towards understanding media, communication and networks. It deals with both the traditional and the new media including face-to-face, telephone, postal mail, cellphone and email. Also under examination is how these are being employed to accomplish the communication needs and purposes of individuals. The way each of these media is beneficial to establish (or re-establish) contacts and their maintenance constitutes the central theme of this book. What is of interest in this empirical study is to learn how a cross-section of South Africans use the media for their communication needs, and to establish, re-establish or maintain their social relationships. The primary data used here reveals how the new media are working together with (or against) the traditional modes of communication for contacting their social relations.

Availability of Media

A complex set of media is now available for individuals to accept, adopt and deploy. Adopting new media does not entail that people uniformly seize all the new possibilities the media can offer (Horst and Miller, 2006). Application varies across the population. Technologies are quickly and easily adopted by the younger generation. Modern media and communication technologies are no exception to this normality. Telephony, fixed-landline or a mobile phone-based communication, is among the group of interpersonal mediated communication means in which the interactive person-to-person communication transcends the limitations and boundaries of time and space (Leung and Wei, 2000). Media use is believed to be under the conscious control of individuals and guided by their perceptions about the potential consequential benefits (Wei et al., 2014) that can be derived from such use. Media use produces a structural shift wherein social relationships are

constituted and reinforced (Morimoto and Friedland, 2011). The media therefore are a major player in one's contacts and relationships. Returning to Soukup (2000), the effects of the media on society are noteworthy. It is therefore appropriate to examine the effects of media use on the social networks of individuals from both the structural and locational points of view.

Media contacts can be accomplished by either mediated or non-mediated communications. Mediated and non-mediated connections have been distinguished as primary and secondary, respectively (Cerulo and Ruane, 1994, 1998, cited in Wei and Lo, 2006: 57). According to this classification, the direct and physical connections are primary relations, while the indirect, faceless and mediated connections are secondary. Mediated connections might precede or accompany non-mediated connections. Betteridge's (1997) ethnographical research on Whiddy islanders off the coast of southwest Ireland portrays this. Technology transformed their communication, social organisation and social life from non-mediated to mediated. The telephone played a greater role in reducing face-to-face communications of the islanders and also their social networks. With the installation of telephones on the island, the residents would no longer meet face-to-face on most days as previously – at community public places such as near the well or houses or meeting for story-telling, darts or card playing. Before the telephone came to the island, the islanders would meet almost daily, more frequently with the mainlanders, with relatives from England once a year, and from other places. This person-to-person interaction remained the basic means of their social contacts and networks until the telephone arrived on the island.

Fixed-land telephony ushered in mobile telephony (cellphony). Ever since the cellphone came into being in 1977 when the American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) introduced the first cellphone network for customers (Oneupweb, 2005, cited in Stump et al., 2008: 397), the technology has advanced at a breakneck pace, faster than many other technologies in human history. This new mobile incarnation in telephony made its own specific contribution to the social consequences of technology, communication and social networks. The social implications of the regular use of the cellphone involved the personal contact patterns, social networks and face-to-face meetings of the users (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2007). Evidence supports the fact that the cellphone is increasing the contacts of individuals and is

employed to develop relationships (e.g. Miyata et al., 2008). Examining the use of cellphone technology will help in understanding the way this new medium of communication intersects with and changes our social relations (Ling and Horst, 2011). It provides a unique opportunity to know how the medium of the cellphone is affecting the social world, creating a new social landscape (Humphreys, 2005).

Permeation of Society by Cellphones

Cellphone communication is not just for the youth. Admittedly, like other similar new technologies of this kind, youth constitute the major chunk of consumers of the technology. For this reason, the relations of youth to the media have been extensively analysed and understood (e.g. Drotner, 2000), but not as much for other age groups. The obvious fact is that the cellphone is equally visible in the hands of individuals of all ages. No society is an exception to this. In Japan, for example, the cellphone is common among all age groups, although the younger generation is marked by a higher volume of use and usage patterns than the rest of the population (Ito and Okabe, 2006). Embedded in the everyday life of individuals, the cellphone is like an appendage of the body, glued to the hands. Wristwatches are the only other thing that individuals across divisions wear. But the cellphone has made wristwatches (and cameras) redundant.

The sole other object that is normally held in individuals' hands in South Africa is a bunch of keys, which is possibly an indication of the crime and safety problems in the country. If you observe individuals while you are walking on the street or those in any workplace or at any public places where individuals converge for different reasons, you will see them holding a cellphone in their hands. It has become an ineluctable part of the body and person without which life is impossible in the modern world. The advantages of carrying a cellphone result from its capability of traversing distances, enabling real-time communication, portability to connect with contacts and the ability to reveal the identity of the caller (Weisskirch, 2009). South Africans know all this.

The combination of cellphone technology and the advancement of multimedia has altered the whole mediascape of the world (Westlund, 2010). The cellphone, according to Kopomaa (2002: 241), has not only adapted to the way individuals live but also redesigned the way they

choose to live. The use of any new medium or tool for communication has its own rationale. The technological function of a new tool, as Katz and Sugiyama (2006) argue, is not always the most important criterion for consideration for individuals to adopt it for their communication purposes, nor because it is expected to improve their communication needs and demands. The reasons for the deployment of a distinct medium therefore depend on many other factors. The personalised nature of the device, juxtaposed with the landline, makes it an easy and convenient tool for personal means of communication. The possession of a cellphone removes the barriers for any-time communication if the user prefers to accept calls – voice or video – from his/her contacts and others.

Martin Cooper, who made the first public cellphone call in 1973, could have never imagined the dramatic impact the device was to have in the lives of the people around the world (Sooryamoorthy, 2014).³ It is now not solely an instrument of communication but much more than that. The cellphone is like a Swiss army knife that integrates multiple functions into a single instrument (Aguado and Martínez, 2007).

Ever since 1987 when the cellphone handset was first introduced, the technology has advanced at an astounding rate. This occurred first in the developed nations including Nordic countries, and then gradually in other countries. The cellphone industry grew at an unprecedented rate transcending all predictions about its spread, adoption and use. However, in comparison to other communication technologies such as the Internet, research on the social implications of the technology has not been extensive (Rice and Katz, 2003).

The dependence on the new media and technologies was so heavy that it prompted scholars to study nomophobia, the fear that originates from the absence of mobile contact (Dixit et al., 2010).⁴ The loss of cellphones is sufficient to trigger panic and disruption (Srivastava, 2008). Negative feelings of loneliness, disconnection, anxiety and boredom are associated with individuals when they are without their cellphones (Hoffner et al., 2015). Citing a posting on Facebook, Evans-

³ The cellular mobile telephony was first tried on the Metroliner trains in Washington and New York in 1969 (Ling, 2008).

⁴ It is a state in which the person becomes nervous, affecting concentration in a no-network or when airtime or battery power to use the device has run out (Dixit et al., 2010).

Cowley (2010: 137) expresses this nervousness as follows: ‘On the very rare days that I forget my phone at home (or God forbid – it dies during the day), I feel completely lost . . . almost nervous and anxious.’ This is not an isolated incident. Similarly, one of the participants in my study said the following:

I think that I have become attached to my cellphone because as soon as I don’t have my cellphone, I think that there’s something missing. I’m basically, I’m paranoid about it, always making sure that I got it with me and you know, it is always charged and I always have some kind of access to it because I think if I didn’t have it, I wouldn’t be comfortable.

The impact and social consequences of the technology, needless to reiterate, are truly overwhelming.

The New Media and Everyday Use

It was a gloomy and clouded afternoon in March 2009 in Luleå, a major city in Sweden. I arrived there on a staff exchange programme at the Luleå University of Technology. Winter was withdrawing, very hesitantly. Roads were still covered with snow as were the vehicles parked on the road. On my second day in Luleå, my host Anita took me to the university to organise my work for the subsequent months. Meeting people, getting smart cards to access libraries and facilities, opening a bank account, subscribing to a cellphone connection, buying a bus pass and other essential errands made it hectic to squeeze everything into one single day. When Anita dropped me back at home around 7 p.m., my wife opened the door but her face looked so strange to me. She was panic stricken though I could see a streak of relief in her face. She was upset that I had not arrived home at the usual time of around 4 p.m. She felt so disconnected and helpless without a phone to contact me to know my whereabouts. She was worried because I was late getting home in a new country on the first day. The apartment we were renting had no landline. She knocked on the door of our next-door neighbour, who also could not get in touch with our host. But this gentleman consoled her saying that academics in Sweden work late into the day in their offices. A few hours of disconnection frustrate people because cellphones make contact possible at any time, which has become the norm.

I recall a few years back in another country where we lived. The cellphone was unheard of then. Even a fixed landline was not common in the city. It was fine if I came home late because the bus was behind schedule, or some other work had to be done on the way back. It never concerned my wife. No technology then allowed perpetual contact, to know where one was at any point in time. All my wife could do was make sure that I had left my workplace by phoning on the landline in the office. So much has changed since then, especially individuals' expectations. We are in an era when the landline has 'grown legs', as aptly described by Mirjam de Bruijn (2008). The cellphone has thus become one of the most widely used media for communication. Within the short span of its existence, it has turned out to be a most popular means of communication.

Although it was first developed and introduced in the United States, cellphone technology grew and expanded to other countries; consequently, the United States fell behind them in expanding technology (Robbins and Turner, 2002). Between 2005 and 2014, the number of cellphone subscriptions per every 100 inhabitants in the world grew approximately threefold, from 33.9 to 96.8 in 2015 (ITU, 2015). In 2014, the cellphone subscriptions at 6.915 billion (ITU, 2014a) were close to the number of people living on Earth (7.125 billion in 2013).⁵ This figure has now grown to 7.1 billion covering 95 per cent of the world population (ITU, 2015). This is one of the few and rare areas where the divide between the developed and the developing countries is narrow. In the developed countries, there were 121 cellphone subscriptions for every 100 inhabitants while there were 92 for the developing world (ITU, 2014a). The growth in the developing world was phenomenal (from 22.9 to 90.2 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants from 2005 to 2014).

Mobile technology is advancing in all directions, like a creature whose body parts are growing before it actually knows about it. The huge investments being made in this technology, including producing handsets or apps to work on them, relate to the enticing prospects for the returns. The world has not witnessed a similar technological development such as this in any other field in human history. In relation to the Internet, which requires other media such as the computer or the

⁵ As only estimated figures are available for 2015 (ITU, 2015), I use the actual 2014 figures.