

# Social Interaction and the New Media

## *The Construction of Communicative Contexts*

TERJE RASMUSSEN

New communication technologies set off new contexts for communication in very different ways from both print media and electronic mass media. In this essay, I shall compare different media with emphasis on the ways they assist in the construction of contexts of interaction. It investigates the relationships between media technologies, social interaction and forms of social context. I shall attempt to draw some ideal-typical lines between forms of communication and their corresponding contexts. The comparisons should be partly read here as hypothesis for further empirical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

In relation to media technologies, contexts pose several complicated questions. For instance, what is the 'context' when watching television or engaged in computer-mediated communication? How should we characterise communicative practices when material and communicative contexts overlap and blend into new ones? Such questions indicate how difficult it is to understand the communicative experiences of the modern individual with the wide range of modes of mediation at hand which reproduce and disintegrate the lifeworld. For clarification, we should distinguish a) between communication and body, or between meaning and place, which suggests different types of context, b) between distinct media technologies according to their contextualization abilities, and c) between types of communication. First, so as to specify the role of communication technologies in contextualization, I shall distinguish between a) *locale* as the bodily-material place of one or several communicating agents, b) *dual context* as the contextual relationship consisting of the present locale and a mediated 'there' in unidirectional interaction, (mediating what I shall call pseudo-communication), and c) *virtual context* emerging from 'absent' agents involved in communication.

With 'contextualization', I refer to the mediation of context – the ways communication technologies take part in the construction and reproduction of contexts of symbolic action. In contrasting the contextual significance of communication technologies with electronic (mass) media, I shall expose significant aspects of the dynamics of communication technologies in the contextual constitution of agency. Communication technologies do not 'decontextualise' communication (Feenberg, 1991:99), they *recontextualise* them.

### **Contextualization**

A significant question is the power of the communication technologies themselves, in their mediation of cultural discourse. This is critical in analysis of social context because communication technologies 'do something' to communication, qualitatively different from processes of talk and mass communication. With the introduction of communication technologies in everyday contexts, contexts as well as communication change.

Practices always takes place in *contexts* which provide *meaning* to them (Blumer, 1969). Contexts are more than simply backgrounds for everyday practices. This becomes more evident when bodies of interacting individuals no longer share the same locale. The context may no longer be tacitly understood in the same way. In a wide sense of the term, context may be 'politicised', since conflicting interpretations of context may emerge, or at least itself become an object of reflection. Through contextualization, places are defined as contexts by the agents, which subsequently 'suggests' the future elaboration of practice and context. I understand 'context' hermeneutically, as a place for interaction experienced as meaningful by the agents. Again, there is a duality at play. Just as something *becomes* a tool through the use of it, places become contexts through the prac-

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*Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Box 1093 Blindern, N-0317 Oslo*

tices that takes place in them, and in which they influence through their capacity as enduring, stable socio-material facts. Thus, there is not a fixed relationship between practices and rules of contexts. As Giddens comments with reference to Marx, people make their own geography as much as they make their own history (Giddens, 1984:363). Also the rules of contexts change. Every action is an objective fact and since they are not isolated incidences, they may signify an objective change of the situation. Contexts are settings of practice and constructed by social and material features. They are socially constructed landscapes where individuals act. Everyday life consists of innumerable contexts linked together by practices in time and space and so affect each other. In a sense, contexts can be considered as structure, since they provide different rules and resources for action and as they themselves are reproduced by the practices they mediate.

One of the most important features for the reproduction of contexts is social interaction through verbal interaction and other forms of communication. 'Talk' is the most important element for the reproduction of contexts. (Place-bound speech, the form of practice that reproduce family life, work life, leisure, etc.) Our strong concern for mediated communication should not lead us astray. New media-based interaction does not annihilate direct, linguistic day-to-day practices, but overlaps with them and becomes intertwined with them in the compartmentalised reproduction of everyday life. I would like to show this by discussing three different forms of context: locale, dual context and virtual context and the communication that mediates each of them and between them.

## Locales

Objects and physical environments are constantly incorporated and interpreted meaningfully in everyday life, and produce semantic evaluations in relation to and in contrast to external systems. Physical surroundings assist in the definition of temporal and spatial contexts for practices, for a sense of history, culture and tradition, and for sentiments of trust and security. All these dimensions that are related to meaning, knowledge and values, have materiality as one of their ontological pillars. This opens the possibility for an elaboration of agency to include materiality, and to locate it in a more dynamic position.

What Goffman calls 'setting', I shall, with Giddens, label 'locale' to underline the materiality of context: it refers to the physical place, the decor, furniture, etc. that is, the bodily, scenic part of context which tends, to use the words of Goffman, to 'stay

put' geographically (Goffman, 1959). With the term 'locale', I refer to the material and bodily aspect of contexts. Features of locales are routinely incorporated into how meanings are generated in social interaction. For instance, the physical character of the particular rooms in the home corresponds with different routines during the day. While the kitchen may suggest work, the living room suggests relaxation. The office table connotes different conduct than do the study or the kitchen table at home. Social and material conditions in contexts play a vital role in letting people appear as present for each other (in cafés, squares, etc.) and thus for agency in general. That materiality stands in a dual relationship to agency means that it cannot be excluded from the sociological considerations of motives, reflections and tools that agents apply and pursue. Locales are contexts of interaction generated through materiality used and interpreted by individuals and groups in the interaction process. Recurrent interaction in particular physical environments makes materiality more than merely a naked scene. The locale influences routines, rituals and other temporal (and substantial) aspects of conduct.

Daily routines take place in various locales – socio-material contexts – and can be charted as paths in time and space. Following Giddens and time geography, social interaction can be interpreted as the 'coupling' of paths (Giddens, 1979:205). Different levels of temporality and spatiality separate and connect individual and institutional praxis. Time is the dimension in which social activities repeat themselves and so construct continuity and co-ordination. Events, agents and institutions belong to different places in space and in different analytical levels of time (seconds, weeks, years, etc.).

## Communication and Pseudo Communication

Contextually, social and technological developments make it less relevant to study communication technologies without reference to other media. In a broader cultural framework, rigid distinctions between broadcasting and telecommunications are futile. Indeed, the introduction of the computer, the answering machine along with a wide range of technical changes of existing mass media makes it necessary to study telecommunications as part of a broader media repertoire. Although different media require different skills and types of attention, they mediate as a media matrix new and modified ways in which everyday life reorganises itself and its connection to the world at large.

Additionally, both the telephone, television and other media become potentially multi-functional, as they receive additional functions related to cable, satellite technology and to digital technology. New supporting equipment, such as answering recorders and the VCR create new similarities between the media, such as interactivity and a-synchronicity. According to Silverstone, the incorporation of a multiplicity of media technologies provides the basis for a domestic socio-technical system in the sense that social relations construct them and define their significance and patterns of use (Silverstone, 1991b:141; 1994). Together with other media like the radio and the fax, the television and the telephone constitute a transformed and tightly webbed media environment in the home.

Production and consumption of information involve the application of knowledge, resources and conventions which in part derive from the social and material context. To produce information means to draw upon a wide range of forms of experience and information. Interpretation of information is also both situated in a social context and 'in-forms' the very same context. Reception (tacit or reflexive) is a creative process in which meaning is valued and made sense of. This is the case both in bi-directional communication, such as in the telephone or videophone conversation, or in the reception of information from a database or in front of the television. Reception of symbolic forms in one shape or another, cannot take place without some *production* of meaning or *making* of sense. Agency means to relate utterances or symbols to other utterances and symbols appearing in other contexts, hence to draw upon extra-contextual meaning.

All media technologies participate in what John B. Thompson calls the 'symbolic reproduction of social context' (Thompson, 1990:153). In producing or receiving communication and information as well as mass produced symbolic forms, individuals are involved in the (re)constituting of meaning which participates in the reproduction and modification of contexts. This is also the case in a very literal sense, related to the organisation of the locale. The television changed the use and meaning of the living room, telecommuting and distance education will no doubt change the meaning of the household as a private sphere.

There are vital contextual differences between the reception/use of mass media and communication technologies. In contrast to communication technologies, mass communication settles a *break* between producers and receivers of information. One consequence of our electronically mediated culture is that oral and written modes of transmission have

been supplemented, and to some degree displaced, by modes of transmission based on uni-directional electronic media (Thompson, 1990:226). Due to the influence of television and other electronic mass media, much of the cultural forms in contemporary culture involve a one-directional flow.

Media technologies detach interaction from co-presence. Interaction is mediated between remote locales. They enable some form of interaction between people who do not share a common physical setting. One can be 'here' and 'there' simultaneously. One can follow sports events at the other side of the world through television while having dinner with the family, or having telephone conversations with distant relatives while also communicating with others in the same room. By storing messages or by eliminating temporal delay, media detach interaction from locales. Some modes, like the telephone, combine availability with simultaneity, while others, like computer-mediated communication combine availability with storing/retrievability.

Due to the combination of an occasional imagined personal style and the lack of possibility of feed-back, mass media, make possible what I call *pseudo-communication*, meaning that a) the media mediate information, b) that they enable communication and interaction among the producers and among the receivers separately, and c) that receivers enter into an 'imagined' communication process with the medium/message. The technical flow of information in and through the mode itself goes one way only. Bi-directionality can only be ensured by the supplement of another mode. Thus, the possibilities for response from the receivers to the senders are strictly limited. As communication technologies enable bi-directional communication (telephony) or interactivity (World Wide Web), they technically enable interaction through the medium itself between producers and receivers, with profound implications on their significance as such, in addition to the interaction within the locales which are connected. This also implies that the special features of pseudo-communication in for instance radio listening or watching television (mediating images of 'intimacy', 'personality' and a wide range of other conventions) are relatively absent in the new media.

The exposing of people and situations through mass media enhances pseudo-interaction or pseudo-communication with persons on the radio or on the screen (see Meyrowitz, 1986: 119), creating a kind of a 'pseudo-intimacy'. President Roosevelt's and Reagan's popularity, for instance, is often explained by the spurious intimacy and familiarity they capitalised on, the projection of character, through clever use of radio and television. The informality, appeal

and 'recognition effect' achieved through the medium reassured the listeners and viewers that they were almost personally updated. Also, popular talk-shows do not only signify talk among persons in the television-studio, but also the pseudo-talk between the host and the public in their homes. Pseudo-communication is, as Meyrowitz holds, a new form of interaction. It resembles both direct interaction and 'communication' through books, but it is neither (Meyrowitz, 1986:121). Here, Meyrowitz comes close to an essential distinction, and yet he continues to overlook this difference. Through the mass media, people become aware of others and their handling of events, but do not enter into discourse with them about how to handle those events. Public interaction is mediated one-directionally, through the mass media in addition to large organisations and markets. The mass media mediate a public sphere and with it, a sense of intimacy with the famous few, without mediating any form of communication directly. Through their regular, nightly appearances, television personalities are involved in a parallel 'reality' which interlock with our own in a strange way.

In so far as television creates solidarity and loyalty to specific social and cultural groups, it is not constructed out of social interaction among the members of the group. In order to become member of a political organisation, for instance, usually entails discussion with established members or leaders of that organisation. Once a member, membership means to get involved in policy processes through discussion. Television, on the other hand, informs and motivates. The communication involved does not take place in the medium: 'They [broadcast media] are in too large degree one-way means of communication: they reach people for the most part in spatially and socially dispersed, privatised settings. They provide an informational environment, but do not foster public discourse' (Calhoun, 1988:228). Or as Torsten Hågerstrand notes: 'Broadcasting opens channels for one-way traffic only. We are prevented from asking questions, except during token arrangements when tens are sampled from thousands' (Hågerstrand, 1986:19). This simple point is for a number of reasons overlooked in media theory. Unless one understands the difference between bi-directional communication and all forms of pseudo-communication, one cannot understand the development of the media and their construction of social contexts. Similarly, many policies and strategies in broadcasting can be understood from the indeterminacy that always stems from monological media (Ang, 1991).

In the use of communication technologies, reception of meaning is often impossible to distinguish from production. A telephone conversation only ma-

kes sense (for the participants and the researcher) as one, coherent communicative process. One characteristic of the majority of communication technologies is that they provide the technical possibility for two-way communication, as in interaction of co-presence. This means that a potential of feed-back to the producer is far greater than in mass communication. In fact, responsive action is in many cases as constitutive of the interaction as the initiator of the interaction. For instance, in telephone conversations one cannot distinguish between sender and receiver, only between initiator and responder. This differs from communication in for instance computer mailing lists, where the difference between active and passive, writers and readers is often striking (Rasmussen et. al., 1993c). And yet it makes sense to consider the mediation as one emerging flow of meaning, and so constituting a virtual relation. In contrast to mass communication, response is 'registered' by the sender, who also identifies the responder. In many cases (such as in telephone conversations), the agent *must* respond in some minimal way for the communication to continue. The 'response' is constitutive for communication. In addition to the liberating possibilities to 'talk back', this also means that the response must be mediated through the same medium. Hence, *while using electronic mass media is not constitutive for communication, applying many communication technologies is.*

Moreover, in contrast to mass communication, communication technology enables *focus and determinacy* in the communication process (see Thompson, 1990:220). Communication is not diffused to reach a general unidentified public, but is dedicated or directed towards more or less distinct individuals. This mode of communication preserves the specificity one finds in interaction in co-presence. Therefore, to a greater extent than in mass communication, the participants can monitor responses of the others and so react appropriately.

The technical fact of determinacy (as opposed to the indeterminacy of broadcasting) also has significance for disturbing constraints of transmission. For commercial television, for example, a conflict appears between ways of financing and technical structure. While symbolic forms are diffused to a general, undifferentiated and unidentified audience, the financing depends, among other factors, upon the size and segments of viewers. The medium itself cannot gather the information needed for pricing the commercials, and a number of other media and methods, such as ratings and survey panels, must intervene into this gap. Also, a number of conventions and formulas are used in the television production itself to increase and sustain a big audience (Ang, 1991).

For switched modes like the telephone, and to some degree computer-mediated communication and video conferencing, the medium itself identifies the particular users, the duration, the geographic span and the kind of use. Moreover, switching and computer electronics also automatically take care of the debiting of use. Due to its technical structure, which enables accurate billing *separate* from the mediation of communication, but still *integrated* into the technology, the commercial strings attached are located outside the (pseudo-) communication process, such as in marketing and commercials in other media. Thus, *while strategies and well-tried formulas to attract the public which in mass communication to a large extent lie in the structure of the symbolic form itself, communication technologies do not need to include such strategic and 'colonising' constraints into the information and communication processes.*

Other differences between communication and pseudo-communication appear when comparing television and the videophone. One of the most typical television genres, advertising, relies almost totally on the 'expressive' or 'poetic' rather than the 'communicative' aspect. The messages are rarely in an argumentative form which can be responded to in a discursive manner. The images and the words in advertising are not meant for discourse in that they cannot be proven true or false (Meyrowitz, 1986: 104). Social interaction, whether place-bound or mediated, can rarely continue without verbal dialogue oriented towards understanding. The telephone, the videophone, and to a lesser extent place-bound interaction rely on verbal interchange of meaning, which make statements predominant in television commercials impossible. However, this is not to say that the videophone conversation will not borrow conventions and styles from television. The talking head will no doubt reappear in the videophone, including an informal, moving, pseudo-personal form. Still, the imprecise and ambiguous presentation form of television, becomes significantly reduced on the videophone, due to the authority of the dialogue, which forces the communicating agents to be precise, and to direct their message to the other in a unambiguous way, and to be responsive to questions and comments, as in the place-bound and telephone-mediated conversation.

It is also worth noting that whereas the monological voice tend to drown in the flow of gestures, moving images and visual conventions, the dialogical voice may regain the power of words. *If expression, in terms of involvement, is stronger than the monologue, the mutual control of meaning in the dialogue is stronger than expression.* As in the tele-

phone, the 'emptiness' of the medium must be filled by both callers. In other words, in using the videophone, one possesses a smaller range of expressive cues to draw upon than in television. It is likely that the videophone can be localised somewhere 'between' television and the telephone conversation in this respect.

The ability of television to separate place from space is often exaggerated (see Meyrowitz, 1986: 115-125). The fact remains that television does not mediate real communication, and thus cannot eliminate the significance of place as can dialogical media. Although the public sees and hears persons and understands their utterances which take place far away, television cannot respond or affect their practices, hence communicate, with them. Also, the persons on television can neither see, hear nor communicate with anyone particular in the public. They may not even know whether anyone sees them. It is, in fact, necessary to remind about these trivial facts, since they are repeatedly ignored by media theorists in their eagerness to project the great social power of television (and to a lesser extent radio) to transform interaction in time and space. The monological character of television may explain a wide range of conventions, program genres etc. (Ang, 1991). They all have important significance for contextualization.

## Dual Contexts

Although an element of communication appears in both bi- (or multi-) directional interaction and uni-directional reception of information, true communication takes only place in bi-directional interaction, such as in a telephone conversation, in video-conferencing or computer-mediated communication. The distinction between regular communication through communication technologies, and pseudo-communication in and mass media, along with the features of the responder as constitutive of communication and of focus and determinacy, create different processes of contextualization. One-directional media technologies, which entail more or less degree of interactivity, involve reception (and sometimes production) of information. These modes, which entail 'pseudo-communication' establish what I call *dual* contexts.

The degree of involvement in communication that separates communication technologies from television and radio (and to some extent approach communication technologies with print media), has significance for their contextualization ability. Similar to print media, communication technologies web segments together. Whereas television to a large extent

transcends segments of age, gender, culture and so on, communication technologies link together individuals and groups that have an 'interest' in communicating or sharing information. They may use different languages and jargons and be based on different levels of technological competence, for instance to search for information in a database. Through unique user-identities and pass words, they control access to portions of information. Rather than undermining social segments, communication technologies restructure them in new ways. They may group people according to traditional boundaries. Compared to television (particularly broadcasting), communication technologies tend to separate children and adults and people with different kinds and levels of education, although not as much as printed media.

The boundaries may not follow traditional distinctions, however. Similarly to printed information, electronic information from databases, or in the form of communication through, telephones, video-phones, computer communication, videoconferencing etc. patterns of use may not coincide with class, gender, education and so on. Rather, the boundaries may follow professions, religion, kind rather than length of education, tastes and life styles and other segments with different hierarchies and conventions. Again, one difference between print media and communication technologies is that in the first case, the information is given. In the case of communication technologies, this does not have to be the case.

Another important distinction, however, relates to the span and size of the distribution of information. In the case of print media, the span differs greatly, from the local news paper in Western Norway, to the *Peoples Daily* in China. Much the same is the case for books, radio and television. However, in spite of this great variation, it is normally a lower limit for their circulation. Due to their technology, production process and financial basis, they are dependent on relatively large editions, hence reaching groups that may have relatively little more in common than their language and national history. They provide shared arenas, a public sphere for the larger regional or societal whole. Communication technologies often, with exceptions such as databases, mediate between relatively few individuals in the same process, normally people that are tied together in professional, personal or family bonds, individuals that have interests in other's affairs, or in one way or another involved with each others lives. Where it not for the mobility, the restless lifestyles and the high degree of virtuality of the new media, it would seem appropriate to compare this kind of communication and networking with the 'specialised others'. This difference in span inherent in the dialogical/monological

aspect of the media, I shall argue later, is central for the understanding of societal integration.

There are other contextual differences between communication technologies, electronic media and print media worth considering. Unlike books and newspapers, media technologies detach particular content from the physical form of the medium. To read a book or a newspaper, a new item, the exemplar, must be purchased each time. The medium and the message are inseparable. Electronic mass media on the other hand, have separated the medium from the content so that a television need only to be purchased once. Whereas access to a book only gives access to that particular book, a television set gives access to innumerable television programs. Communication technologies take this feature a step further. In spite of the wide variability of programs and genres to select in television, there is a limited set of information to select from. In the dialogical communication technologies such as the telephone, computer and video communication, the content are constructed by the agents in particular, evanescent contexts (where the communication is non-storable and non-retrievable). The openness of the agenda of the medium is therefore even greater than for television or radio. Once gathered and mastered, the object of the telephone or the computer gives 'access' to unlimited dialogical constellations. To purchase a newspaper means to accept that the content is predefined and unchangeable. To purchase a television set, however, means to accept certain given broadcasters/cable-companies as senders, but one may choose between different channels for a long time, without buying another television set. The home computer may be bought for a wide range of different purposes, without accepting a given information or established information producers, other than the software. The computer may be bought for the purpose of writing letters, but the purchase does not indicate the content of the letters. Furthermore, the computer may also be used for a wide range other purposes like games, calculation, graphics or computer communication. It resembles the genius of the chalk-board, the medium that can be used over and over again. We may therefore speak of three stages of the media – information relationship:

- a) the cemented relationship between information and medium in written and printed media,
- b) the detachment of information from the medium, still cemented to the information producer in electronic mass media, and
- c) the detachment of information from both medium and defined information producers in communication technologies.

This implies that the choice of media technologies, as well as their design or model, are less and less clearly defined and connected to potential use and content of the medium. Whereas the book (and to a far lesser degree television) anticipates the use and the content, communication technologies leave more space open for other influences. Hence, they are more *vulnerable* for social variables like the nature of the relationship one has with the people one communicates with, use in a particular locale, with one's change of life, career, family setting, etc. *Just as electronic mass media are more socially sensitive than printed media in terms of 'content' and the nature of use, communication technologies are even more socially sensitive than electronic mass media. The information and use are less determined by the medium.*

Symbolically, this means that the telephone and the computer do not represent a particular message or set of messages, as is the case with a particular issue of a newspaper or a book. Rather they represent a particular *mode*. Their symbolic authority lie less in their direct reference to particular information, than to the informational features of the technological mode. This ability to mediate content according to context and social condition, however, takes place at the expense of continuation and tradition as given. Whereas books, films (classics), and to some extent television focus on history and past events in news and fiction, communication technologies always carry only a short 'past'. The quick and flexible adaptation of communication technologies to the future relieve them from a symbolic past.

There are however contextual differences between electronic mass media and communication technologies that make the latter more similar to typed media. Books and newspapers must be interacted with relatively actively, through the turning of pages and the selecting of particular information. Television, on the other hand mediates a flow of images, text and sound which 'wash over the viewer', to use Meyrowitz's expression. Although one must turn the television set on, and select among channels, information is received without much concentration and effort: 'In a sense, people must go after the print messages, but electronic messages reach out and touch people' (Meyrowitz, 1986:84). With respect to activity and interactivity, communication technologies are similar to print media in that they require constant attention and effort, to keep the process of meaning-reproduction going. Just as in reading a book or a newspaper, this takes place in a double interaction, towards the medium and the content. To stay in the meaning-constituting process,

one must operate the medium through the *practical* turning of pages, and in the case of computer communication; turning the machine on, constantly sending and receiving messages and giving commands to the software. One must also direct *reflexive* attention to one's own thoughts, movements and words, in relation to the other's expressions of meaning, the content. Communicative actions *cannot* be carried out in dual contexts, only in locales and in virtual contexts.

## Virtual Contexts

That technology-mediated action is embedded in socio-historical contexts implies that there is a dual relationship between action and locale. The agent along with her intentions and practical knowledge informs and becomes informed by the immediate 'bodily' locale in which information and communication is valued, contested, produced and interpreted. However, when communication and information are retrieved or transferred in (extended) time and space, media technologies appear as what John B. Thompson calls 'modalities of cultural transmission'. This refers to conditions and apparatuses which are specially constructed and deployed for the exchange of symbolic forms, such as the telephone, computer-mediated communication, etc. and sub-forms of these (see Thompson, 1990:146).

Meyrowitz holds that 'changes in media in the past have always affected the relationship *among* people. They have affected the information that people *bring* to places and the information people *have* in places. But the relationship between place and social situation was still quite strong. Electronic media go one step further: They lead to a nearly total dissociation of physical place and social 'place'. When we communicate through telephone, radio, television or computer, where we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially' (Meyrowitz, 1986:115). Again, Meyrowitz tells us that we 'communicate' through radio and television in a similar way that we do through telephone and computer-mediated communication. This 'communication' through electronic mass media dissociates place from space, Meyrowitz holds, as if geographic mobility and accessibility is ensured similarly in the case of television and telephone. Alternatively, I hold that the nature of the interaction and the contexts that emerge from those interactions define *qualitatively* different social relationships.

In a telephone conversation two different bodily contexts influence the interaction. Compared to face-to-face interaction, the context is split into two

spatially distinct locales. The two contexts may in all ways be very different, which may influence and restrain the telephone call in various ways.

When communication technologies mediate communication and information, contexts also become extended. Contexts of encoding and decoding may come close to overlapping one another. Although the context of interaction may be separated by space and time into two different locales, they also become mediated by some mode of communication technology, which reunites them in a new way. Why a telephone conversation is at all possible, is that the two separated bodily contexts partly connect spatially (or in the case of computer-mediated communication; spatio-temporally), through mediated language. This reminds us that language, including non-verbal affinities is an important (but not the only) feature of the constitution and reproduction of contexts. Thus, the 'split' into two bodily contexts (locales) is in a peculiar sense compensated by the constitution of a communicative context: *Virtual contexts transcend the features of locales of the agents in favour of the mediation of meaning which merges them.*

A useful conception for the understanding of the difference between dual and virtual contexts, is Goffman's terms 'front stage' and 'back stage' which refer to different motivations and conventions of conduct (Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1986; Thompson, 1990). Precisely these concepts, which Meyrowitz uses in a way that *conceals* the vital difference between mass media and communication technologies, also reveal important *differences* between the two kinds. Goffman labels as 'front stage' that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. 'Front stage' is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during the performance (Goffman, 1959:32). It is the place where the performance or activity towards others is given. A 'back stage' is defined by Goffman as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course (Goffman, 1959:114). The back stage is the region of aspects of the activity, which is consciously suppressed in the front stage. In front stages, performers are in the presence of their 'audience', playing a particular social role or towards a relatively ideal conception of such a role (Meyrowitz, 1986: 28). In back stages, on the other hand, performers are sheltered from their audience and so behave differently, apparently more real or natural or relaxed, although backstage behaviour can be regarded as

playing roles as well (Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1986:30).

Goffman's metaphors of 'front stages', 'back stages' aptly illustrate how individuals change behaviour according to context and how both kinds complement and support each other in reproducing personal and social life. However, it needs to be emphasized more strongly than Goffman and Meyrowitz do, that everyday life consists of a wide range of stages of all shapes, *serving as back and front stages for each other in a mosaic of contexts*, varying in size, span, temporality, explicitness, level of activity and hierarchy, and so on. Hence, a back stage in a set of social relations may serve as a front stage in one or several others. Some of the stages or contexts are mediated, some are not. The range of media involved varies from the most general media of newspapers and television, to personal media like electronic mail, telephone and personal letter. Some of these contexts are motivated by special purposes and mediated by various communication technologies. Examples are electronic distance education, tele-commuting, tele-shopping, and so on. Moreover, most of the back and front contexts are more or less clustered together to larger entities with similar characteristics.

In the social organisation of bi- or multi-directional telecommunications such as telephone or computer-mediated communication, the primary interactive framework encompasses the front regions which consist of all participants-as-communicators. The front stages of interaction are more or less associated with the back stages which consist of the locales of the respective physical participants. However, in the use of many forms of the new media, the back stage is excluded from the primary framework, and from influencing directly on the mediated communication process. These features form a potentially virtual situation, consisting of the participants and their primary, front stages, communicatively detached from their back stages. When I enter into a telephone conversation, I 'detach' myself mentally from the locale and the people in it. As Meyrowitz notes, a telephone conversation brings two people closer together than they are to other people in their locales (Meyrowitz, 1986:38). A person engaged in a telephone conversation may isolate another person in the same room from the ongoing conversation almost as if there was a wall between them. The virtual context shapes the language and practices of involved agents. For instance, for a wide range of reasons, it will be impossible to maintain the performance of a telephone call when having a conversation through a videophone. Through the mutual relation-



ship between the agents and the medium, boundaries move and new segregation takes place. A new virtual context emerges, which means that the mutual definitions of the situation are likely to change.

In domestic electronic pseudo-communication, the interactional framework of the reception side does not establish a front stage separated from a secondary back stage in the same sense. Television directs itself to all individuals in the room, who do not separate themselves from the locale in the process. Therefore, television involves the locale stronger in the pseudo-communicative process. The contextualization is dual: one finds oneself reflexively *both* in the living room as locale and in a pseudo-communicative process with the events on the screen. In the case of mass communication, one cannot identify a similar gap between communication and locale. As noted in chapter three, communication technologies are tools more than objects, thus stronger connected to the locale of the agent than to the external world. Alternatively, in the case of television at least, one may distinguish between a), a locale (or front stage) particularly dedicated for reception of television and face-to-face interaction, such as the living room, and b), other peripheral locales (backstages like the kitchen or the sleeping room) which are physically severed from the mediated pseudo-communication. We may conclude that in contrast to electronic mass media, communication technologies separate locale and interaction as two relatively distinct and separated contexts. In this way, they not only influence the communicative process more directly, *they become an integrated part of it. As communication entails reflexivity, the technology itself becomes thematized as well.* The rise of virtual contexts implies that communication technologies and their mediation become exposed to view and subject to debate. Communication technologies not only enhance communication and reflexivity in general, they may also enhance 'technological awareness' (see Giddens et. al., 1994).

## Virtual Teams

Over time, the constitution of virtual contexts may tie agents into groups with certain features, which may resemble passing or more lasting 'in-groups' or 'teams' discussed in the sociology of Simmel, Goffman and others. Simmel discusses the ambiguous position of the stranger in confrontation with established groups (Simmel, 1971). Goffman similarly calls any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine for performance, *team*, for instance, how an interacting group establish an impression management in relations to others (Goff-

man, 1959:85; Meyrowitz, 1986:55). In computer conferencing for instance, conventions and discussions may emerge, which define clearer boundaries, in relation to others who are not participating, and which may, over time, create a feeling of internal belonging (Rasmussen et. al, 1993c).

The shared experience emerging from communication mediated by some communication technologies constitutes different forms and degrees of group cohesiveness in comparison with the outside world, which then may function as a back stage. The agent acquires membership in a team which, in alliance with the technology, constitutes a virtual context. The members share particular information or reach such information faster than others. Social bonds – personal or professional – emerge and reproduce themselves for a period of time.

Although these practices of distinguishing oneself from, or creating distance from others, draw upon various rules, their common feature is the principle of formal or informal *membership*; a mutual sharing and restricting of information, hence creating a flow of information among certain agents, outside the reach of others, through creating rules for membership, secrecy confidentiality, and so on. With respect to the principle of membership, new media use creates new possibilities to control access to information. A central feature of information services of various sorts, including databases, premium rate services and Videotex, is the simultaneous restricting, and the subsequent supply of formalised information, as a commodity. To direct information through a distinct communication technology, implies increased possibility to control the dissemination of information through technological access mechanisms such as pass-words and user identification. In bulletin board systems (BBS) and computer conferences for instance, certain identities are given access to a communication network – identities that for some personal or professional reason constitute a group of relevant knowledge for all involved. We could call this group a 'team of particular others'.

The creating of such boundaries transforms the context into a back stage for the members, separated from the front stage of the larger 'masses' and audiences they belong to. For instance, a communication network among the division managers within a firm, makes the manager group into a back stage for coordinating and consolidating positions, in relation to the other employers. In this case, a collective, common frontstage action towards the employees (for instance in a conflict over wages) requires a sheltered backstage for mutual 'rehearsal' of public appearance. The new territory of this team – or rather for their communication – is virtual, mediated by elec-

tronic networks. This implies that in contrast to teams in earlier days, communication and place are severed, and the participants no longer have to be located at the same place. The choice or availability of modes of mediation suggest power in presenting degrees of limits and discretion of information and communication. In contrast to mass media, communication technologies obey more effectively the interest in selection of audience and participating agents, hence the orchestrating of discretion and confidentiality. The effective targeting features of electronic mail for instance, make it a suitable media for immediate reaction on incidents in organisations, so that communication may be flexible enough to avoid and anticipate possible conflicts, etc. The back stage teams may be composed by more filtered, dedicated and more closely selected groups. The degree of closeness, however, depends on the particular mode of communication technology.

Another distinction throwing light on virtual teams versus the contextualization of electronic mass media, is the one between category and network (CATNET), elaborated by Harrison White (Calhoun, 1995:220). *Category* distinguishes out a group of people by their common features. It refers to boundaries which the individuals in a group have in common in contrast to the external world, whether geographic, cultural or otherwise. Category defines the basic conditions for membership in a certain group or movement. It characterises the similarities of the members in a group which distinguishes it from other groups. Cases in point are members of a local or national community, subcultures with some common characteristics, etc. *Networks* on the other hand, distinguish out a particular group of individuals among a social whole by the social relations *between* certain individuals. The network aspect refers to the density, durability and multiplicity of social ties irrespective of geography and place.

In order to see the features of different mediation processes and of mediated integration, we can connect this typology to media technologies. Television and radio establish cultural communities by exposing their common features to others. Mass media enhance social change by visualising living conditions, for certain social groups who then become defined as a *category*, like the poor, women, gays, members of a particular community, etc. Television in particular, visualises common characteristics of certain individuals and as such defines them or confirms the definition of them as a social group. Compared to the category-making of the mass media, communication technologies like telephony and computer-mediated communication mediate *networks*. A set of telephone calls or electronic mail sessions do not expose or demonstrate in public common features or

similar characteristics that would construct them socially as a group. Rather, they define groups through their actual mediating of social relationships. The characteristics of the group would appear through the variability, durability, regularity and density of the interaction. Somewhat crudely then, we may say that while the mass media mediate contexts as *categories*, communication technologies mediate contexts as *networks*.

## The Interplay Between Locale and Virtual Context

The phenomenon of virtual context, however, does not exclude the fact that the two or more locales involved may diverge radically from each other in various ways. This diversion may be of vital cultural significance. Contexts are always located in larger structures of class and other forms of differentiation. In specific situations agents draw upon different forms of capital to pursue their aims (Bourdieu, 1992; Thompson, 1990:148). They also draw upon them in practices like selecting means and objects to which other practices are connected. Certainly, to purchase a personal computer and a modem, for example, requires the financial possibility to do so. Of more recent importance is the fact that education leads to certain work positions in which home work or teleworking is possible and positively sanctioned. As prices of hardware, software and telecommunication traffic decrease, cultural capital of one's relational position into networks counts more. Historically, one may say that dual and virtual contexts are products of a modern development of a splitting of locales and re-embedding of their communicative intent in extended time-space. Virtual contexts are elements in the larger tendencies of differentiation and reunification that is said to be the crux of modernity (Giddens, 1990:18-19).

In relation to contextualization, this distanciation means that virtual contexts may have impact on locale-based social interaction. New media communication may provoke or change conduct on the parts involved which may have consequences for the nature of interaction at the locales where the communicating agents are situated. Often, the involvement in mediated communication may be followed by discursive elaboration among the members of the household or friends, fellow students, etc. The meanings of virtual contexts feed into locales and become topics for further discussion. Mediated communication between specific individuals may acquire additional audience of secondary participants in some form, both face-to-face and through mediated communication. Often, a telephone conversation starts off new conversations in the locale and

gives rise to further telephone conversations and thus generates both social interaction in one locale, as well as new virtual events. The influence is also reversal. The locales, even if they are relatively detached from the communication process, may constrain or in other ways modify the communication. For instance, a bureaucrat at work who receives a telephone call from her husband at home may feel inhibited from speaking naturally (intimate, private). This is to a large extent due to the different ideals of rationality and value which operate in bureaucracies versus in the private home.

In the virtual context of telephony, this may create tensions. In the private sphere of the household, there is a constant interplay between locale and the virtual context. Also, in the household, the intersection of the locale and the virtual contexts may cause disturbance and confusion. To be sure, a mutual relationship between technology-mediated action and locales does not entail a harmonious relationship. Locales are constructed in ways which may contradict mediated practices. This is evident in households where the children's on-line involvement in sub-cultural 'hacker' environments are in conflict with the parent's conceptions of child-rearing. Also, at some work-places private phone calls are negatively sanctioned. A third example is that to receive tele-marketing messages or requests concerning polls through the phone or telefax is often seen as invading or disturbing privacy. Similarly, television has for many years caused considerable domestic conflict, generational and otherwise. Other new functions like Caller-ID may also cause sudden changes of social interaction hitherto unknown (Dutton, 1992). Such conflicts are grounded in both cultural, economic and symbolic arguments. As new communication technologies enter the household, a number of disturbances may appear, suggesting that valuations of the domestic context will be affected by the extended function of the household as a social context for communication technologies as both communication modes and symbolic objects. As locale, it also becomes the locus of overlapping dual and virtual contexts.

Collisions between communication and locale are however negotiated in various ways. Through the localisation of terminals for instance, the use of new media is restricted to particular sub-locales, within the locale of the home. The telephone is placed where one can speak uninterrupted (from the 'back stage') and without being overheard. The computer is placed in the study, to isolate technology-mediated action from intra-domestic activities. Also, restrictions on the time and duration can be settled both to limit communication costs and to restrict technology-mediated action from intruding domestic

interaction. Thus, technology-mediated action may also be 'scheduled', as is electronic mass communication. Yet in this case, the scheduling is for the most part carried out according to domestic temporal and spatial rules and not according to system-schedules and definitions of 'prime-time', etc. Incoming telephone calls, are, if not controlled temporally (with for instance telephone answering machines), an intervention (so far, a relatively accepted) into the rhythms and routines of domestic life.

As argued above, the performance of agents engaged in a telephone call is different from having a conversation through a videophone. Through the mutual relationship between the agents and the new medium, boundaries move and new segregation takes place. On the one hand, the virtual context is strengthened by the use of videophones, since live images of the agents appear to both, in addition to the sound of their talk. On the other hand, however, images on a screen make the conversation partner more accessible to others in the same room. In addition, if sound is heard loud (as is an option of most videophone systems), the third person becomes ever more integrated into the virtual communication process. This means that the communicating agent loses some of the possibility to keep their back stage separate from the communicating partner. This loss of privacy entails that some of the ability of to play out front stage roles becomes handicapped. In short, the agent cannot differentiate clearly between front stage and back stage, which may hinder free, independent role performance. Put differently; the personality of the performer gets more involved and so, following Richard Sennet's argument, ruins the distance that conditions autonomous communication (Sennet, 1974:294-340). Naturally, the conversation partners as well as others in their mutual places/locales tend to modify their behaviour and their agenda of the conversation. In this case, the communication seems to become more 'public'.

To sustain privacy of communication, one may choose to turn off the image and reduce the volume, which of course also may serve as a clear signal towards others. The manipulation of image and volume may create an interplay and interweaving of frontstage and backstage performance, according to the nature and purpose of the communication process. In this case, the backstage transforms from a stable place of rehearsal and recuperation, to a flexible, manipulatable resource for front stage communication.

Another and less flexible way to solve this problem of 'privacy' is to place the videophone in a private 'booth' or in a room for itself, constituting a new, segregated communication locale within the larger domestic setting. In both cases, the boundary

between backstage and frontstage is kept, however in a less rigid fashion. The boundaries change according to the desired consistency between communication and context, on the part of the communicating agent. However unintended, this is likely to influence the communication in itself. For example, if one chooses to expand the backstage space at the expense of the frontstage, as an everyday rule, Meyrowitz suggests generally, the front stage conversation may become more formal (Meyrowitz, 1986:47). This is because the agent becomes adjusted to privacy and to a withdrawn position, and consequently less used to 'semi-public' exposure.

Also, the distinct separateness of locale and virtual context may enable communicating agents to simulate locales in their presentation of their self in the virtual context. One of the most central assumptions in Goffman (1959), is that when an individual appears before others, the individual will have a wide range of motives for trying to control their impression of the situation. The telephone and other communication technologies give improved possibilities to such control. One can pretend to be alone when one has company, or 'simulate' to be at a different place than one actually is. The distinct features of mediation allow the agents to control information or reformulate it in a more 'convenient' version. (A contrary tendency can be seen in the public use of cellular telephones, for instance at street corners or conference halls. Here, the deception works the other way round: the communication in the virtual context is intended to impress people in the locale.)

Access to information beyond particular locales means that one can enter into contact with persons of authority. In computer conferencing in graduate research education for instance, one may interact with leading figures in the discipline, perhaps easier than students at the same department as the professor. Just as the telephone made it possible for people in the periphery to reach national authorities, electronic communication changes established accessibility patterns. This, however, may certainly also create barriers to communication.

## Conclusion

Material conditions always enter into fields of practices in constraining and enabling ways and participate in the constitution and reproduction of *contexts of interaction*. Increasingly, encounters seem to be differentiated in space and time, to include rooms, buildings, cities or nations, nights, weeks and years. Locales, regardless of scale, may be coupled so that social interaction include both face-to-face encounters and interaction between actors of groups tempo-

rally or spatially distant. This is precisely what increasingly takes place, and casts doubt on conventional terms like 'context', 'place' and 'interaction'. To be sure, it forces us to recognise that the materiality is no longer merely external environments for interaction, but are embedded into it.

I have argued that communication technologies, unlike the mass media, *combine the situations of the production of the conversation, with the conversation itself*.

Unlike the space of print, radio and television, the virtual contexts of 'cyberspace' consist of heterogeneous, isolated, selective and distinct stages of meaning-constitution. While mass media enhance homogeneity, incapable of adapting to social life as demarcated stages and segments, communication technologies enhance heterogeneity and relatively closed communication environments. While the linear space of mass media ignore memberships in social groups, the significance of social status, etc., communication technologies enhance such criteria.

While both communication technologies and mass media dissociate space from place and so transcend the limits of locales, communication technologies do not blur differences between social groups to the same extent. Rather, they enforce existing identities like the private person or the professional, and they create new roles in stimulating specialised communication. For example, in frequent telephone contact with friends, one enforces one's identity as a member of a small network of people, as distinct to be a member of the larger audience or public. Also, various forms of computer communication give opportunities to engage in discussions and communities constructed through nothing else than common interests, stimulating a broader range of roles and communicative activities, including a broader variation in language, rituals, habits and competence.

In communication technologies such as the telephone, computer and video communication, the content is uniquely constructed by the agents in particular, evanescent contexts. The openness of the medium is greater than for television and radio, as the telephone or the computer gives 'access' to unlimited dialogical constellations once gathered and mastered. They provide 'talk', rather than well-defined agendas, and may in the long run adapt well to the structure of everyday interaction. In relation to the day-to-day reproduction of social context, the telephone for example, plays an important role because it is grounded in action and the regulative competence of conversations in *virtual co-presence*, beyond what is mediated by mass communication and interpersonal communication in the locale. Telephone use in everyday life extends and modifies contexts in space (and to some degree in time) without

necessarily involving more individuals than in direct interpersonal communication. The telephone may help to co-ordinate family life and allows for more mobility in daily life. It may also enable contact with other family members or friends outside the household, and in some sense including them in the

domestic atmosphere. While the telephone serves as an 'extension', of domestic contexts, however, it seems more significant that it increases the *density* and *frequency* of day-to-day personal networks. It not so much includes other people as much as reproduces established relations.

## Note

1. The observations on the telephone are in part drawn from Rasmussen (1989b; 1990a and 1991). Contextual differences between electronic mass media and communication technologies are discussed by Meyerowitz, (1986) and Thompson (1990). I elaborate further on these below.

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