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Marika Lüders

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# Conceptualizing personal media

MARIKA LÜDERS

## Abstract

The digitalization and personal use of media technologies have destabilized the traditional dichotomization between mass communication and interpersonal communication, and therefore between mass media and personal media (e.g. mobile phones, email, instant messenger, blogs and photo-sharing services). As private individuals use media technologies to create and share personal expressions through digital networks, previous characteristics of mass media as providers of generally accessible information are no longer accurate. This article may be situated within a medium-theoretical tradition, as it elucidates technical and social dimensions of personal media and revises the distinction between mass media and personal media. A two-dimensional model suggests locating personal media and mass media according to an interactional axis and an institutional/professional axis: personal media are de-institutionalized/de-professionalized and facilitate mediated interaction. The implementation of digital media technologies has important consequences for social networks and fits well within a theoretical discussion of the post-traditional self.

## Key words

CMC • communication theory • convergence • medium-theory • multimodality • personal media • social technologies

**The general aim of scholars within the** tradition of medium theory has been to elaborate on the social influences of media technologies (Meyrowitz, 1994). Through theoretical arguments and historical research, medium theorists have analysed societies in relation to the development of increasingly complex media. Scholars have taken a retrospective approach, with the advantage of hindsight, elaborating on the significance of new media (written language, the printing press, electronic media) to structural changes in society (Eisenstein, 1993; Innis, 1951; Kittler, 1999[1986]; McLuhan, 1997[1964]; Meyrowitz, 1986). In a comparable manner, this article aims to explain the main characteristics of personal media as opposed to mass media and to point out some social implications of the recent and ongoing development of digital personal media.

Tools for personal communication have seen a remarkable development with the digitalization of media technologies. As media for personal communication, these tools may be labelled 'personal media'. This is not an established and fixed term in academia, but related examples of use can be found: in 1977, Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg (2003[1977]) referred to 'personal dynamic media' to describe their quest to develop a portable Dynabook: a flexible and personal 'metamedium' in the form of a personal computer (PC) to be appropriated according to the specific needs of the user. The computer allowed users to view, edit and create various expressions: archiving different types of files, writing and editing texts, drawing or painting and experimenting with animations and music. The parallels with the way in which personal media are used three decades later are apparent. A significant function of the computer (either as a computer, mobile phone, digital camera or any other form of mini-computer) is to facilitate possibilities for individual expressions. In this article, personal media denotes the tools for interpersonal communication and personalized expression, for example, mobile phones, email, Instant Messenger, homepages, private weblogs (blogs), online profiles and photo-sharing sites. The article can be placed within a discourse associated with concepts such as 'architecture of participation', 'creative industries', 'collective intelligence' and 'participatory culture' (Hartley, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005), referring to active and creative media users and a media system characterized by increasingly complex relations between the media industry and users as consumers and citizens. The focus here is deliberately on personal media as a contrast with mass media, in order to develop a critical discussion of two endpoints on a scale.

The main analytical challenge emerges from the observation that the same technologies are used for personal as well as mass communication purposes. Emails are used not only as a private means of communication, but also sent as newsletters from institutions and corporations in a mass communication way. Other examples include commercial blogs (e.g. Boing Boing: <http://boingboing.net/>) in contrast with individualized uses of blogs. This interchanging use of the

same media forms for both interpersonal and mass communication brings us to the core problematic of this article: the development and use of digital media technologies have destabilized the traditional dichotomy between mass communication and (inter)personal communication (see Thayer, 1986[1979] for a discussion of how this dichotomy has never been perfect). Traditionally, mass communication is comprehended in contrast with interpersonal communication. Similarly, mass media may be comprehended in contrast to personal media, but as will become clear, the connection between types of communication and types of media is not perfect. With the digitalization of media, in certain cases the same media technologies are used for both mass media and private individual purposes. Regarding personal media, digitalization and networked structures change both key characteristics and the social significance of mediated interpersonal communication. Traditionally, letters were sent and telephone conversations took place among a limited group of associates, whereas newspapers and television shows were distributed to a heterogeneous mass of people. However, there has been a radical increase in the available means for mediated individual expression and the previous characteristics of mass media to a certain extent now also describe personal media, as individuals use media technologies to create and distribute photos, videos, music and texts through digital networks.

This article does not propose that distinctions between mass media and personal media are no longer pertinent. Personal media are distinguishable from mass media, if not always technically, then at least socially. The aim of this article is to elucidate important technical and social dimensions of the concept of personal media and to revise the distinction between personal media and mass media. What happens to our understanding of mass communication and interpersonal communication when mass media increasingly initiate personal communication with, or at least among, users and when private individuals potentially turn into mass communicators? First, in an attempt to clarify and conceptualize the changing dynamics of mediated communication, the relations between media, technology, genres and communication processes will be clarified. Second, personal media will be discussed as distinct from mass media. In this context, the most distinguishable feature of personal media, barring a few exceptions, is the required type of activity of all parts involved as actors in more or less symmetrical communication processes. Finally, the possible social implications of widespread use of personal communication media will be sketched. This final part of the article has two aims: to clarify further the characteristics of personal media and to indicate how a theoretical elaboration of the concept is important for empirical studies of the (arguably increasing) significance of mediated interaction and mediated personal creative expressions.

## TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA, GENRES AND COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

What are the conceptual relations between technology, media, genres and communication processes? What are media technologies, compared to communication media, communication technologies or technical media of communication? Is the internet a technology or a medium? As these concepts are used frequently in various ways, clarification of how they are applied in this article is required. This will help to explain how some digital mass media forms and digital personal media forms use the same technology, yet generally have different social functions.

### Technology/media/genres

The concept of media involves several analytical levels. John Thompson (1994) suggests differentiating between media *technologies* such as printing and particular media *products* such as books or newspapers. Considering personal media from Thompson's perspective, the telephone and the internet are media *technologies*, whereas Short Message Service (SMS, i.e. 'texting'), Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), telephone conversations, Instant Messenger, email, blogs and homepages are media *products*. This article suggests replacing the concept of media products with media *forms*. The latter concept is more dynamic and better encompasses the flexibility of digital media and is therefore an appropriate concept for different types of media. A logical and very important consequence of this differentiation is that the same media technology can facilitate both mass media forms and personal media forms: for example, the internet is the technological foundation of both commercial online magazines and personal homepages. Furthermore, this article employs Andrew Feenberg's (1999) theory of technology, which is based on a revised constructivist approach within a critical theory tradition. Inspired by Feenberg's arguments, it suggests a four-level model of how technologies, media forms and genres evolve within everyday contexts.

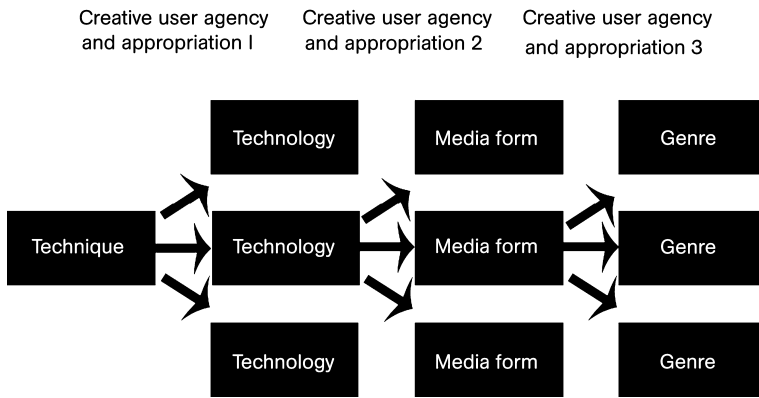
Technological development is situated within a social and political context. A theory of technology needs to recognize how technology engages with its objects, subjects and its environment and the various potentials for further developments of specific technologies. These are premises that oppose a deterministic belief in technological development as a unilinear process and the existence of autonomous technical imperatives on social development. Following these premises, Feenberg attempts to construct a hermeneutic theory of technology to expose its relational character. Technical devices are mediated within engineering, artistic, ethical, political and economic discourses, among others and hence technological devices concern more than their formal rational properties (Feenberg, 1999). Actual technologies cannot be defined from technical principles and are not destined to follow a code of rational control and efficiency. Any technology has to be comprehended as a whole and from its various elements such as its basic technique, technical code and the environment in

which it is used. Technical codes refer to how social values become internalized as part of technologies. The internalized values then seem invisible and appear as natural and indispensable. Consequently, a phenomenological approach has some explanatory strength in emphasizing how technologies in practice take on different meanings in different contexts. Here, Feenberg refers to Don Ihde's (2002) account of technology. Technologies display multi-stable possibilities and their designed intent rarely explains their ultimate functions and effects.

Actual user-situated knowledge is decisive in the development of technological alternatives. The technical elements inherent to technologies have consequences for their practice, but the final meaning of media technologies develops through their actual use and social functioning. This article suggests calling this the first order of user agency and appropriation according to environment. Including the level of technical elements or 'pure technique' in a model of technology, media forms and genres, is necessary in order to depart from instrumental approaches. Technical elements are not neutral, and there are limitations and potentials embedded at this level which to some extent influence the development of technology and, consequently, of media forms and media genres. We need to acknowledge the materiality of technology (Hutchby, 2001; Kittler, 1999[1986]; Poster, 2001) without losing sight of the discursive practices through which we understand it (Barnet, 2003).

Next, this article combines Feenberg and Thompson's theories in considering the second order of user agency of media technologies to media forms. It tentatively argues that the mobile phone and internet as media technologies are used to construct different media forms. Through creative use of media technologies, personal media forms such as blogs, SMS and email have developed with their own conventions as to how these forms are to be constructed. Technologies are more than their technical elements and media forms are more than their technology. Media forms are the result of the interrelations between media technologies and their function within our everyday lives. In a similar manner, the constitution of media genres represents a third order of social agency and appropriation. Media forms with near-naturalized, socially-implemented characteristics at this level constitute points of departure for more specific types of the same media form, that is, the development of different genres. The relationships between technical elements, technologies, media forms and genres are simplified in Figure 1.

The distinction between media forms and genres is comprehended more easily when applied in practice. For example, online newspapers are mass media forms comprising distinct genres such as features, editorial and news reportage. Similarly, personal media forms can be analysed according to genre characteristics. For example, private letters may be said to be their own genre and an offspring of various official letters (Eliassen, 2003). Telephone conversations correspond to different types or genres, such as private chat, business meetings or ordering takeaway food. Even SMS is of diverse types: for example, the commercial SMS



• Figure 1 Four-level model of the relations between technique, technology, media form and genre

service, the brief reminder and the intimate ‘I love you’ message. The internet as technology constitutes various media forms, which then are characterized further by different genres. Blogs clearly fall into various genres: personal diaries, academic, research, travel, campaigning or food, among many others.

With personal media, individual users are the developers of genre conventions. Consequently, exploring genre conventions of various personal media forms is more challenging than exploring mass media genres, because institutional and professional conventions are absent. This is not to imply that there exists a total genre-chaos of personally-mediated messages. Just as journalists are socialized into professions and genres, a similar socialization occurs with users of personal media, even if not in the same systematic way. Individual users learn to decode personal messages, partly because they recognize genres from their typical characteristics and conversely they learn what genre-conventions to follow when constructing messages of various kinds; in other words, our knowledge of genres help us to decode and recode messages appropriately. Moreover, knowledge of genre-conventions is important in order to understand how to interpret messages. As such, genres need to be socially and psychologically understood, as they help us to understand social aspects of communication processes (Anneberg Olesen and Halskov Jensen, 2003). Specific genres are used within specific situations and we interpret and understand texts according to our familiarity with these genres and actual situational characteristics. Our expectations as to what blogs, personal homepages and messages mediated via phone, email, discussions boards or Instant Messenger are, help to us decode their messages.

**Media/communication processes**

One of the challenging aspects of this article is to distinguish between mass media and personal media while elucidating that mass communication and interpersonal communication indeed may cross the borders between mass media

and personal media forms. Different media provide various premises for communication processes and mass communication is fundamentally different from interpersonal communication. However, there are differences between the communication environments facilitated by personal media forms: phone conversations, SMS and MMS; computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as Instant Messenger, chat and email; and media forms such as blogs and personal homepages are all different regarding synchronicity, interactions, requirements of multimodal literacy and the scope of the communication in time and space. Certain forms of personal media facilitate mass communication-like processes. As such, mass media and personal media are not perfectly congruent with mass communication and interpersonal communication.

Although communication environments differ between mass media and personal media and within mass media and personal media, a general model of communication portrays the essential points, independent of the type of mediation. Niklas Luhmann's (2000[1996]) model is useful as a theoretical depiction, with the advantage that it is independent of specific media forms. According to Luhmann, communication sequences are made possible by three necessary selections. First, 'Alter' selects meaningful information as actual from an endless, potential amount of themes. From this actual information Alter has to make a new selection to create an utterance that is disseminated further through some sort of (media) technology. However, the communication process is only factual as far as 'Ego', a receiver, makes their selection, constituting an understanding. If there is no Ego responding, there is no communication process. Luhmann's communication model is strictly systemic, emphasizing the communication process without really regarding the specific role of individual beings. Only communication communicates for Luhmann. His model of communication resonates with Stuart Hall's (1999[1973]) proposed model, in which the media user is strongly emphasized as active in producing meaning from the (mass-)mediated message.

Prior to the digitalization of personal media, people generally knew with whom they were communicating. They knew who would reconstruct an understanding from the communicated messages, whether communicated via phone or private letters. With blogs, private homepages, message boards and newsgroups, people are never sure who will constitute the Ego(s) who select an understanding from their utterances. This is arguably the most fundamental change which has occurred, and explains how personal media forms may take on mass communication characteristics. Popular private blogs may have a huge anonymous audience and are, as such, personal media with mass communication characteristics. In other cases, personally-mediated utterances may not be received by anyone at all, despite being publicly available online. Doubtless however, creators of homepages and blogs actually respond to and read their own utterances, re-reading previous thoughts and ideas and developing a somewhat different understanding; thus Alter simultaneously performs as Ego.



A vital function of writing is to enhance the capacity of reasoning by materializing thought and to oscillate between the roles of Alter and Ego in the process (Bolter, 2001). This corresponds with modern ideas concerning the reflexive and dynamic self and indicates that letters and diaries are relatives of current digital personal media.

### **WHERE DO PERSONAL MEDIA END AND MASS MEDIA BEGIN?**

Modern societies are characterized by an encompassing functionalization, differentiation and division of labour. The development of media technologies such as printing lays the ground for the differentiation of a mass media system which, in system-theoretical terms, constitute its own function-system (Luhmann, 2000[1996]). Function-systems are characterized by comprising their own expert knowledge, technology and professions (politics, economy, education and science are examples of other function-systems). However, whereas mass media comprise their own function-system, the internet works within all of society's social systems, increasing levels of self-reflection (Rasmussen, 2002).

Luhmann and Thompson's characteristics of mass media serve as appropriate points of departure when attempting to differentiate personal media and mass media. This section clarifies how their comprehensions of mass media are somewhat obsolete, and moreover modifies Thompson's categorization of types of interaction. The main point is that with the digitalization and widespread use of personal media, some characteristics that were previously applied to mass media are also pertinent descriptions of personal media. This further changes how interactions between communicants appear.

For Luhmann (2000[1996]), the term 'mass media' includes all institutions of society that make use of copying technologies to disseminate generally accessible communication. From this, he excludes personal communication such as telephone conversations, as communication here is not generally accessible. As Luhmann puts it, with mass media no interaction can take place between senders and receivers: 'Interaction is ruled out by the interposition of technology' (2000[1996]: 2).

Thompson's characterizations of mass communication are not too different from Luhmann's description of mass-mediated communication as generally accessible. Thompson defines mass media as having five typical characteristics:

- technical and institutional means of production and diffusion;
- the commodification of symbolic forms;
- a structured break between the production and the reception of symbolic forms;
- the extended availability of symbolic forms in space and time; and
- media products are available in principle to a plurality of recipients (Thompson, 1995).

These characteristics make interaction difficult, a point which both Luhmann and Thompson make explicit. Thompson does not claim that his depiction of mass-mediated communication is exclusive for mass media. Telephone conversations are not mass mediated or, following Luhmann, the produced content of telephone conversations is not generally accessible. However, the content is technically mediated, which extends the scope of conversations in space. With digitalization and networked structures, the communication facilitated by personal media has come to share even more strongly the traits previously typical only of communication facilitated by mass media. Generally accessible communication and social interaction are no longer incompatible. Privately produced content is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, yet the possibility of more or less symmetrical social interaction remains.

Distinctions between personal media and mass media may be outlined as differences in the types of involvement required from users. Personal communication media are more symmetrical and require users to perform actively as both receivers and producers of messages. Thus there are two levels in an explication of differences between personal media and mass media regarding communication processes: first, analysing the interactional roles that communicators take on; and second, considering users as *producers* of content or expressions. Personal media differ from mass media in both respects, but as this article will propose, certain differences are more like varying positions on a continuum.

### Interactional roles and network structures

Users interpret all messages, whether mediated face-to-face, via personal media or mass media, yet the interactional roles between the communicating parties differ according to the communicative environment. John Thompson's differentiation between types of interaction is enlightening as to how personal media conventionally have differed from mass media in this respect. Thompson distinguishes between three types of interaction: face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction and quasi-mediated interaction (Thompson, 1990, 1994, 1995). Typically, telephone and letters are tools used for mediated social interaction. With the development and appropriation of digital personal media, mediated social interaction has the potential to be near all-pervasive in our everyday life. With mass media, the interaction between the producers of media messages and their audiences is of another kind. Because of the asymmetric relations and the lacking degree of reciprocity between the producers and the unknown audience, Thompson adds 'quasi' to the form of interaction initiated by mass media.

The user-elasticity of computer and internet technology as the basis for both mass communication and interpersonal communication explains why there has been a certain blurring of boundaries between mass communication

and interpersonal communication. Hence this discussion can be placed within a discourse of convergence, accentuating how different media forms and communication processes are drawn together through digital technologies. Networked computers greatly increase the potential audience of personal media content and often personal media are used as a tool to enhance audience contact within mass media. Therefore, the internet or mobile phone cannot be said necessarily to facilitate symmetrically mediated social interaction and mass media cannot be equated absolutely with mediated quasi-interactions. This makes the types of interaction as elaborated by Thompson appear less instructive. The blurring of boundaries between types of interaction becomes urgent because of the blurring of boundaries between interpersonal communication and mass communication.

There are important differences between types of personal media: communication media such as SMS, Instant Messenger and email provide arenas for symmetrical interaction (when used within interpersonal relationships), whereas homepages and blogs sometimes evolve into more one-way communication processes. To take the most obvious example, some private blogs have such vast audiences that it seems more pertinent to describe the relationships between producer and readers as quasi-interaction. It appears that Thompson's categories of mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction do not cover the whole spectrum of possible types of interactions. One solution may be to understand Thompson's two categories of mediated and quasi-mediated communication as a continuum rather than two different situations. In most cases, personal media are closer to the mediated interaction pole, but an either/or categorization is too crude to cover the array of possible levels of interaction. Personal media differ from digital mass media, as the latter type facilitates asymmetrical interaction between producers and receivers of information.

Network theory illustrates the differences in interaction patterns from another perspective, focusing upon users as nodes in networks. Networks facilitated by personal media differ significantly from networks of mass media and their audience, but some aspects may have changed with the digitalization of media technologies and the increasing use of mass media as arenas for interpersonal interaction. In network theoretical terms, social organization (whether online or offline) is made up of networks of connected nodes. These nodes are linked to each other by weak and strong ties (Barabási, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). Personal communication takes place within and between networks made up of reciprocal interlinked nodes: one node communicating with one or several connected nodes. These ties may be weak or strong, where the strength of tie can be defined as a 'combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie' (Granovetter, 1973: 1361). As Caroline Haythornthwaite (2002) argues, strong ties are associated with complex patterns

of media use. Typically, closeness between friends is characterized by higher frequency of interaction and use of more media to communicate. The networks of mass communication are of a fundamentally different character to those facilitated by interpersonal communication: ties between the nodes of mass media institutions and their audiences are necessarily weak, if existing at all.

Nevertheless, with the increasing use of personal media within mass media, this depiction becomes more complicated: undoubtedly, participants in mass media blogs or in TV chat programmes<sup>1</sup> are interacting with each other. Thus a more thorough look at the nature and dynamic of ties is required. The existence of technical means of connectivity implies the emergence of latent ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). These ties are activated and turned into weak ties when some sort of social interaction occurs. Typically, latent tie structures are set up by someone beyond the individuals affected and may connect formerly unconnected others, so creating new weak ties (a blog section in an online newspaper is one example). Haythornthwaite's examples of latent tie structures are taken from her studies on using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and webboards in work and teaching environments. If and when these possibilities to communicate are lost (e.g. the blog section or course webboard are closed down), weakly-tied pairs will break. Conversely, strongly-tied pairs look for new and more media to communicate: hence the consequences of losing one arena for communication do not mean the end of the relationship. People may occasionally meet in latent tie structures, develop weak ties and decide to take their relationship to a deeper level. With strengthening ties, more media and more intimate media will be employed, that is, communication processes migrate to personal media arenas.

### Users as producers

Mass media content is made within institutionalized and professionalized structures, or, as previously stated; mass media constitute their own function-system. Private individuals create personal media content in non-institutionalized settings. Media production outside of institutional and professional structures is not new with the development of digital media. Chris Atton (2001) includes fanzines, social movement media, perzines (public journals of a person's life) and the personal webpage as examples of de-institutionalized and de-professionalized alternative media. For example, social movement media seek to be what mass media are not: egalitarian, participatory voices with close proximity to readers and activists. Atton maintains that personal webpages differ from other types of alternative media, as typically they are very mundane. Some users may have political agendas, but generally this cannot be said to comprise an important motivational factor.

Users now have the technical resources to create texts, photos, private radio shows (podcasting) and videos that are generally accessible to an unknown audience. The combination of the internet, PC and evolution of less expensive

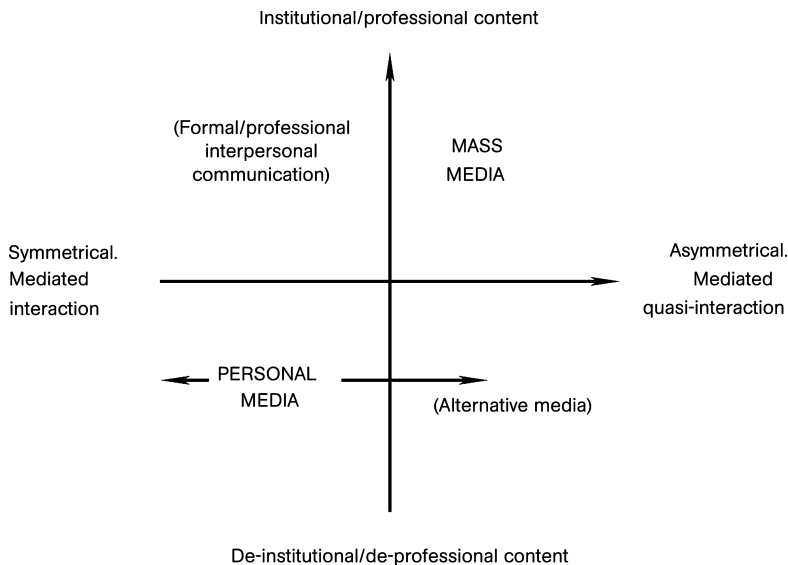
and more manageable media production tools give leeway for the amateur media producer. Lister et al. (2003) discuss the proximity of media production processes to citizens over the historical period of the late 20th century and illustrate that the process of media production has diffused itself within our everyday life. They advocate the buzzword 'prosumer' technologies to indicate the meeting of consumption and production technologies. The term was coined initially by Alvin Toffler (1980) as a combination of producer and consumer. Individuals with online access may publish multimedia content, potentially reaching out to a sizeable public. Amateurs produce and distribute music, videos, texts and photographs with the help of the right (and now affordable and manageable) equipment. 'Anyone' becomes qualified to be a media producer and is likely to have an audience to their productions. Examples are ample. The successes of photo-sharing services such as Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) and Deviantart ([www.deviantart.com](http://www.deviantart.com)) are only two cases that consolidate the thesis of the amateur media producer.

The importance of active and creative amateur users is stressed among key actors within the mass media industry, further complicating the distinction between personal media and mass media. The BBC invites the audience to share their stories, photos and videos as well as playing and creating with existing content. For public service broadcasters this can be understood as a strategy to increase their legitimate role, but the same tendencies are visible among commercial actors. In August 2006, CNN launched CNN Exchange (now CNN; Report) encouraging users to send in their news stories, pictures or videos. This can be perceived to be a response to the success stories of social software services such as YouTube (Bjørkeng, 2006; Sandoval, 2006), but involving the audience as participants is also a strategy which is seen to generate loyal users (Maasø et al., 2007). Regardless of the motivations and aims of the media industry, these tendencies have consequences for the social category of mass media users. Recognizing the audience as co-producers of meanings in mass communication processes became particularly important in media studies, with the substantial influence of the British cultural studies tradition and later reception studies (Hall, 1999[1973]; Morley, 1992; Williams, 1992[1974]). Yet, audiences are no longer recognized as merely co-producing media messages by interpreting their meaning; they take on an increasingly active role as producers of media messages in the first place. However, the institutional setting of the mass media influences how user-created content is filtered and screened for publishing.

What, then, is left of Luhmann and Thompson's definitions of mass media? Personal media now share features commonly associated only with mass media: their content can be generally accessible; content multiplies through copying technologies; there are structured breaks between the production and reception of symbolic forms; and the symbolic forms are available independent of the space and time of production and reception. However, some characteristics remain typical to mass media: they are institutionalized and professionalized; have

a formal structure; are asymmetrical with a break between producers and audiences, and thus characterized generally by quasi-interactive relations between producers and audiences. In Luhmannian terms, mass media comprise their own function-system within modern societies. Personal media are characterized by being private, non-institutional and more symmetrical than mass media. Personal media do not comprise their own function-system, but are used increasingly within different social systems. The relations between personal media and mass media are summarized in Figure 2.

Traditionally, participation by the public, in the form of readers' letters or radio and TV phone-ins, has been important for mass media institutions (McNair et al., 2002; Wincour, 2003). Still, TV chat programmes, the initiatives of BBC and CNN to encourage user participation and the increasing use of reader comments and audience discussions, are symptoms of mass media actors struggling to initiate more symmetrical relations towards their users. The effort to include the audience can be seen as a response to the success of the participatory web and the increased significance of individually and collaboratively produced content. Hence, the above model may be modified with an arrow indicating that mass media cannot be described as facilitating absolutely asymmetrical relations. Yet, even when the public is given a chance to participate in mass media contexts (and increasingly they are), the interactions between host or journalist and active members of the audience are situated within an institutional mass media setting, in which the audience *en masse* does not participate. The institutional setting and the mere scope of the mass-media audience restrict symmetrical interaction on a large scale. That said, the interactions taking place



• Figure 2 Two-axes model illustrating the relationship between personal media and mass media

between participants in, for example, mass media blogs or TV chat programmes, can have a symmetrical character and illustrate how interpersonal communication takes place within mass media formats.

The increasing possibilities for mediated communication and the general public to create and share expressions have social consequences, which will be elaborated briefly below. This discussion will clarify further the notion of personal media and indicate important research areas.

## PERSONAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The characteristics of personal media as interactional and overcoming distances in space and time suggest answers to how personal media technologies have social implications for individuals and society at large. However, trying to identify any profound transformative 'message' of personal media can be naive and unreliable (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004). Yet, Feenberg and Bakardjieva emphasize that there are important sociability aspects and questions concerning identity connected to the use of these media.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when individual users increasingly construct media messages, social discourses multiply and mass media institutions no longer reign as exclusive storytellers with audiences beyond immediate social and geographical borders. It is also essential to examine changing modes of literacy, as more people learn how to encode and decode multimodal media messages of various genres. The remainder of this article will sketch how identity, social relations, literacy and multiple discourses are significant areas to examine in order to understand fully personal media and the social implications of recent developments of personal media.

### Identity and social relations

Numerous conceptions of the self in post-traditional societies have been proposed, generally claiming that individuals practise and narrate their identity as reflexive and dynamic projects (Bauman and Vecchi, 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Hartley, 2005). Although the reflexive self is understood often in connection with modern, functionalized societies characterized by a decline of traditions and *a priori* individual roles, it is interesting that similar thoughts of the self can be found long before our time. Foucault (1997) relies on the Roman philosopher Seneca when he examines the importance of taking care of the self in Greco-Roman culture during the first two centuries of the empire.<sup>3</sup> Foucault's interpretation of Seneca's ideas of the self seem surprisingly applicable to personal media, although the context and the explicit purposes of self-writing are very different. Two thousand years ago, self-writing concerned ethical matters. Reading, writing, listening, training and meditation were all important personal exercises in order to transform truth into ethos (Foucault, 1997); that is, true discourses were to be transformed into character action as habitual customs. Today, the use of personal media to express the senses of the self appears to be closely related to an increased sense of

control, yet simultaneously the mediated subject is commonly perceived as open and honest and close to a 'true self' (e.g. Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; McKenna et al., 2002; Walther, 1996).

Most personal media forms mediate social relationships that are generally more symmetrical than the interactions mediated by mass media. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that people in post-traditional societies have a reflexive relation to their social networks as well as their identity. Relationships are constantly chosen, established, maintained and renewed and personal media are employed to establish and maintain social relations actively. Quantitative surveys can give some answers to the extent and scope of the use of personal media (e.g. Lenhart et al., 2005; Livingstone and Bober, 2005; Torgersen, 2004). However, qualitative studies have been (and are) necessary to obtain more in-depth knowledge on the use and significance of personal media in relation to social networks (e.g. Henderson and Gilding, 2004; Kendall, 2002; Oksman and Turtiainen, 2004).

### Literacy and multiple discourses

Historically, literacy, implying the ability to read and write, had significant implications for human consciousness (Goody, 1977; Havelock, 1986; Ong, 2002[1982]). Digital personal media require people to be multimodal-literate: handling a complex mix of audiovisual-textual media technologies, producing and deciphering meanings: 'language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message; language and literacy now have to be seen as partial bearers of meaning only' (Kress, 2003: 35). Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen define multimodality as 'the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined' (2001: 20). The multimodal character of various personal media clearly differs, but even simple Instant Messenger conversations integrate buddy icons, emoticons, winks, nudges and graphical environments. Not only do personal media require people to have multimodal skills as far as interpreting texts; producing expressions of various kinds requires knowledge of intricate and multimodal resources. Technical competence and the ability to work with multimodal creative expressions varies considerably between users and, as such, discussions concerning potential national and international digital divides also concern how relatively few have the linguistic, artistic, technological and economic resources to take a comprehensive and productive part in mediated discourses.

Nonetheless, there are significant consequences of a participatory turn within media systems. In modern societies, mass media alone have had the resources to reach out to a large audience with local, national and global news. With the increasing use of digital personal media, individuals and smaller groups have the potential to describe and publish their interpretations of the world. Hence



power relations are changing, and mass media institutions are no longer the only ones to produce messages for dissemination in public domains. To a large extent, private individuals may become important sources of information. The internet has proved to be a valuable tool politically and as an alternative (or only) source of viable information concerning countries with a severe lack of freedom of speech (Basuki, 1999; Froehling, 1999; Lüders, 2001).

Consequently, mass media actors no longer have a monopoly as mediators and constructors of factual and fictional reality but, as previously noted, are increasingly aware of the value of user-generated content within a mass media setting. Participating media users are seen as an essential part of the media future and the value of user-generated content as eyewitness accounts is acknowledged (such as with the London terrorist bombs in 2005 and the Israeli–Hezbollah war in 2006).

## CONCLUSION

### Implications for future research

This article has discussed the main technical and social characteristics of personal media as opposed to mass media. It applied a revised constructivist approach to technology, media and genres in order to account for the materiality of technologies as well as the social discourses within which technological developments are embedded. Next it questioned Luhmann's and Thompson's characteristics of mass media, arguing that these conceptions are outdated. Certain personal media forms share characteristics that Luhmann and Thompson argue are typical for mass media: most significantly copying technologies are used and there are structured breaks between the production and reception of messages, which imply that expressions are detached from a shared temporal and spatial presence. Instead, the differences between mass media and personal media were discussed according to different interactional roles and network structures and users as active producers of mediated (and generally accessible) content. Personal media combine generally accessible communication with possibilities for social interaction. The article suggested a model that situates personal media and mass media differently according to two axes. On the horizontal axis, personal media are more symmetrical, facilitating mediated interaction, whereas mass media are more asymmetrical. On the vertical axis, personal media are closer to the de-institutionalized or de-professionalized content pole, whereas mass media are closer to the institutional or professional pole.

Drawing specific conclusions about the individual and societal implications of evolving media technologies is challenging in a situation where new configurations of mediated relationships are materializing continuously. Whereas the point of departure for this article has been a crude distinction between personal media and mass media, the reality is certainly more complex, especially considering the emergence of social and collaborative media situated between

these endpoints. The proposed two-dimensional model suggests that critical empirical studies need to analyse the interactional roles of participants in order to explore the symmetricalness or asymmetricalness of communication practices (Lüders, 2007). Analyses of interactional structures within interpersonal, collaborative and mass mediated practices might modify and challenge the ideal-typical model proposed in this article.

Personal media are institutionally and structurally different from mass media, and consequently their functions are different. The emphasis on the implications of a changing mediascape for practices of self, social networking, literacy and available discourses point to the importance of analysing the societal significance of evolving media practices between the personal and the mass mediated. The institutional/professional axis in the proposed model and discussion of the social implications of evolving media practices indicate that empirical work needs to focus on aspects beyond patterns of interaction. The institutional setting of the mass media system stresses the importance of research which investigates aspects such as market mechanisms and strategies to adapt to a changing mediascape, as initiatives to increase audience participation hardly can be explained merely with reference to democratic aims to facilitate open and symmetrical dialogue. Furthermore, it is necessary to emphasize that the structural lack of symmetrical interaction in mass-mediated communication is not a sign of inferiority. Mass media have societal functions, which rely on processes of audience identification rather than interaction (Holmes, 2005). Their significance in relation to symbolic integrational processes in societies is important and perhaps made possible exactly because of the typical characteristics of mass communication as unidirectional and asymmetrical.

## Notes

- 1 TV chat programmes are broadcasted on Norwegian NRK2, TV-Norge and TV2 and are based on SMS and MMS messages from viewers, combined with varying elements such as coordination and commenting from TV hosts, music, polls and contests (Beyer et al., 2007).
- 2 David Silver (2000) claims that typical studies of cyberculture in the 1990s rested on the twin pillars of 'virtual communities' and 'online identities'. These are not outdated themes, but I will emphasize the importance of understanding the relationship between online and offline, i.e. the social context of mediated interaction.
- 3 Pierre Hadot has criticized Michel Foucault's interpretation of the Stoic's 'arts of existence' for downplaying the transcendent part of the self, 'whereby one rises to a higher psychic level, at which one encounters another kind of exteriorization, another relationship with "the exterior"' (Hadot, 2000[1995]: 378).

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MARIKA LÜDERS is a research scientist at SINTEF ICT in Oslo. Her research interests include the social and political uses and implications of technologies.

Address: SINTEF IKT, Fobkningsveien 1, 0373 Oslo, Norway. [email: [marika.luders@sintef.no](mailto:marika.luders@sintef.no)]