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Interactional Divergence Notwithstanding Technological Convergence

Media convergence has been heralded since the late 90's. Although there are now many artefacts that combine different communication channels, this paper argues that rather than convergence, these can create new hybrid communication formats, increasing, rather than reducing, interactional diversity.

The paper is based on ethnographic research with 32 UK mobile phone users, which included extended open-ended interviews, 24-hour communication diaries, text messages and respondents' mobile phone bills. The research explored respondents' perceptions of the interactional differences between communication channels. Although the study focused on the two main mobile phone channels, phone calls and text messages, it also included computer email, phone email, and instant messenger.

A key finding from the research is the diversity of interaction afforded by mediated communication channels. Interaction is not simply taken for granted and transparent, rather users are aware of the interactional affordances created by different communication channels and, on occasion, deliberately select a medium for its interactional characteristics. The research shows how the medium shapes the message; people will say things in a text message that they wouldn't say face-to-face or in a phone call. The path of a text message conversation, and its outcome in terms, for instance, of relationship development, are different from a mobile phone conversation.

The paper develops a theoretical framework of mediated interaction that relates the characteristics of communication channels to their interactional affordances. Ostensible convergence, for example of email with Blackberry phones, is not necessarily reductive, but can create additional diversity. This is because the interactional characteristics of communication are very sensitive, not only to the precise constraints and affordances of the communication artefact, but also to usage circumstances and norms. During 'convergence' the combination of different communication formats in an artefact may create hybrid forms of communication, with distinctive interactional affordances.

Dr. Ruth RETTIE is a senior lecturer at Kingston University, and an associate lecturer at the University of Surrey. Her research interests include mobile phones, social theory, science and technology studies and the internet. Her PhD thesis was based on mobile phone communication, and develops a theoretical framework for mediated interaction. Together with colleagues at the University of Surrey, she is currently working on an edited book on the reconfiguration of social theory. Her research has been published in many journals and in several disciplines, including sociology, human-computer interaction, and management. Prior to joining Kingston University, she spent twelve years as a brand manager for Unilever, General Foods, and Cadbury, and six years at Oxford University, studying philosophy.

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