

## Research in Brief

# Social and Linguistic Convergences in the Information Age<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *This article argues that the electronically mediated communication contributes to the construction of new, mediated forms of communities that are based on the synthesis of virtual and physical communities. The appearance of these new forms of communities leads to a new conceptualization of the relation between self and community. The aim of this article, on the one hand, is to show that with the mediatization of communities, our concept of community becomes more complex. On the other hand, in this essay I consider the assumption that the medium of the mediatization and new conceptualization of community is a specific, pictorial language of electronically mediated communication.*

**KEYWORDS** *Globalization; Electronic culture; Mediated communication; Networked individual; Pictorial language*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article soutient que la communication transmise électroniquement contribue à la construction de nouvelles communautés qui combinent le virtuel et le physique. Ces nouvelles communautés mènent à une conceptualisation différente du rapport entre l'individu et sa communauté. D'une part, cet article propose de montrer que la virtualisation rend plus complexe notre conception de ce qu'est une communauté. D'autre part, il examine l'idée que cette nouvelle communauté virtuelle entraîne, pour la communication transmise électroniquement, le développement d'un langage pictural spécifique.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Mondialisation; Culture électronique; Communication virtuelle; Individu en réseau; Langage pictural*

### Introduction

The concept of globalization is the fruit of the communications revolution of the twentieth century. In other words, this concept is rooted in the process of change that has resulted in an expansion of electronic communication culture, abolishing the dominance of print literacy. It seems that by using electronic technologies (e.g., radio, television, the Internet, and mobile telephony etc.) and the specific pictorial language of multimedia communication, we can increasingly eliminate the spatial and temporal

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bonds of the global exchange of information. By deploying new technological dimensions of communication, an opportunity presents itself to simultaneously follow various global processes and events.

In this new communication galaxy, the flow of information becomes quicker and continuous; the universally understandable iconic world, icon-based information, and multimedia-based know-how transfer play ongoing roles. The rules of this special iconic language, which supersedes cultural boundaries, will transform our different societies and cultures into a “global village,” to use Marshall McLuhan’s term (1962, 1964).

The new global-community-consciousness, growing out of the use of electronic media supported by the effects of the information economy, will accelerate the technologically and economically founded process of globalization. Gradually, we will become citizens of the McLuhanesque global village, and as such we can witness the birth of a new universal civilization. Global communication is the most important manifestation of this new civilization based on Western patterns.

The notion of a new kind of worldwide flow of information is the denotational base, which then determines the meaning of the term “globalization.” There are a large number of semantic layers, however, which have settled on this conceptual base. Although nowadays we use the word globalization to refer to phenomena created by the social sciences (e.g. the division of labour, integration, and international cooperation), beyond this, the notion of globalization is inseparably attached to our expectations regarding the effects of electronic media on the creation of the conditions for worldwide communication.

Though the real-time occurrence and proximity created by electronic media have not been followed by the reconciliation of certain cultures, especially not by the economic balancing of different regions of the world, the meaning of the word globalization still suggests our faith in the positive developments of global communication and in a knowledge-based social world model. This meaning is rooted in our belief that the worldwide flow of information creates a specific atmosphere of acceptance in which the characteristic approaches that divide nations and cultures do not prevail, but rather common problems, which are of concern to all of us move into focus. In this spirit, we feel ourselves to be members of a global community, the borders of which supersede the common human relationships defined and articulated by new, mediated forms of communities.

In this article, I consider the above assumption by investigating the impacts on our conceptualization of community by the use of electronic media. To clarify the nature of this new conceptualization, I take the hypothesis that the expansion of electronic communication has transformed our notion of the relation between place and community. With a greater proportion of our communicative acts taking place via electronic media, physical co-presence—the importance of co-located interpersonal relations—is diminishing, as determinants of the nature of human interactions.

It seems that in the space of electronic media, community should be understood as a mediated network of interactions between individuals who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the effective exchange of information through communicative actions. In other words, there is an interrelation between the criteria of community

and the global and local conditions for an effective method of information exchange. These global and local conditions transform our notions surrounding the structure of community life.

Electronically mediated communication, as an inherent part of life in today's world, contributes to the construction of new, mediated forms of communities based on the interaction or operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities. The appearance of these new forms of communities leads to the new conceptualization of the relationship between self and community. In the age of electronically mediated communication, the essence of community is a kind of networked individualism in which individuals can choose their own communities, rather than being involuntarily fitted into them with others. Therefore, the new mediated form of community implies an individual-centered existence and weaker social ties. New technologies foster communication links outside individuals' immediate social surroundings.

Accordingly, electronic communication creates a new context in which our notions of culture, community, society, and human interactions become more complex. These more complex notions can be regarded as the bases of the idea of global and local information communities, in which a person's communication attitudes are determined by their impression of their self as a permanently available individual whose communicative acts are embedded in a special network of communicative interactions.

The aim of this article is to show the basis and effects of this process by examining the following two propositions: 1) the expansion of electronically mediated communication leads to the appearance of new, mediated forms of communities; and, 2) the medium of the "mediatization" and new conceptualization of community is a specific, pictorial language of electronically mediated communication.

### **Toward a new conceptualization of community**

Our conceptualization of community, when transformed by the use of electronic media, is strongly embedded in the associative system of conceptual relations that represent the network of various communicative acts—the various situations of information exchange. With such a conceptualization, mediated community is conceived as a network of communicative interactions. I argue that the way of understanding the interactions between virtual and physical communities moves beyond the traditional sociological conceptualization of community-as-interpersonal and toward a conceptualization of mediated communities based on the interaction or the operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities.

Just as traditional theories regard community and society as distinct forms, it is also easy to consider physical and virtual communities as mutually exclusive forms of social organization. In this view, physical community can exist only by virtue of physical co-location in space and is based on people's natural association through sameness and residential solidarity. Virtual communities, created by electronically mediated communication, however, attempt to break some of the boundaries of geographic location, gender, and ethnicity established in physical communities. In other words, physical communities are based on shared social and physical boundaries, whereas virtual communities are based on shared social practices and interests.

Considering the influence of mediated communication on our conceptualization of community, many theorists believe that we need a synthesis of physical and virtual communities in order to truly inhabit our experiences. For example, Manuel Castells (2000) holds that we need a “bridge” between physical and virtual places in order to unify our experience, because virtual communities only deal in fragmented individuals when they are opposed to real life. Others, like Amitai Etzioni (2001) and Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, and David (2004), emphasize that the best communities are indeed the hybrids of physical and virtual communities. They see ideal communities as virtual communities enhancing physical ones. According to Katz et al. (2004), since electronically mediated communication becomes inherently part of real life in today’s world, “we need an operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities in order to have fulfilling, embodied experiences all of the time” (p. 362). In this view, in the age of electronically mediated communication, the dividing line between virtual and physical communities becomes increasingly indistinct. Therefore, as Mark Poster (2001) shows, mediated individuals imagine their virtual communities as real. That is, the role of communication as meaningful and value-based in virtual communities works to construct physical communities as well.

It is obvious that with this new synthesis of virtual and physical communities, electronically mediated communication contributes to a new construction of the self. The mediatization of communities leads to fractured and fragmented selves, because it opens up many other possible communities in which to participate. New communication technologies enable individuals to participate in ulterior systems of value, belief, and desires. As Kenneth J. Gergen (2003) notes:

New affective bonds are created outside one’s social surrounds. The result is that the centered sense of a bounded self slowly gives way to a ‘multiphrenia’ of partial and conflicted senses of self. Identity becomes fluid, shifting in a chameleon-like way from one social context to another (p. 111).

Thanks to these changes, the networked individual is attached to the place and position appointed by his (or her) own social ties less and less. Through his multi-channel communicative acts he can become acquainted with more and more communal forms, ways of life, traditions, and values in the light of which he can choose more deliberately from among competing local communities. This more deliberate choice becomes a part of the increasingly complex and multi-layered identity of the networked individual. As Joshua Meyrowitz (2005) writes on the multiple, multi-layered, fluid, and endlessly adjustable senses of the media-networked individuals’ identities:

Rather than needing to choose between local, place-defined identities and more distant ones, we can have them all, not just in rapid sequence but in overlapping experiences. We can attend a local zoning board meeting, embodying the role of local concerned citizen, as we cruise the internet on a wireless-enabled laptop enacting other, non-local identities. (p. 28)

New localities are in the making, which are particular in many ways and yet are also influenced by global processes and global consciousness. Thus, new local commu-

nities organized in the space of electronic communication, on the one hand, strengthen local attachments and local identity, and on the other, can be regarded as integrated elements of virtual communities created by global information exchange. Consequently, the global virtual community serves as a kind of comparison background for local communities organized in the age of electronic media. With globalized communication space, electronic media give networked individuals external perspectives from which to judge and define their own local communities. In other words, the twentieth century expansion of electronic communication technologies, as Meyrowitz (2005) writes, “[has] placed an interconnected global matrix over local experience” (p. 23).

The networked individual determines the characteristics of his own local community in the light of information acquired in the global communication space. The global perspective created by electronic communication has transformed not only community definitions, but also individuals’ relations to social rules. In the space of electronic communication, there is a new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the national institutions of political and cultural domination, as a consequence of new global perspectives.

One of the most characteristic features of the virtual space of electronic communication is that it lacks the compulsory categorization system and the classificatory forms and norms of a print society. In the media-networked global and local communities, it is difficult to maintain several traditional categorical distinctions that characterized print societies. That is, as electronic communication technologies expand, the dividing line between several political and social categories becomes increasingly indistinct.

The age of electronic communication is the age of opening categorical and classification boundaries. In this new space of communication, the traditional distinctions between private and public, between childhood and adult experiences, and between male and female spheres, collapse and disappear. In the age of electronic media, as Meyrowitz (2005) suggests, we are experiencing “both macro-level homogenization of identities and micro-level fragmentation of them” (p. 29).

A new virtual social space is in the making, which strengthens the cohesion of competing local communities and in which, therefore, the influence of traditional social and political institutes declines. The new communication situations created by the use of electronic technologies foster greater emotional attachments to the local communities that we choose from among competing communities deliberately without social and political restrictions.

In this new social space, there is a fundamentally new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the conceptualization of the relation between local communities and traditional political institutions. Thanks to these changes, the networked individual is attached to the place and position appointed by his own social class less and less. Through his multi-channel communicative acts he can become acquainted with more and more communal forms, ways of life, traditions, and values, in the light of which he can choose more deliberately from among the competing local communities. This more deliberate choice becomes a part of the increasingly complex and multi-layered identity of the networked individual.

By using electronic communication technologies, a networked individual becomes part of a network of interactions between humans who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the effective exchange of information. In other words, media-networked individuals become members of a virtual community that is determined both by the global and the local conditions for an effective method of information exchange.

Regarding the conceptualization of this new virtual community, Nicola Green (2003), for example, argues for a new view of community in which the significance of locality and interpersonality recedes to the benefit of symbolic processes. As Green (2003) points out:

As is the case with internet and 'virtual' communities then, understandings of mobile 'communities' should move beyond the conceptualisation of 'communities-as-interest-groups' (secured via the authentication of the embodied liberal individual and their 'right to privacy'), and indeed beyond a traditional sociological conceptualisation of 'communities-as-interpersonal-and-co-located' (secured via relations based on face-to-face interaction in kinship or social commonality). (p. 55)

This new conceptualization moves beyond the traditional definition of community, according to which, as Green (2003) writes,

[Community] as an ideal type of relation corresponding to 'natural will', is distinguished by an appeal to a totality of cultural history in the collective memory of tradition, is defined through common property, family, custom and fellowship, and is bound by consensus, language and ritual. (p. 53)

The basis of this conceptualization is a complex system of associative conceptual relations that includes our concept of community and integrates the conceptual representations of human interactions that determine the life of community both in a direct and indirect way. The medium of the new conceptualization is a specific pictorial language, the semantic structure of which offers new opportunities to grasp and understand the complex concept of community.

### **Linguistic convergences in the age of mediated communities**

One of the most important criteria of the new, more deliberate attachment to the local culture, is the deliberate application of the ways of usage that create new local communities in the age of electronic communication. These new ways of usage are rooted in the communication language of electronic media, which can be regarded as a result of the convergence of oral and written communication. Thus, we consider the new linguistic culture of electronic communication as one of the most important conditions of the conceptual and social convergences experienced in the space of electronic media. It seems that this new linguistic culture is the basis of both the global perspective created by electronic communication and the cohesion of new, mediated communities that are strengthened by the deliberate choices made by networked individuals.

In this new linguistic culture, the original social function of language, namely, the building and maintaining of cohesion within human communities, becomes an important development. This is because in print societies, language has moved away from its original function as a consequence of the appearance of oral-literal bilingual-

ism and linguistic asymmetry (rooted in the social dominance of the standard dialect of literacy). That is, instead of strengthening community cohesion, bilingualism and asymmetry disintegrate primary human communities, since the use of local dialects is overtly stigmatized in contrast to a socially preferred standard dialect of literacy. The communication culture that forces a whole society and all communities within it to use a preferred language variety goes against the biological need of belonging to a primary community.

The original social function of language, however, has survived this linguistic asymmetry developed in print societies. People hold on to their everyday use of language, even if they judge their own dialectal varieties incorrect under the pressure of the overt prestige of the “standard.” Since the members of small local communities generally communicate with one another orally, the linguistic conventions characterizing these communities have survived in the age of standard linguistic varieties too. In these small local communities, the importance of cohesion-strengthening local values outstrip the significance of the external social values that are symbolized by the standard forms of written communication. This phenomenon is experienced especially in small, isolated rural and suburban communities where the prestige of the non-standard variety of usage can be regarded, at the same time, as a symbol of communal identity.

In the space of electronic communication, the literacy that generated the asymmetry of linguistic norms of oral and written communication seems to be losing its power. Meanwhile the prestige of the identity-strengthening ways of usage characterizing small communities and groups grows. The expansion of the non-standard varieties of language preferred by networked individuals is accelerated by the use of electronic media (e.g., internet, mobile telephones, etc.). This process leading to the decline of the prestige of literacy is accelerated by the convergence of oral and written communication technologies, which affect usage since the new kind of orality created by the use of radio and television or, especially, use of multimedia messaging, the synchronous-complementary transmission of speech, text, and pictures in the space of mobile and internet communication.

There are well-perceptible, concrete signs of this convergence of the features of oral and written usage. Let us consider texts that are mediated by the Internet or mobile telephone. The texts of many email and SMS messages actually belong to the domain of speech and not to the domain of written texts. The grammatical and stylistic characteristics of these messages can be regarded as the marks of a special kind of oral communication (e.g., simple, addictive grammar). These grammatical and stylistic elements, however, are integrated into texts mediated by new communication technologies more deliberately than into oral utterances. By using these elements, the utterer intends to show that he wishes to accept and apply the norms and rules of a linguistic community organized by email and SMS communication. That is to say, he uses these grammatical and stylistic elements to make it unambiguous that he is attached to a community accepting some forms of usage, and that this attachment is a consequence of a deliberate choice.

The linguistic forms accepted in this way have a strong impact on everyday use of language. The use of the special linguistic forms of texts mediated by new com-

munication technologies leaves its mark on written communication and leads to the convergence of orality and literacy. What can be regarded as an outcome of this process, then, is the increasingly indistinct dividing line between linguistic characteristics of oral and written communication. A new communication language is in the making, which integrates forms of language used in oral utterances and in written texts.

The appearance of the new language of communication can be regarded as a consequence of networked individuals' deliberate choice to join in the global information exchange and to express conceptual relations and emotions as a member of a small community by using new linguistic forms. One of the most characteristic features of this culture is that the advent of multimedia communication has resulted in a strong interaction between picture and language in the process of oral and written messaging. Thanks to the appearance of this specific, pictorial language, the process of convergence and synthesis of the linguistic features of oral and written forms of communication is accelerated.

As multimedia technology expands, the dividing line between the linguistic characteristics of oral and written communication becomes increasingly indistinct. This means that though the syntactic features and structure of this new language of communication remind us of the linguistic world of oral communication, the new language seems to be more complex in terms of its semantic characteristics.

This new communication culture is referred to as "secondary orality" by Walter J. Ong (1982) in his classic work, *Orality and Literacy*. Accordingly, the new kind of orality is not succeeded by, but rather completes, the cultures of literacy. As Ong (1982) writes:

[W]ith telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of 'secondary orality'. This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment and even its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well. (pp. 135-136)

Accordingly, the multimedia integration of verbal and pictorial elements, or the convergence of the linguistic features of oral and written communication, contributes to the transformation of the structure of the mind and content of thought by establishing a new communication culture—"a more deliberate and self-conscious" kind of orality (Ong, 1982).

Consequently, by using the term "pictorial language," I am referring not only to the integration of verbal and pictorial components of information exchange, but to the linguistic medium of the specific synthesis of the features of conceptual and pictorial thought. The pictorial character of the language of electronically mediated communication is rooted in the fact that this language includes expressions that refer to complex conceptual relations that have no conceptual analysis. In other words, a new metaphorical language is in the making, the function of which is to "show" the world rather than to analyze it.

By using this language, we want to “make perceptible” the complexity of conceptual relations to which we refer. The main intention is to embed some conceptual relations in the system of more complex conceptual representations by using words that are suitable for making the complexity of newly-revealed conceptual relations intelligible.

On the one hand, this kind of usage leads to the appearance of new terms in language, while on the other hand it leads to the novel use of available linguistic elements. In the latter process, the meanings of some words multiply with more and more conceptual relations. This is why the usage of the word “community” entails the intention of understanding the overall or global criteria of the term in the age of electronic media. These criteria can be attributed to the specific features of communicative space, which has been globalized by television, the Internet, and mobile telephones. In other words, there is an inner relation between these criteria and the global conditions for an effective method of information exchange. These global conditions (i.e., a common information basis, collective trust relations, etc.) transform our notions surrounding the structure and life of community.

Focusing on the interrelation between the new conceptualization of the criteria of community and our notions regarding the global conditions for an effective method of information exchange, we can suggest, for example, the following definition of “community”: a network of interactions between individuals who uniformly accept and apply some rules for communication, with the aim of effectively exchanging information.

Of course, our complex notion of community urges us to form many other definitions. It is obvious that these definitions approach the community-organizing role of information in a different way. They have, however, one thing in common: they all must be based on the analysis of conceptual and linguistic changes that transform the structure of our minds in the mediated communities of the electronic era. This is because these linguistic changes can be regarded as bases for the mediatization of communities and for adopting the idea of a global, community-building language in the new media space. But what kind of language would best serve as a global language in the network of mediated communities? Amitai Etzioni (2008), for example, argues for adopting English as a shared, secondary global language in the information age. As Etzioni (2008) points out, “a key element of building a global community atop local communities requires that the various nations involved choose the same second language” (p. 124). This second language, of course, does not replace the particularistic identity, constituting primary languages of local and national communities; rather, it is best considered as an additional language. Nevertheless, an opposition can be experienced to adopting such an additional language in many nations. According to Etzioni (2008), “this opposition often conflates preventing English penetration into the primary language with resisting it as second language” (p. 124). Whereas this opposition, as Etzioni (2008) writes, “delays overcoming the ‘babel’ effects at great cost to the transparency of global laws, the promotion of shared understandings, and the efficiency of economic transactions” (p. 124).

In my view, as a global process, the appearance of pictorial characteristics of primary communal languages can contribute to the adoption of an additional global language,

because this process, as we have seen, creates the foundations of the convergences of different usages and languages. The global expansion of the pictorial language of electronic communication can be regarded as the basis of the idea of a global information community in which the communication attitudes of a person are determined by his impression of his self as a permanently available person whose communicative acts are embedded in a global information net. In other words, it is by accelerating and mediating linguistic changes leading to a complex notion of global community that electronically mediated communication becomes a source of, as Meyrowitz (2005) writes, the “fusion of local and global identities” (p. 30) and, thus, the adoption of the idea of a secondary global language in new, mediated communities.

## Conclusions

This essay holds that a new world of communication is in the making. The global linguistic changes traceable to the use of electronic communications technologies lead to a linguistic galaxy, which can contribute to the development of a higher level of human cohesion. Through the appearance of this linguistic galaxy, a new, mediated kind of community comes into existence which can offer a solution to the balance of power between the dual system of globalization and localization and also to the fragmentation and segmentation of the globalizing world. In other words, with the worldwide expansion of the new communication culture, a global-community-consciousness can be born that could arrange the values of the global and local worlds into a harmonic unified whole.

## Note

1. An earlier version of this article (“Mediated Communities in the Age of Electronic Communication”) appeared in the Hungarian journal *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry*, 1(1), 46–53. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17646/KOME.2012.15>.

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