Been There, Done That
Communication, Meta-Communication and Presence

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Abstract

Digital media have been defined as meta-media that integrate new as well as old media on a single technological platform. As such, digital media enable new forms of meta-communication about the conditions under which communication is accomplished. The resulting meta-data bear witness to who was present, when, where and doing what, and these meta-data remain present for system administrators, regulators, marketers and other third parties to reinterpret and recycle. This article outlines the importance of meta-communication for contemporary communication theory, examines mediated presence as an instance of meta-communication, and addresses the implications of digitally mediated presence for current issues of surveillance.

Keywords: communication theory, meta-communication, meta-media, presence, surveillance

Being here, being there

In the oral version of this keynote, I began by suggesting that everybody in the audience felt present then and there. In reading this print version, different audiences will experience different senses of presence: having been there at the conference, or compensating for their absence through a (digitised) print medium, but in each and every instance being present to themselves in and through the act of reading. As suggested by Joshua Meyrowitz (1989: 326), "All experience is local (…) We are always in place, and place is always with us." As biological and historical entities, we cannot *not* be present. But print, digital, and other media have extended our presence in the world and in relation to other natural and cultural entities (McLuhan 1964), for better or worse. Digitalisation is currently challenging media and communication research to make sense of presence and its implications beyond the academy.

Since the Nordic community of media and communication researchers began meeting for biannual conferences during the 1970s, the objects of study have gone through what arguably amounts to three phases of development. During the 1970s, we still referred to "mass media", analysing and assessing what they did to people and, with time, what people did with media (Katz 1959), partly in response to contemporary concerns about

and critiques of "the media". One popular sign of the times could be found in the feature film, *Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979).[1] The tale of a gardener (starring Peter Sellers) who had watched a lot of television while tending his master's garden in solitude, and who came to be perceived as a financial and political sage when he ventured out into the wider world, contrasted personal and public realities. Televised reality, as filtered through Mr. Chauncey Gardiner in a two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955), had become a present reality, and had come back to haunt the society that created it.

The second phase in the development of media, and of media studies, was kickstarted by the World Wide Web from the mid 1990s, when "the internet" became a medium for the general public. This time, an advertising campaign articulated the hope and the hype: Microsoft's launch of Windows 95. One television commercial depicted all the places one could go on a computer, grounded in an operating system that offered overlapping windows on the world.[2] If not persuaded by the images, consumers would perhaps be taken in by the theme song, featuring The Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up".[3] The multimodal web and the graphic user interface jointly afforded users – consumers and citizens – yet another layer of presence.

The third and current phase – with more phases still to come – has been summed up so far in the terminology of "big data". Media users increasingly traverse different, interconnected physical and virtual platforms, leaving traces and becoming present in places and times that they may or may not recognise or appreciate. Another one of Microsoft's mid 1990s campaigns asked: "Where do you want to go today?".[4] Before answering that question, users might like more insight into where they have been today, who knows about it, and who will do what with this knowledge.

This essay addresses the premises for posing and beginning to answer such questions. My main argument will be that, in order grasp the current phase of media history, the field needs to revisit the concept of communication. Whereas the question, "what is a medium?", has been debated regularly at conferences and seminars at least since the second, intermediate phase of networked computing, "what is communication?" represents a key challenge for media and communication research in its current phase.

In the following sections, I go meta: I review three different approaches to human communication, each of which relies on a terminology of "meta", each of which holds distinctive implications, but which taken together help to clarify what it means to communicate, and how this mundane practice is conditioned by changing technological circumstances. The first section notes the status of the digital computer, and of computer-based networks, as *meta-media* – media that reproduce and integrate other types of media, old and new. The concept of meta-media sums up the affordances of digital media, simultaneously as means of communication and as conditions of research. The second section returns to Gregory Bateson's concept of *meta-communication*. While Bateson was examining face-to-face or embodied communication, the concept lends itself to the study of online and networked communication: the bit streams that are accumulated as big data can be understood as instances of meta-communication. Meta-media yield new varieties of meta-communication – and of *meta-data*, which represents the third meta-approach. The third section of the article returns to the mostly technical notion of meta-data and restates it in the vocabulary of communication theory. Meta-data indicate who or what was present in a particular place and time in the past; they also suggest who may do what, to or with whom, in the future. The last section briefly considers the

implications of meta-data and meta-communication for issues of surveillance in the digital media environment.

Meta-media and other media

The digital computer can be seen to reproduce and recombine previous media of expression, representation and interaction on integrated platforms of hardware and software. This unique affordance (Gibson 1979; Hutchby 2001) of digital computing was summed up early on by Kay and Goldberg (1999/1977): computers are meta-media. As modes of expression and representation, digital media recombine text, image and sound, and they incorporate the full range of traditional genres as inherited from both mass media and face-to-face interaction: news, fictional narratives, debates, games, etc. As forms of interaction, digital media integrate one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many forms of communication: in addition to blogging, tweeting and networking socially, digital media are used extensively for interpersonal contact as well as good old-fashioned mass communication. While the networked personal computer, for a few decades, was the pivotal meta-medium in the West, mobile telephones and other portable devices are becoming equally, or more, important access points to the internet around the world (Castells et al. 2007). At the same time, the integration of digital technologies into natural objects, cultural artifacts and social arrangements in a projected Internet of Things (Howard 2015) is challenging, once again, received notions of "media" and "communication", as currently illustrated by location-aware technologies and other ubiquitous communication (de Sousa e Silva & Frith 2012).

Digital technologies invite research to refocus the activity of theorising – from media to communication – and to explore how different flows of communication intersect, on single platforms such as tablet computers, and across several platforms such as smart television sets and cell or mobile phones. Their intersections lend themselves to studies of multistep communications, not just in two steps (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955), but in three steps of mass, interpersonal and networked interactions (Jensen 2009). To begin, consider some of the prototypical configurations of communication that meta-media enable.

CONTROL OF TIME AND ITEMS SELECTED	CONTROL OF INFORMATION BASE	
	Central	**Peripheral**
Central	Allocution	Registration
Distributed	Consultation	Conversation

Figure 1. Four prototypes of communication (Bordewijk & van Kaam 1986)

Figure 1 reproduces the early and helpful typology by Bordewijk & van Kaam (1986) of what was referred to then as "telecommunication services". The conceptual matrix distinguishes, along one dimension, between central and distributed control over an available information base. For example, an encyclopedia may be centrally administered

and edited (*Encyclopedia Britannica*), or it may be open, to varying degrees, to input and revisions from distributed users (*Wikipedia*). Along the other dimension, it may be up to a central agency or authority exactly when the particular items of information become accessible, or it may be up to individual, distributed users. This distinction is illustrated by the difference between broadcast television and various dedicated services, from pay-per-view to streaming content such as Netflix.

The two dimensions, in combination, yield four prototypes of communication. *Conversation* refers to the online equivalents of face-to-face interaction (e.g., chat or conferencing), whereas *allocution* covers the traditional formats of one-to-many or mass communication, as recently embedded in digital platforms. *Consultation* is perhaps typically associated with accessing websites and other sources of information, but can also be seen to include, for instance, the more fine-grained process of following Facebook profiles (overlapping, in this systematic, with conversation). Finally, *registration* concerns the automated documentation of users' trajectories within a given system of communication, and perhaps beyond, across interrelated media platforms and flows of communication.

It is this last type of interaction – registration, in which users enter information into the system, more or less willingly – that speaks most directly to current research and debate concerning the power relations and wider structural implications of networked communication. It is essential to note, however, that registration is not a separate type of communication in digital media. Each of the three other types equally involves encoded documentation and similarly establishes particular social relationships among users and service providers. The point is that these codes and relationships are registered in and of the various acts of consultation, conversation and allocution. In a next step, they lend themselves to review and analysis by anyone who gains access to the resulting information trail: system administrators, other users, government officials, hackers, spies, etc. It used to be that communicators would speak into the air (Peters 1999). In digital media, communicators also speak into the system.

One important insight of Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) early model was that what had commonly been thought of as separate types of communication, as associated with particular media technologies and social institutions, were merging or converging on integrated platforms. The model provided a specification of how communication could be seen to flow in meta-media. Subsequent technological and institutional developments have made the lessons of the model almost common sense to the average media user. My laptop, tablet and smartphone afford allocution, consultation, conversation, registration and then some, and yet the definitions of meta-media and their communicative affordances still appear unresolved. In networked media, the flows of communication do not exhibit neat technological or theoretical boundaries. Indeed, the very terminology of meta-media is best thought of as an ad hoc conceptualisation of new, digital media with reference to their embedding of old, analogue media – a memento that the field is still struggling to come to terms with its conceptions of "media".

In this regard, meta-media and meta-communication come with rather different histories. Whereas "meta-media" represents an attempt to move beyond predominant conceptions of "mass media", "meta-communication" returns the field to differences as well as similarities between face-to-face and technologically mediated communication. All media, including humans, meta-communicate; meta-media meta-communicate in largely

unrecognised ways. The following section lays out two aspects of meta-communication and their relevance in the digital media environment.

Two aspects of meta-communication

Bateson (1972) developed the concept of meta-communication with reference to face-to-face interaction, building on a wide range of studies spanning anthropology and psychiatry. His premise was that, far from being simply the literal exchange of information, "human verbal communication can operate and always does operate at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (p. 150). Any given statement carries multiple potential meanings that hold implications for the further course of the communication and its outcome. This *polysemy* is not a contingent product of either channel noise or errors of precision at either end of the channel, but a constitutive feature of human communication. In face-to-face settings, moreover, communication incorporates not just verbal language, but all manner of bodily expressions from the communicators as well as any number of contingent aspects of their context of interaction. Embodied human beings can be considered media in their own right – media of the first degree (Jensen 2010). Much of our face-to-face communication is outside our conscious control, and yet it may qualify as communication as far as other people are concerned. Humans are constantly ascribing meaning to each other and to their cultural and natural environments (Ruesch & Bateson 1987/1951: 6). As students of Bateson summarised the point, humans "cannot *not* communicate" (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson 1967: 49), productively and receptively.

Bateson (1972) identified two aspects of meta-communication. First, people meta-communicate about the *codification* of their interaction. In some instances, this may amount to meta-linguistic (Jakobson 1960) or explicit information about the meaning of particular words, phrases or statements. Taking a standard example from logic – "the cat is on the mat" – Bateson noted that, in a certain context, the reference of "cat" might be said to include tigers, for example, as part of a game. In a wider sense, the codification of communication is in question whenever new topics or vocabularies are introduced into a conversation, and in the common use of humour or irony. In the vast majority of instances, however, people will work out the relevant meaning of statements and expressions as part of the flow of their communication through repetitions, rewordings, examples etc. Humans are remarkably good at finding out what words and, by implication, other people mean without constantly asking, "What do you mean?".

Second, people meta-communicate about their *social relationships*. In Bateson's example, the suggestion that a cat is actually a tiger might be an aspect of children's play, organised role-playing, religious ritual or other cultural practices. In the unlikely event that someone takes the reference literally and, perhaps, is startled, a meta-communication can reassure them that "This is play" (Bateson 1972: 151). Again, the nature of the communication mostly becomes clear to people in the course of their turn-taking, including openings, responses, elaborations, etc. It is only rarely that one finds it necessary to explicitly or directly raise questions regarding interpersonal relations or personal identity: "Who are you?", "Who am I?", and, by implication, "Who are we?", as far as this communication is concerned.

In noting the multiple levels of communication, Bateson was further recognising their interdependence in the practice of communication. For one thing, "the vast major-

ity of both metalinguistic and metacommunicative messages remain implicit" (Bateson 1972: 151) in "the message" as commonly understood. For another thing, "a majority of propositions about codification are also implicit or explicit propositions about relationship and vice versa" (Ruesch & Bateson 1987/1951: 209). Depending on who one is talking to – family, colleagues, strangers – different kinds and degrees of codification are called for. The meaning of the codes that we use in our communications with each other implies the meaning of our relationship. Both these meanings are established in and vary by context.

Bateson (1972) was focusing on embodied interactions in local contexts, but also in technologically mediated communication across time and space, meta-communication is one constitutive aspect of the interaction between user and medium, or between user and user. In the case of traditional *mass media*, codifications and social relationships are signalled and accomplished, not least, by *genres*: discursive conventions of expressing and experiencing a particular subject matter in common. Whereas the analytical category of genre has most commonly been associated with literature, aesthetics and other humanities, recent decades have witnessed a growing literature on genre simultaneously as a discursive structure and a social practice (Bawarshi 2000; Lomborg 2009; Miller 1984; Miller & Shepherd 2004; Yates & Orlikowski 1992). Beyond epic, dramatic and lyrical formats, political negotiations, financial transactions and cultural criticism also constitute discursive forms with social functions. Genres meta-communicate about the anticipated uses of their characteristic contents. For example, news and advertising employ distinctive codes and conventions, and they imply different social relationships with their audiences – as citizens or consumers – who can be expected to interpret the contents as scripts for subsequent action, beyond the moment of communicative interchange.

Digital media join some of the meta-communicative affordances of face-to-face communication and traditional mass communication. On the one hand, digital media, like mass media, rely on a wide variety of genres to address their users – emails, websites, quickpolls, tweets, likes etc. – but also the genres inherited and remediated (Bolter & Grusin 1999) from earlier media forms: news, advertising, serial fiction etc. On the other hand, because of their interactive potentials, digital media reintroduce certain expressive potentials from face-to-face communication – a remediated body language of sorts. Beyond emoticons, users enter and leave behind a great variety of information about the communication and about themselves.

Web search engines (Halavais 2009; Hillis, Petit & Jarrett 2013) offer a useful example of meta-communication in the digital media environment. Search engines codify information: the algorithms lend a coded structure to an available mass of data points, so that users gain access to them (or not) *as* information and as *this* kind of information with some presumed relevance. Search engines also enact communicative relationships: users establish a communicative relationship, not necessarily or explicitly with identifiable individuals or institutions, but with a distributed resource of information, which may lead into multistep flows of communication and interaction, including mundane offline activities such as finding out where to go to in order to meet someone or buy something. Most important in the present context, in and of their searches, users provide input to the medium or system of communication and, in doing so, they reconfigure the system, however minimally. Such meta-communication prefigures subsequent searches

and communications by the person in question and by others: users participate in the codification of a common information pool, and they articulate identities for themselves vis-à-vis the present information.

It is the continuous *documentation* of these two aspects of meta-communication through the architectures of digital technologies that together present one of the most central challenges to current communication theory. Both information and communicators are codified as part of any act of communication. The question is who codifies what – and whom – with what consequences, when it comes to digital channels of communication and meta-communication. To address that question it is useful to revisit the concept of meta-data, which has become increasingly common in the field of media and communication research, but which has retained its mostly technical connotations.

Meta-data, meta-languages and connotation languages
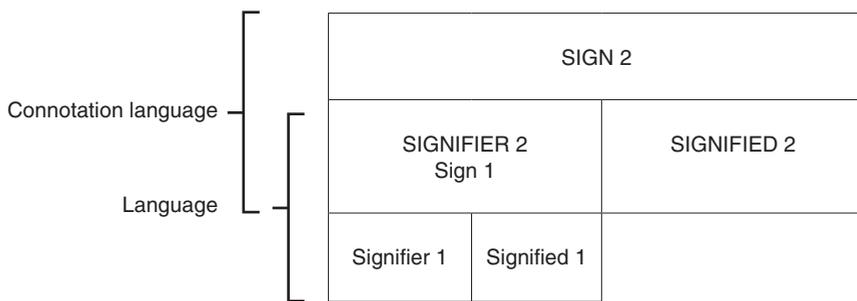
Connotation languages

Whereas social-scientific research traditions tend to refer to communication in terms of data and information, humanistic traditions rather speak of languages and meaning. The process of translation between these traditions has been ongoing for decades, and has yielded various forms of integration between transmission models and ritual models, quantitative and qualitative methodologies (for overview, see Jensen 2012). One particular strength of humanistic traditions has been their sensitivity to the many nuances and multiple levels of meaning inherent in human communication, as also highlighted by Bateson (1972). One common limitation of humanistic traditions has been a reluctance to explicate and systematise the analytical procedures employed, and to specify the relationship between the (verbal and visual) "languages" of communication and the second-order "languages" of research. Semiotics stands out as perhaps the most ambitious attempt at joining nuance and precision, and as a prime candidate for developing an interdisciplinary vocabulary regarding the constituents of communication, whether conceived as information or meaning. This has also been recognised in some publications with a social-scientific orientation, for example, in Denis McQuail's (2010) classic textbook, now in its sixth edition, which includes the application of semiotics to the study of media texts (pp. 345-350).

Roland Barthes's contribution to semiotics is particularly relevant for exploring the relationship between communication and meta-communication. However, it is, first and foremost, his conceptualisation of denotation and connotation, and of their role in the production of mythologies or ideologies, that has been widely influential in media and communication research for close to fifty years. Before focusing on meta-communication, then, it is useful to review his more familiar model and to clarify its complementary relationship with the model addressing meta-communication. In both respects, Barthes (1973/1957) referred to "languages" – connotation languages and meta-languages – departing from Louis Hjelmslev's (1963/1943) formal linguistics.

Connotation languages, first of all, recognise the fact that both individual signs and entire languages are multi-layered structures: one such language can build on another language, giving rise to additional meanings and uses. In modelling connotation languages, Barthes (1973/1957) sought to specify what exactly is entailed by "layers" of meaning. He went on to suggest that signs and statements accumulate as worldviews –

discursive configurations with normative implications. A central motivation of Barthes' work, and of much semiotics, has been the identification and critique of such worldviews, which could be seen to endorse debatable social conditions as desirable or inevitable.

Figure 2 lays out the principles of a connotation language. The first or bottom level is the level of *language* as a basic medium of description. The expressive form (*signifier*) and conceptual content (*signified*) of a word, image or statement together constitute a *sign* that carries a denotation or representational content. The second or top level is the level of *connotation language*. Here, the entire sign from the first level is conceived as the expressive form of yet another sign with a conceptual content, sometimes referred to as a connotation. In a further analytical move, a given set of connotations may be interpreted as the constituents of a more of less unified worldview, ideology or culture. Signs as communicated accumulate as culture.

Figure 2. *Language and connotation language (adapted from Barthes 1973/1957)*

To illustrate the principle of connotation languages with one of Barthes' most famous examples, a magazine cover with an image of a young black man in a uniform saluting the French flag might, in itself, be said to carry a relatively neutral or descriptive denotation. Barthes' critical point, however, was that the cover immediately elicits a more controversial meaning or connotation. In its historical context, the cover with its content became the expressive form of a further ideological content or myth: "French imperialism is not a discriminatory system since people of all colors are in a position to salute the flag, to serve and to be a part of the nation." In sum, this two-tiered mechanism of meaning production could be seen to naturalise certain worldviews, while silencing others.

In later work, Barthes (1970: 13-16) reversed the perspective, suggesting that denotations are not points of departure or foundations of meaning, but rather preliminary end points in a more complex and fluid process of meaning production. Nevertheless, in both perspectives, connotations are considered collective and consequential constructs. Signs will assume a comparatively stable shape when they are used by people for practical purposes of representation and interaction. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, semiotics does not conceive of connotations as the outcome of more or less incidental, personal or idiosyncratic interpretations. Instead, connotation languages, as employed by individuals and institutions, serve to reproduce and prefer certain worldviews as social facts, for better or worse.

Using Bateson's terminology, connotations might be characterised as codifications: they add codes or layers of meaning, thus contributing to the meta-linguistic aspect of meta-communication, which helps to ensure the understanding of both explicit and implicit meanings. Connotations pervade media representations and media users' frames of interpretation. Simultaneously, codes serve to situate communicators within social relations, a premise shared by Bateson and Barthes. This premise was elaborated by Barthes in a second model paralleling his model of connotation languages. Drawing again on Hjelmslev (1963/1943), Barthes also referred to meta-languages.

Meta-languages

Barthes' use of Hjelmslev's original terms and concepts was creative, if debatable. Like much of twentieth-century linguistics, Hjelmslev approached languages as systems – systems of communication and second-order systems that either build on or describe such systems. Barthes set out to appropriate – and remediate – Hjelmslev's basic figure of thought for alternative purposes of analysing and critiquing contemporary media and communication. Barthes' accomplishment was to retool the original systemic logic and to apply it to the study of communication as a practice and a process in social context. In addition, Barthes went beyond verbal language to include images and other modalities in his approach to the several aspects and levels of communication.

In Hjelmslev's (1963/1943) account, connotation languages and meta-languages have different but complementary relations to a common reference point, namely, first-order language or language as commonly understood. Connotation languages, on the one hand, add to the meanings of language in such a way that they themselves constitute vehicles of communication. They amount to representations of and statements about the world, as illustrated by Barthes (1973/1957) with reference to myths such as the notion of an innocent imperialism. Meta-languages, on the other hand, describe language. They are not languages in themselves, but languages about languages, for instance, syntactical or semantic descriptions of the English language. In a wider sense, meta-languages can serve to characterise not just a language, but its uses and implications.

Figure 3 presents the principle of meta-languages. While almost identical to Barthes' first model of connotation languages (Figure 2), its implications are quite different, underscoring the semiotic insight that small signs, including the details of models, can make a big difference. Compared with Figure 2, Figure 3 inverts the relationship between signifier and signified at the second level. The point is that whereas connotation languages add mostly implicit meanings to the first level of language, meta-languages explicitly address or thematise the first level, adding some further characterisation to the basic sign or statement. Its meaning (signified) is left intact, but by adding another description or re-description (signifier), the meta-language invites further consideration of and communication about the first level of language. In Bateson's (1972) vocabulary, meta-languages may raise questions such as, "What is the meaning of X?", but also, in communicative terms, "What do *you* mean by X?".

Figure 3. *Language and meta-language (adapted from Barthes 1973/1957)*

Hjelmslev (1963/1943) qualified his typology of meta-languages and connotation languages by making a further distinction between scientific and non-scientific languages. Meta-languages could be considered scientific languages. While primarily defined by their formal operations, meta-languages can be operated and applied, above all, by certain expert users who are in a position to step back and assume a second-order perspective on the language in question. Such expert users would be linguists, but also, in the case of formal languages and other systems of notation, mathematicians, logicians or computer scientists. Algorithms amount to languages that depend on meta-languages for their construction and refinement.

At this point, I should clarify how I propose to treat meta-languages: not merely as systems of analysis, but as practices of communication, i.e., as vehicles of meta-communication, which lend themselves to non-expert uses as well. In doing so, I stand on the shoulders of Barthes, who performed a creative interpretation of Hjelmslev's work in order to develop concepts and procedures for the study and critique of communications and their connotations in an age of mass media. In the present age of digital media, meta-languages and meta-communication have taken on an added significance. A new range of meta-languages has become available that afford new forms of explicit and implicit, intentional as well as non-intentional meta-communication. For one thing, ordinary users of digital media effortlessly employ meta-languages when they tag the blog entries of others; when they customise their profiles at social network sites; and when they forward news stories from websites to friends or colleagues. For another thing, the resulting meta-data are accumulated; they can be re-communicated to and by system administrators, advertisers, regulators and other stakeholders; and the meta-data may inform subsequent actions by any and all of these, with or without the knowledge of the original communicators.

The social uses of meta-data reemphasise Bateson's (1972) point that meta-communication accomplishes not only the codification of content, but also the maintenance of social relationships. In the digital media environment, these relationships involve users, communication systems and a host of other social actors who may access and recycle the trails of communication, across space and time, for commercial or surveillance purposes. Far beyond either Batesonian body language or Hjelmslevian language study, meta-communication has major implications for social interactions and structures today. Meta-communication makes a difference.

Meta-data and differences

The concept of difference provides a common denominator for the traditions of semiotics and cybernetics. In contrast to the widespread, commonsensical conception of information in both scholarship and everyday parlance as an objective entity or delimited product, the concept of difference entails a relational approach to the constituents and processes of communication. According to Bateson's (1972: 351) definition, "'information' may be succinctly defined as *any difference which makes a difference in some later event*". From a media user's point of view, differences manifest themselves, for instance, as messages selected and disseminated (or not) by the press as news; the news of the day as re-communicated (or not) to others face-to-face or online; and actions (or inaction) in response to news of elections, coups and catastrophes.

Bateson belonged to the tradition of cybernetics – the science of "control and communication in the animal and the machine" (Wiener 1961/1948). Cybernetics offers formal descriptions of natural as well as cultural processes, which can be seen to share certain elementary structures of information. One further assumption of cybernetics is that these elementary structures enter into highly complex differential structures, from living organisms to information technologies. Bateson drew some of his ideas from one of the two founders of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce. Its second founder, Ferdinand de Saussure, also developed a differential and relational conception of information or meaning, and outlined a framework for studying "the life of signs within society" (Saussure 1959/1916: 16).

A fundamental idea of semiotics is that meaning is not a quality of any given sign, but an aspect of how that particular sign differs from other signs. Sounds, letters and words are defined by the features that distinguish them from other sounds, letters and words. Sentences, books, libraries and databases can be examined as increasingly complex configurations of difference. Peirce especially pursued the idea that the production of difference is not limited to signs or language as such, but carries over to processes of interpretation and social action. In communication theory, one may distinguish between three types of difference (see further Jensen 2010: 44-47):

- *Discursive differences*, or the range of potential meanings of a message: An advertisement is intended to promote some product or service, even if readers may resist or negotiate this meaning (Hall 1973).

- *Interpretive differences*, or the meanings actualised by specific users in particular contexts: The advertisement may be read as consumer information, capitalist propaganda or everyday entertainment.

- *Performative differences*, or predispositions to act: The advertisement may lead readers to either buy or boycott the advertised goods.

The sequential or stepwise aspect of communication, interpretation and action is of special interest for a reassessment of meta-communication in the context of the digital environment. When registered and documented in digital media, communication lends itself to a great deal of delayed and distributed interpretation and action. One familiar example is "liking" a comment or event on Facebook. This communication entails both of the two aspects of meta-communication: establishing or maintaining a social relationship involving (at least) two communicators, and a codification or valuation

of the comment or event in question. In another example, user clicks on a banner advertisement represent interpretations and expressions of interest in a particular (kind of) commodity, leading perhaps to a purchase. Again, a social relationship of buying and selling is enacted, and the representation of the commodity is codified as relevant or attractive from the users' perspective. In a later stage of meta-communication, the resulting data may be analysed and resold as evidence of the socio-demographic profiles of potential customers and their codification of relevant commodities. Depending on the kind of commodity, the same data may give rise to further and controversial issues. In addition to its constructive uses in agriculture and gardening, fertiliser also has destructive potential as an ingredient of a bomb. A search for or purchase of fertiliser might variously be codified and socially profiled as a business opportunity or a security threat.

Returning to Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) early typology, one may begin to specify various types of meta-communication in a digital media environment. Within their typology, the category of *registration* covered the documentation of users' *distributed* access to different services in a *centralised* system of communication. In comparison, current interactive systems, while still centralised in key technological and economic respects, afford more degrees of freedom both to users and to system administrators in terms of access to and adjustment of services.

Figure 4 lays out four prototypes of meta-communication, building on Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) model, and reconsidering the differential capacities of *systems* and *users*, first, to control the information base and, second, to decide exactly what information will be selected, and when. The prototype most familiar from the original model, akin to registration, is that of *processed communication*: the documentation and analysis of individual users' trajectories for purposes of billing, system maintenance, market analysis, strategies of avoiding churn etc. The prototype diagonally across the model – *recommended communication* – is comparable, yet different. Here, the focus of attention is on users as collectives or segments, who may or may not continue to communicate as they have done in the past. By reviewing patterns of communication, system administrators can identify favourite acts of communication, as far as different user segments are concerned, but also complements and alternatives that might be recommended to the same users. While exemplified by recommender services such as those of Amazon for books or Netflix for feature films, the prototype can be extended to include entirely different services from different providers within additional networks of communication. The same logic applies to the marketing and sale of products and services throughout the network to users who are also consumers, and whose communications constitute part of their socio-demographic profile. While the outcome, in Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) terminology, might be thought of as consultation of some communication or commodity, the interaction is different in kind. The offer or recommendation of consultation is the product of an elaborate codification of potential users, who thus enter into a social relationship with the system of communication that is quite different from merely selecting from a database or set menu of news stories, movies, games or other media "content".

CONTROL OF TIME AND ITEMS SELECTED	CONTROL OF INFORMATION BASE	
	System	**User**
System	Third-party communication	Processed communication
User	Recommended communication	Iterative communication

Figure 4. *Four prototypes of meta-communication*

Iterative communication is meant to capture the diverse ways in which users interact with reference to each other's communications. The prototype, again, is similar to Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) category of conversation, but reemphasises the pervasive iterativity of the conditions of communication in digital media. In addition to opening, participating in and ending conversations, users comment on, re-send and act on each other's communications, whether synchronously or asynchronously and across far-flung networks. In an even wider sense, users are able to shape interfaces and systems as conditions of their communication. Users will customise their points of access to services and networks. They can pull a later push of information to themselves through an RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication). They may even, to a degree, affect network infrastructures by engaging in collaborative open-source innovation (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008; Von Hippel 2005). Users thus codify themselves and each other as part of variable social relationships.

The last prototype is *third-party communication*, referring to the accumulation, consolidation and re-distribution of system-wide evidence of communication patterns. Compared with processed communication, the information base in the case of third-party communication is controlled by the system rather than the user. It is only through the intervention of the system as a technological and institutional agent that a certain kind of consolidated evidence that will be of interest to third parties comes into existence. If processed communication is oriented inward to the operation of the system as such, third-party communication caters outward to additional stakeholders, typically by re-distributing (more or less) refined information to advertisers, marketers, regulators and government authorities. In Bordewijk & van Kaam's (1986) typology of communication, allocation or mass communication sends information from a centre to a mass of distributed individuals. In the present preliminary typology of meta-communication, the system can be seen to pass on information from (about) a mass of individuals to other systems and centres of power.

The motivation for elaborating the finer details of meta-communication in digital media is that they make a real discursive, interpretive, as well as performative difference. The implications are suggested most prominently by the prototype of third-party communication, but also by iterative communication, both of which speak to ongoing debates about the participatory and empowering potentials of digital media, often along a utopian-dystopian spectrum (e.g., Curran, Fenton & Freedman 2012; Jenkins 2006). Communication is a form of action in itself; communication also anticipates and negotiates action. In both respects, meta-communication serves to frame and condition commu-

nication. By beginning to develop the conceptual resources for assessing the constituents and processes of meta-communication in the present digital media environment, research may itself make a small difference to future communications and meta-communications.

Having been there, having done that

Media and communication researchers are still brought up on variations of Lasswell's (1948) model – who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect – even if they gradually learn to distance themselves from its apparent simplicity, certainly in the presence of other researchers. Still, we live the model; old models die hard. At the present juncture of media history and communication theory, at least a complementary model of meta-communication is needed.

One way of reformulating Lasswell (1948) is to ask: which information is *present*, to whom, for what kinds of action, in what time frame, with which consequences? In the case of meta-media, much meta-communication remains present in the shape of meta-data for others to make sense of and act on. As citizens and consumers, *we* remain present, here but also there. Having communicated and meta-communicated, we have been there, and we have done things.

In order to reintegrate models of communication and of meta-communication, we may return to the complex configurations of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication that digital technologies afford (Helles et al. 2015; Jensen & Helles 2011). A next step is to include many-to-one flows: Which individuals and institutions are in position to monitor the actions of other individuals and institutions for political, economic and cultural purposes? Big Brother now has many little sisters. Compared with the traditional understanding of top-down *surveillance*, citizens, interest groups and social movements are now in position to engage in bottom-up *sousveillance* of the powers that be, in addition to performing *coveillance* of each other (Rainie & Wellman 2012). The question – who knows what about whom? – is, in part, empirical. But, as always, empirical questions are premised on theories and models of what we might expect or imagine.

It was Kurt Lewin (1945: 129) who suggested that, "Nothing is as practical as a good theory" and, one might add, good models. In common parlance, "been there, done that" articulates a certain self-satisfied self-conception, here and now. Dr Dre, the rapper, offered an ambiguous elaboration of this position on his single "Been There, Done That" (1997).[5] Then and there, one may have felt quite satisfied with what one said and did. But things, including meta-data, can be taken out of context; contexts will be contested. Was I *there*? Did I do *that*? The answers to such questions will be of great practical interest to individuals and collectives alike.

Notes

1. *Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979) trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZcBccViAtM (accessed 15 February 2016).
2. Microsoft's Windows 95 campaign – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRdl1BjTG7c (accessed 15 February 2016).
3. Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, "Start Me Up": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGyOaCXr8Lw (accessed 15 February 2016).
4. Microsoft's "Where do you want to go today?" campaign: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zwf0EZ-50KUY (accessed 15 February 2016).
5. Dr. Dre, "Been There, Done That": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c80dWbiONqM (accessed 15 February 2016).

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