Communication in the public space: Attention and media use

Julia Roll

Abstract

Using media is an everyday phenomenon. Cell phone and smartphone usage, in particular, have been the subject of much research. When referring to this, media appropriation research shows that negotiation processes concerning proper media usage in different contexts are not exclusively limited to innovations; they also take place within well-established daily media practices. A frequent research topic deals with how media users either pay attention to their mobile communication devices or their surrounding environment. In this context attention is not only a psychological but also a social matter. However, the literature review unveils that this duality is widely neglected by psychology and sociology. Drawing on Goffman's (1963, 1974) public interaction order concept, Hoeflich's (2003) media frame approach and the Mobile Phone Appropriation Model (Wirth/von Pape/Karnowski, 2008), a multistage research design was conducted in order to explore how smartphone users deal with their attention in different contexts in the public space. Containing guided interviews, media diaries and sketches of everyday life practices of media users, the results show how the integration of different disciplines enables new insights into changes in everyday media practices. Smartphone usage in public places is highly context specific, but also influenced by cross-context factors like habitualized media usage patterns.

Keywords: mobile media use, public places, attention, involvement, qualitative approach

1   The relevance of attention for mobile media usage in public places

Looking at everyday activities, it becomes obvious that media usage plays a crucial role. Thus, using mobile media in the public space is an everyday phenomenon. A public space is characterized by the fact that one can encounter other people – both known and unknown – at any time (Hoeflich/Kircher, 2010, p. 61). Furthermore, even if there is no verbal communication between people who coincidentally meet each other, they act as if they are in a communicative situation (Goffman, 1963, p. 17). This means that they control their actions in order to adjust them to the different situations and settings within the public space. Furthermore, settings may not only change spatially (a marketplace vs. a church), but also temporally (night vs. day) and socially (number and proximity of co-present people). That is, the same place may have different settings in different times within the public space (Barker, 1968, p. 18).

The findings of media research which widely focuses on mobile media like cell phones and smartphones (e. g. Hepp/Krotz, 2014; Ling, 2012), suggest that mobile media usage and the meaning of places as well as their different settings mutually influence each other (e. g. de Souza e Silva/Frith, 2012, pp. 9). Moreover, the literature review unveils that a frequent discourse topic is how media users focus their attention on either their mobile communication devices or their surrounding environment (e. g. Turkle, 2011). In this respect, attention is not only a psychological (Allport, 1987; Styles, 2006) but also a social (Goffman, 1963) matter.

However, this duality is widely neglected by psychology and sociology. An exception is Goffman's (1963) concept of "involvement" (p. 43), which directly addresses the duality of attention: "Involvement is the capacity of the individual to give, or withhold from giving, his concerted attention to some activity at hand - a solitary task, a conversation, a collaborative work effort." (ibid.).

While such a Goffmanian approach to mobile phone and smartphone use is not new (e. g. Humphreys, 2005; Ling, 2012), research most often focuses only on one or few places or settings (for restaurants see Ling, 1996) and on phoning (Cumiskey, 2005). An integrated and comprehensive view of everyday smartphone use in different contexts is still missing.

Starting from this point, I chose an empirical approach in order to investigate the question: How do smartphone users deal with their involvement in different contexts in the public space? The goal is to analyze similarities and differences in media-related involvement management in public places, whereby a smartphone is defined by access to the internet via a touchscreen (Garrett, 2006, p. 164).

In the next section, I will outline the relevant theoretical aspects of my study. The second part deals with the methodical implementation and provides an overview of my approach. Third, the main findings will be illustrated. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion concerning social conventions within a world where media usage is an everyday practice.

2 The Nested Frames Model

According to Goffman, two persons principally have expectations of each other, e. g. how the other should behave in a certain situation and also which amount of attention is adequate. The latter aspect is called "involvement" by Goffman (1963, p. 43).

Goffman' approach refers to a Constructivist approach like Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic Interactionism considers communication as only then successful when two persons are referring to a common set of symbols with which they can exchange information as symbols. Taking each other's role and mutually adapting actions enables people to become self-aware and to build up a common idea of (a constructed) reality (pp. 2). In connection with attention mechanisms, a communicative interaction is based on the aspect that both interactive partners apply a minimum amount of their attention consciously to the exchange of information. Psychological research suggests that attention is limited. That is, concentrating on one aspect also means neglecting other things at the same time (Allport, 1987, p. 397; Styles, 2006, p. 1).

In order to comply with expectations of involvement and adequate behavior, people have to find out "what is going on" (Goffman, 1963, p. 50). They also have to define the "frame" (ibid., 1974, p. 9) of a situation. A frame serves as a scheme. It is used in social situations to adjust mutual behavior and contains both interpretation and action guidelines. Within communication processes, frames are developed by negotiation, implemented, but also changed. However, the implementation of frames in everyday communication practices is said to be mainly unconscious (ibid., pp. 9).

How could such frames in public places be characterized? On the basis of a common attention focus for information-pickup, Goffman (1963) distinguishes three interaction[1] scenarios. The interaction scenarios are characterized by different frames. The first is the scenario of "unfocused interaction, that is, the kind of communication that occurs when one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him, if only momentarily, as he passes into and then out of one's view" (p. 24). The second scenario of a part-focused

---

1 As derived from the perspective of communication in the public space used in this paper, the terms of interaction and communication are used as synonyms.

interaction includes at least three people: While two persons build up a common attention focus (e.g. in a conversation), other present people are excluded. Nevertheless, the people within a focused interaction frame simultaneously adjust their behavior to the actions of the other present people and vice versa. Therefore, both a focused interaction and an unfocused interaction frame exist at the same time (ibid., pp. 151). Third, the focused interaction scenario is "the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talking" (ibid., p. 24). Here, the frame of focused interaction applies to all persons present. This theoretical basis has to be extended by two aspects.

First of all, although Goffman's (1963, 1974) concepts are based on face-to-face communication, frame analysis can also be widened towards media usage as Hoeflich (2003) explains. He introduces a distinctive media frame. It is characterized as follows:

> […] a media frame eventually consists of common rules of adequate usage (procedural rules of media etiquette), a standardized usage of a medium (which medium should be used for what purpose), including strategies for using the medium (to convince, to lie, to flirt, to gossip and so on). (p. 36).

Hoeflich's idea of a media frame is integrated into the model as a frame of media-focused interaction which refers to all kinds of media-related communication and usage.

Second, Goffman does not emphasize explicitly that people also adjust their behavior to a potentially present person. Therefore, by following Hoeflich's (2011) suggestion that being in public places means to be always in a communicative situation because of the potential of mutual interaction (p. 43), a frame of generalized unfocused interaction has to be taken into consideration. Consequently, it can be assumed that independently from the three interaction scenarios (where others are present), people consider such a distinct frame. Illustration 1 shows the Nested Frames Model.

Illustration 1: Nested Frames Model (own representation, based on Goffman, 1963, 1974; Hoeflich, 2003, 2011)
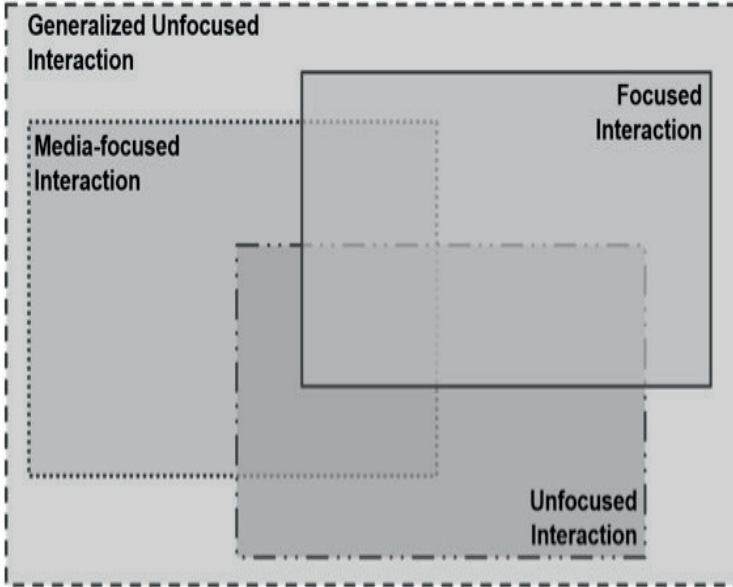
To understand everyday mobile media usage from a Constructivist perspective (Blumer, 1969) both the 'inner' and 'outer' views of media usage need to be considered. Both subjective evaluations and their manifestation in mobile media use are subjects of the Mobile Phone Appropriation Model by Wirth, von Pape and Karnowski (2008). Moreover, this model emphasizes that media usage has - besides the mere usage of the device - a symbolic dimension (pp. 600). As Goffman (1974, pp. 9) did for proper behavior, the authors suggest that negotiation and appropriation processes with respect to adequate media usage in different contexts are not exclusively limited to innovations; they do also take place within well-established daily media practices (Wirth, von Pape/ Karnowski, 2005, p. 19). Thus, it is possible to use their model to derive the relevant categories of the subjective evaluation and implementation of everyday mobile media use.

Drawing on the literature review and the theoretical model, I have two research questions. The first question concentrates on media usage habits in order to identify typical media use patterns:

RQ1: Which cross-contextual everyday media usage patterns can be detected?

Furthermore, in order to understand context-based media-related involvement management, the second question is:

RQ2: Which involvement attributes and specifications characterize media usage in different contexts within the public space?

Concerning cross-context habits of mobile media use, the Mobile Phone Appropriation Model (Wirth et al., 2008) mainly serves as a general framework and heuristic. The analysis of context-based involvement management is mainly guided by the Nested Frames Model.

3   Methods: A multistage triangulation of qualitative questioning forms

Since the intention of this study is to investigate subjective meanings and conceptualizations as well as habits, a qualitative approach provides appropriate research methods (e. g. Flick, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, a grounded theory methodology (Glaser/Strauss, 1967; Corbin/Strauss, 2008) for orientation, a complex multistage qualitative research design was conducted between April and July 2014.

In the first step, a sample of 12 German adult smartphone users (sampling by academic context and gender, average age of the eventual sample is 26.7 years) were asked to keep a media diary containing their mobile media usage in the public space for one week. When they used their mobile media devices, they were instructed to fill in their diaries as soon as possible afterwards. Here, the media diary serves as a tool to make media usage more reflexive. However, such an approach enhances the risk of shaping usage routines. That is why the participants were additionally asked to draw a sketch of their everyday activities. The second and third steps contained guided interviews analyzing the everyday media-related cross-context and context-based involvement management. The last step included guided interviews with persons who are affiliated with the adult smartphone users, for example family members and friends. This provides a supplementary insight into the living environment of the participants. In sum, 18 affiliated persons participated in the study. All persons in the study where acquired by a snowball sampling (Berg, 1988).

The qualitative content analysis of the material followed the theoretical coding. Here, constant interaction with the data and literature serves to identify the main concepts and categories of the research subject (Corbin/Strauss, 2008, pp. 159).

4   Results

The illustration of the empirical findings is divided into two parts: First (4.1.), the main results concerning the cross-context everyday media-related involvement management are presented. The second part (4.2) deals with a context-based view on media usage in public places.

4.1. Characterization of cross-context everyday media-related involvement management

Looking at the everyday media usage of the participants, the smartphone is seen as a very personal device where private information is stored. Its usage is firmly anchored in the interviewees' daily routines and mostly used sub-consciously. The persons also express that they typically use their mobile devices everywhere regularly and for a short time. In these cases, they normally pay more attention to their devices than to their surroundings. An analysis of personal and social constraints concerning smartphone usage reveals that some of the interviewees feel a kind of pressure which, however, at the same time, they have under control:

> Yeah, for me, I can say that there exists a kind of addictive potential, although I only look at my smartphone about five times a day.[2] (Female 4, interview I)

> […] one time, I decided for myself: No, I do not need to be reachable via smartphone all the time. […] It is important for me to stick to that doing. (Male 4, interview I)

Asked for the motives of smartphone usage, understood as "reasons behind a person's behavior […] words, societal members use to make sense of their behavior and the behavior of others" (Leiter, 1980, p. 202), the participants claim that they use their smartphones mainly for pastimes (such as playing or reading news) and interpersonal communication. Especially text-based applications like WhatsApp are used intensively. Additionally, they normally communicate only with people they know well.

---

2   The quotes were translated from German to English.

Following the statements of the participants, the smartphone is less mobile than expected because half of the persons use their mobile devices mainly at home.

Another main result is the importance of information access. The interviewees see information access as almost equally important as the reachability for people close to them. Furthermore, the interviewees describe numerous examples that point to a symbolic use of their devices. This also expresses de Souza e Silva's and Frith's (2012) idea of "mobile interfaces" (ibid.) which describes that mobile media is used in order to control communication processes:

> […] If there is an unpleasant question [interviewee demonstrates non-verbally faked smartphone use], I only answer: Wow, that is cool – what did you say?! […] The person did not ask a second time [giggling]. (Female 3, interview I)

> Sometimes, being with others, I feel myself as being a little bit redundant. I feel unsure. Then I use my smartphone. This pretends confidence in action. (Male 6, interview I)

While sociodemographic variables rather seem to influence the motives of smartphone usage (for example, the females highlight the security factor), a relevant difference between the smartphone usage patterns cannot be detected. Smartphone usage patterns are rather influenced by context factors.

4.2. A context-based view on media usage in public places

As a first finding, the existence of a frame of generalized unfocused interaction can be determined by the participants' answers concerning a guilty conscience when not paying enough attention to the surroundings:

> Sometimes, I focus my attention more to myself and my electronic device than to the other people around me. That is not optimal […] (Female 2, interview I)

The context-specific analysis points out that short, occasional and silent mobile media usage is not accepted everywhere. During the focused interaction of watching a film in the cinema, the participants express their irritation. Besides that, inadequate media use can result in a media user losing his or her 'right' to be present. This applies both to focused (e. g. watching a film in the cinema or attending a theatre or opera performance) and unfocused interaction scenarios (like doing research work for oneself in the library or visiting a church or museum alone).

Moreover, the persons seem to have an intuitive feeling for adequate mobile media usage, because they do not report any serious disruptions resulting from mobile media usage in public places. However, specific media practices which are seen by the study participants as seriously annoying can be identi-

fied - though they happen rarely according to the interviewees' statements. For the unfocused interaction scenario it is inattention in the context of media use which leads, for example, to jostling other people or dangerous situations in traffic. Within the part-focused interaction scenario the interviewees say that it is most annoying when a person in a conversation does not clearly show his or her focus of attention either on the media device or the ongoing conversation. The focused interaction scenario contains the prohibition of volume, e. g. through phoning or ringing of the smartphone. Concerning mediated communication, the daily routine of the communication partner should not be disregarded; in particular, mediated communication mainly involves familiar people and is mostly about topics which do not need an immediate response:

> Phoning means that you must focus all of your attention on the conversation. Everything else has to be neglected. That is not always possible in everyday life. Sending a message is more flexible, because I can decide for myself when to answer. Normally, communication via smartphone is about topics which are not really urgent. So, I can answer some hours later. (Male 1, interview I)

5   Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the everyday media appropriation in public places with a view to the duality of attention. Starting from the point that using mobile media in public places is an everyday phenomenon, and that psychological and sociological research neglects the duality of attention, it was possible to show that an integrated view gives new insights into how everyday media practices are changing.

As a contribution to communication science research, this study offers a deeper understanding of how people use their mobile media devices. Media-related involvement management is highly context-specific, but also influenced by cross-context factors like habitualized media usage patterns. The findings suggest that smartphone usage has the status of "taken for granted" (Ling, 2012, p. viii). Therefore, it cannot be confirmed that mobile communication is seen as a disruptive factor in the public space (see for an overview de Souza e Silva/Frith, 2012).

The empirical data also show that both a cross-contextual perspective with the help of the Mobile Phone Appropriation Model (Wirth et al., 2008) and a context-based perspective through Goffman's (1963, 1974) interaction order and Hoeflich's (2003, 2011) media frame approach have to be taken into consideration when analyzing media-related communication processes in public places. However, it has also become obvious that the term 'involvement'

contains more than Goffman (1963, p. 43) described. For example, it does not only concern attention focused on other people, but can also belong to the context itself or to specific actions.

In a broader context, for sociological research, it provides new insights for social communication practices. In other words, the analysis unveils how new media affect social conventions which are based on the duality of attention. One example for such a social convention is Goffman´s (1963) concept of "civil inattention" (p. 84). In Goffmann's words, civil inattention means

> […] that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design. (ibid.)

According to the findings in the study, a short conscious glance at the contents of the media usage of others (e. g. a text message) is acceptable. On the other hand, people also break the rule of civil inattention just as they do in non-media-related communication situations, as Goffman (ibid., pp. 85) describes. This could be an indication that the disruptive behavior of media users is not always judged as annoying.

A further example is Sennett´s (1976) notion of civility. Sennett detects "tyrannies of intimacy" (p. 337) when people unveil personal information which is not appropriate to strangers respectively people they do not know. According to mobile media usage, the participants distinguish visual from auditive information-pickup of media contents. Looking away is seen as more controllable than listening the other way. This could be an explanation for the phenomenon that intimate topics (sex, conflicts) are not accepted as well as speaking loudly when phoning.

This study has taken a step in analyzing everyday media practices by considering the duality of attention. However, it did look at a narrow sample. Therefore, the new insights mainly refer to the living environments of the study participants. A quantitative approach could provide a strategy to explore in what way general assertions can be made. Furthermore, using a sample with different age groups, cultural as well as lifestyle background or different media use intensity could provide insights into specific involvement management patterns.

Another issue is that of media contents, which were widely neglected by the study. From media effect studies it is known that media contents influence attention and therefore communication processes. An extended perspective on "media as technological objects, symbolic environments and individual texts" (Hartmann, 2006, p. 80) in the form of a "triple articulation" (ibid.) could be fruitful to investigating media-related involvement management in more de-

tail. For future research a focus on the change of a media-related involvement management is of enduring relevance. The reason for this is that, as a limited factor, attention constitutes a constant within the media usage dynamics.

6 References

Allport, A. (1987) 'Selection for action. Some behavioral and neurophysiological considerations of attention and action', pp. 395-419 in H. Heuer and A. F. Sanders (Eds.) *Perspectives on perception and action.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Barker, R. G. (1968) *Ecological psychology. Concepts and methods for studying the environment of human behavior*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Berg, S. (1988) 'Snowball sampling', pp. 528-532 in S. Kotz and N. L. Johnson (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of statistical sciences, volume 8.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Corbin, J. M., Strauss, A. L. (2008) *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Los Angeles et al.: Sage.

Cumiskey, K. M. (2005) '"Surprisingly, nobody tried to caution her": perceptions of intentionality and the role of social responsibility in the public use of mobile phones', pp. 225-236 in R. Ling and P. E. Pedersen (Eds.) *Mobile communications: re-negotiation of the social sphere*. London: Springer.

de Souza e Silva, A., Frith, J. (2012) *Mobile interfaces in public spaces: locational privacy, control, and urban sociability*. New York: Routledge.

Flick, U. (2009) *An introduction to qualitative research.* Los Angeles: Sage.

Garrett, B. M. (2006) 'Development of the personal digital assistant (PDA) interface', pp. 160-164 in C. Ghaoui (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of human computer interaction*. Hershey, PA. et al.: Idea Group Reference.

Glaser, B. G., Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Goffman, E. (1963) *Behavior in public places. Notes on the social organization of gatherings.* London et al.: Free Press.

Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis. An essay on the organization of experience.* New York et al.: Harper Colophone Books.

Hartmann, M. (2006) 'The "triple articulation" of ICTs: media as technological objects, symbolic environments and individual texts', pp. 80-102 in T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie and K. Ward (Eds.) *Domestication of media and technology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hepp, A., Krotz, F. (2014) *Mediatized worlds. Culture and society in a media age*. Basingstoke et al.: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hoeflich, J. R. (2003) 'Part of two frames. Mobile communication and the situational arrangement of communicative behaviour', pp. 33-52 in J. K. Nyíri (Ed.) *Mobile democracy. Essays on society, self and politics*. Vienna: Passagen-Verlag.

Hoeflich, J. R. (2011) *Mobile Kommunikation im Kontext. Studien zur Nutzung des Mobiltelefons im oeffentlichen Raum*. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Hoeflich, J. R., Kircher, G. F. (2010) 'Moving and lingering: the mobile phone in public space', pp. 61-96 in J. R. Hoeflich, G. F. Kircher, C. Linke and I. Schlote (Eds.) *Mobile media and the change of everyday life*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Humphreys, L. (2005) 'Cell phones in public: social interactions in the wireless era', *New Media & Society*, 7(1): 810-833.

Leiter, K. (1980) *A primer on ethnomethodology*. New York et al.: Oxford University Press.

Ling, R. (1996) *"One can talk about common manners!" The use of mobile telephones in inappropriate situations.* Kjeller: Telenor.

Ling, R. (2012) *Taken for grantedness. The embedding of mobile communication in society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Sennett, R. (1976) *The fall of public man.* New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Simmel, G. (1995) 'The metropolis and mental life', pp. 30-45 in P. Kasinitz (Ed.), *Metropolis: centre and symbol of our times.* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Styles, E. A. (2006) *The psychology of attention*. Hove et al.: Psychology Press.

Turkle, S. (2011) *Alone together. Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.

Wirth, W., von Pape, T., Karnowski, V. (2005) 'New technologies and how they are rooted in society'. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference 2005, 26.-30.05.2005, New York. Downloaded on 02 November 2015 from http://thilovonpape. de/publications/wirth_von_pape_karnowski_2005_new_technologies_and_how_they_are_ rooted_in_society.pdf.

Wirth, W., von Pape, T., Karnowski, V. (2008) 'An integrative model of mobile phone appropriation', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1): 593-617.

Biography

At the Bauhaus-University Weimar (Germany), Dr. des. Julia Roll is a research assistant at the Professorship of Marketing and Media Research of the Faculty of Media. Her current research and teaching focus is on marketing in the area of culture, mediatized interpersonal communication and mobile media. Julia Roll completed her doctorate in Communication Science at the University of Erfurt (Germany).

Contact: julia.roll@uni-weimar.de