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INTERPERSONAL AND MASS COMMUNICATION: MATTERS OF TRUST AND CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of information technologies in our modern society offers an incentive to investigate various aspects of communication. This study is meant as a preliminary comparison of trust and control between interpersonal and mass communication. Drawing on the treatment of modernity and postmodernity, I investigate how individuals perceive their own action versus both friends' and other people's actions across two types of information sources -- the radio and a friend -- and types of messages -- going to a concert and going to a restaurant. These messages were chosen for similarities -- both are enjoyable experiences -- and differences, as we might expect various levels of expertise across sources on these topics. Data was taken from a college vignette study, and levels of trust in the content of the message were found to vary across sources of information, and a weak gender effect is evident when analyzing differences between perceptions of self and others' actions.

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INTRODUCTION

The continued growth of information technologies is motivation to extend research in the field of media and communication. While there is little hope in ending the debate concerning the degree of hegemonic power controlled by the mass media, we can continue to investigate audience interpretations and uses of media messages. Given the central role of mass communication in sociological writings on modernity and postmodernity, I draw from these bodies of literature to develop a framework for which to understand audience behavior. Within this framework a comparison between mass communication-audience interactions and interpersonal communication. The aim is to find similarities and differences between these types of communication at the individual level.

MODERNITY

Modernity is characterized by the integration of social institutions which wield hegemonic power over individuals (Giddens 1991; Shils 1982). The mass media represent one of these institutions, though the depth and direction of control has been constantly debated (e.g., Fiske 1992; Gamson et al. 1992; Morley 1980). Whether researchers felt that the media was omnipotent (e.g., Bagdikian 1992; Marcuse 1964; Mitroff and Bennis 1989) or played only a part in constructing reality (e.g., Gamson 1992), this institution received a great deal of attention from all sides of this debate. The following is only meant as a small depiction of this literature.

Hardt (1992) has pointed out that many of the critical approaches to modern mass media have argued that mass communication in modern society was developed to help convey the needs of industry and the politics of the day. These needs, in turn, were based on pragmatic demands such as control over market share and successful political campaigns. This leads, according to the Frankfurt school (Frankfurt 1972), to audiences which need quick-fixes and seek these from those in positions of authority which appear within the channels of mass communication. We become cultural dupes at the mercy of our cultural and technocratic leaders.

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Giddens (1991) has taken a somewhat different approach to the role of the mass media in a modern society. According to Giddens, audience members still seek advice from experts found amongst the airwaves and pages of the mass media (including mass produced self-help books), but their goal is to learn how to avoid risky situations. This aversion to risk is a result of vicarious experiences gained through consumption of mediated images. With the proliferation of mass media channels (newspapers, radio, television, cable, Internet, etc.), modern audiences are inundated with images from around the world which often portray the violence done to -- and often by -- humanity (wars, famine, transportation accidents, natural disasters, etc.). Given the feelings of proximity which accompany these media images and stories, audience members feel threatened by circumstances which are beyond their control. They are forced to turn to technocratic experts to tell them what is safe and what to avoid.

Thompson (1995) views the mass media as an institution which has reordered time and space within modern society. Media consumption has become "a routine, practical activity which individuals carry out as an integral part of their everyday lives" (38). The outcome of this process is that the mass media now serves as both a producer and mirror of our self-fashioning. While mentioning that other forces do act upon our socialization, Thompson states that "we must not lose sight of the fact that, in a world increasingly permeated by the products of the media industries, a major new arena has been created for the process of self-fashioning" (43).

For each of these authors, the mass media have become both a cause and outcome of modern society. The various organizations that make up this institution have become a source of information that people use to make sense of their lives, and well as a tool for those in power to control their constituents. Not everyone, though, agrees with this approach. For some, the media are polysemous, and always have been (e.g., Gamson et al 1992), while others argue that life experiences shape media consumption as much, if not more, than the media shapes our life experiences (e.g., Fiske 1992; Hoijer 1992). For others, the transition to a postmodern society has changed the role of the mass media.

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POSTMODERNITY

Postmodernity, as compared to modernity, is typified by a return to, or celebration of, individual freedom, though some writers feel that much of that freedom often imitates popular cultural icons (e.g., Bauman 1992). According to Lyotard (1993), the postmodern era is characterized by the emancipation from the stranglehold of science, progress, and other hegemonic powers. This is not to mean that technology vanishes or that audience members automatically challenge new technological innovations. What it does mean, however, is that new technology is not automatically thought of as progress. For an information medium whose lifeblood is technological, this can be problematic.

Gergen (1999) has argued that postmodern media technology has undermined the individual as the original moral center of society. The reasons for this contention includes plasticity – the increased speed of information dissemination offers new and unique ways to combine experiences – and, transience – new identities are formed and dissolved at a quicker pace than in the past. These tendencies of current information technologies has the effect of erasing a core self within the individual, which is the anchor, according the Gergen, of moral identity.

Bauman (1999) charges that postmodern society is a consumer society which has little need for massive, assembly-line industries. The role of the media within this type of society is to bombard the consumer with images of consumer goods; images that raise feelings of inadequacy among consumers until they purchase the commodities. These purchased commodities, in turn, quickly become obsolete, replaced by other needs constructed by marketing departments and placed within the mass media. In the end, consumers are left with little direction in their lives, as well as no precedent or model for how to cope with stability.

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In looking at the media and self in postmodern society, Dowd (1996) has gone so far as to argue that much of the sociological and psychological writings in this area are inadequate for explaining our present-day situation. The overabundance of mass mediated messages have taken the form of surrogate parents or friends, and so we no longer have to show our true feelings in public, if we can even fathom true feelings. The outcome of this departure from a true self in every situation is not Gergen's or Bauman's lost, immoral self, but a continuing search for similar individuals. While this search can be partially fulfilled in consuming media images, without interpersonal interactions, the self is never completely fulfilled.

In both of these reviews of modernity and postmodernity -- which is not meant to be representative -- two essential aspects of communication are missing. First, much of the work is conjectural; actual people were never asked to participate in a study. Bauman (1992) has argued that we spend too much time trying to learn about the world through television (or in this case, through reading and writing theoretical treatises on how the mass media communicates information to audiences), and not enough time walking through the streets and learning how

society is possible through the observation and study of actual interactions. This ignores any possible differences in audiences, such as racial, ethnic, gender, or regional differentiations. Second, little is said about interpersonal communication. Purcell (1997) has argued that mass-mediated and interpersonal communication are parts of a dialectic relationship, and dichotomies of these types of communication are based on old or false assumptions. Rubin and Rubin (1985), on the other hand, contend that the mass media cannot attend to all of our needs, forcing us to seek interpersonal communication. Finally, Ten Eyck (1998) has made the distinction between these types of communication in terms of social capital. From the approach, interpersonal communication is directed at mobilizing specific social capital, while mass mediated communication is based on mobilizing some social capital among whatever audience members are listening (reading, viewing, etc.). The methodology used in this study addresses both concerns, and helps to investigate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Respondents treat interpersonal and mass mediated communication the same way when asked to act on the information.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents will see little difference between themselves and others acting on information coming through either interpersonal or mass mediated information.

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A null hypothesis in the first case would lead us to argue that we live in a modern society. This line of reasoning is drawn from the contention that within a modern society, the communication process is a two-step process in which community leaders interpret mass communication information and pass these interpretations to their local constituents (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz 1957), while outside voices within a postmodern society are interpreted individually and given equal weight (Bauman 1992). Rejection of the second hypothesis would lend credence to the postmodern world view, as postmodern individuals tend to view themselves as more impulsive and autonomous than their modernist counterparts (Turner 1976). Finally, there are two reasons for using null hypothesis which are typically difficult to prove in these types of studies. First, if a null hypothesis can be rejected, it strengthens the substantive hypothesis (Frankfort-Nachmias 1997). Second, by using null hypotheses for both cases, both the modern and postmodern arguments have equal success of being substantiated.

DATA AND METHODS

A vignette based on the third-person hypothesis was given to undergraduate students enrolled in two sociology survey courses at a major southern university in the Spring of 1999.¹ The reason for using third-person research to develop the vignette is that this line of work has dealt with issues of control and trust (e.g., Atwood 1994; Duck and Mullin 1995; Gunther 1991; Ten Eyck 1998). A total of 306 students took part in the vignette study during class time, of which 305 identified their gender (196 females and 109 males). Students did not receive extra credit for their participation.

Four separate vignettes were randomly distributed in each class. In each case, respondents were asked to imagine they had heard from either a friend or the radio about either a free concert or a new restaurant. In the case of hearing from a friend, they received a phone call from their friend and had to make a decision in the next half-hour to an hour on whether they would act on the information.² When hearing the information on the radio, it was either a commercial for the free concert or a "great new restaurant" in town. Again, respondents had only an hour to decide to act on the information.

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Respondents were then asked to choose between four different possible responses to the message. These responses included "go to the [concert or restaurant] alone"; "ask a friend to go to the [concert or restaurant], but still go even if they are unwilling to go"; "ask a friend to go to the [concert or restaurant], and stay home if they do not want to go"; and, "do not go to the [concert or restaurant]." The middle two responses were collapsed into a single category to reflect that action would possibly depend on the action of others.

After giving a course of action for themselves, respondents were asked whether or not they thought (1) their friends and (2) most other people would go to the event. These questions were asked on a three-point scale: "More Likely to Go" (+1 to self action) to "No Difference" (+0 to self action) to "Less Likely to Go" (-1 from self action). Respondents were also asked about their frequency of going out to eat or attending concerts,³ the amount of trust they gave to information coming from friends and the radio about either concerts or restaurants, how many hours a day they listen to the radio, their gender, age, year in school, and major.

The purpose for these vignettes was to set out scenarios that realistically could be acted upon by college students (as compared to vignettes concerning issues such as biotechnology or political actions). In addition, both situations could be considered positive, in that most people view going to a restaurant or concert as a form of entertainment. At the same time, these two types of activities may be dissimilar enough that different information sources would be sought for validation. This offers the opportunity to investigate if the content and context of information are treated differently across situations that are somewhat similar.

RESULTS

I was interested in using very specific situations to investigate how people use and act on information. Earlier studies have investigated general perceptions concerning the power of the media (e.g., Fields and Schuman 1976; Gunther 1991), but if we assume audience members are active participants in the media process, then we cannot assume they are decoding each message in the same way -- a postmodernity approach to the mass media. Table 1 reports information concerning reactions to whether the respondent thought s/he would act on the information, as compared to friends and general others. This is the classical third-person approach to media studies, and gives us some insight into the amount of control individuals felt they have concerning mass mediated and interpersonal information.

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Table 1. Comparisons between Self, Friend, and Others on Action-Orientations

Situation	Self	Friend	Others	N
Overall	2.21	2.19	--	303
	2.22	--	2.05***	281
Concert	2.25	2.23	--	152
	2.25	--	2.03***	147
Restaurant	2.18	2.15		151
	2.19	--	2.07*	135
Hearing Information from the Radio	2.19	2.15	--	146
	2.20	--	2.15	135
Hearing Information from a Friend	2.24	2.23	--	157
	2.25	--	1.96***	147
Hearing about a Restaurant from a Friend	2.21	2.24	--	72
	2.23	--	1.91***	66
Hearing about a Concert from a Friend	2.26	2.22	--	85
	2.26	--	2.00***	81
Hearing about a Restaurant from the Radio	2.15	2.08	--	79
	2.16	--	2.22	69
Hearing about a Concert from the Radio	2.24	2.24	--	67
	2.24	--	2.08	66

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

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The first thing that is noticeable in Table 1 is the lack of differences between the perceived action of self and friends. In no case is the difference between these two perceptions statistically

significant, and in only one situation – hearing about a restaurant from a friend – is there even a suggestion of a third-person effect. The differences between the perceived action of self and general others are more pronounced – six of the nine differences are statistically significant at the .10 level or greater. In each case, respondents felt they were more likely to go to either event as compared to others. While the higher scores for action would support the modernity view of mass media information, the fact that there are significant differences between self and others highlights an active -- postmodern -- process of interpretation.

At this point it is important to look more closely at the sources of information. Earlier work on mass-mediated versus interpersonal communication argued for a two-step process in which leaders took mass-mediated information and passed it on to their followers (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz 1957). The rise and spread of mass communication since the 1940s and '50s, though, has called into question the intermediary role of receiving mass mediated information. The majority of citizens in most industrialized countries can now attend to mass communicated messages, often times even if they do not want to participate (Thompson 1995). It is still up to the individual as to how much trust they put in the context of messages. Table 2 gives the mean levels of trust for information coming from friends and the radio concerning concerts and restaurants.

Table 2. Levels of Trust Across Source and Situation

Source	Concert	Restaurant	N
Friend	3.08	3.24***	306
Radio	3.50	2.69***	305

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

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In both cases there is a statistically significant difference ($p < .01$) between the level of trust in the information coming from friends and the radio, *but it is not in the same direction*. Respondents had the most trust in the radio when hearing about a concert, and least likely to trust the radio when hearing about a restaurant. This does not fit the profile of a passive mass audience, as the most extreme scores of trust were given to information carried by the radio. If this finding is generalizable in any sense, it points to a society of postmodern audience members. Of course, the findings may be different in the information tested concerned a risky situation.

Finally, I wanted to investigate possible factors that may have any effect on perceptions of action, as well as differences between perceptions of self action and others. Given the small difference between the perceived action of self and friends, I only investigate the action of self and general others. The next two tables each contain four OLS regression models (Table 3 -- self actions and Table 4 -- others' actions). The first model in each table shows action regressed on the situation, source of information, the frequency of attending concerts or going to restaurants, the amount of radio listened to each day, the amount of trust in the radio, the amount of trust in friends, year in school, and gender. The second model contains an interaction term of source x

gender; the third contains an interaction term of situation x gender; and, the fourth model contains an interaction term of source x situation.

The best predictor of self action in the first model of Table 3 is how often respondents attend these types of events. This is evidence of how media messages are used, and compliments work on the knowledge-gap hypothesis in which people pay more attention to information in which they are interested (e.g., Chew and Palmer 1994). The amount of trust respondents have in their friends is also positively related to self action, which is likely an outcome of having more trust in friends in terms of hearing about restaurants, though the weak, positive relationship with the situation variable is evident that respondents were more likely to see themselves going to the concert, which may be a consequence of relying on college students in this specific vignette study, or that the concert was free.

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The second model in Table 3 contains the interaction term of source x gender. Work on the third-person hypothesis has not found any differences between males and females (Tiedge et al. 1991). At the same time, research has found gender differences in using and acting on information, such as women being more likely to take suggestions made by others into account as compared to males (Ibarra 1997; Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994). As mentioned, the work reviewed for this study in the area of modernity and postmodernity has not made any kind of comparisons between audience members. Still, enough evidence exists to continue looking for gender differences, which led me to investigate gender differences across sources and situations. The interaction term is significant but weak, which points to a possible small interaction between gender and source of information on self action. The interpretation of this effect must include the constant term, source and gender variables, and interactive term. Since these are dummy variables, the constant term becomes the effect of females (gender = 0) hearing the information from a friend (source = 0) on self action. The source variable is the additional effect of females (gender = 0) hearing the information from the radio (source = 1), which is not significantly different from females hearing the information from a friend. The gender variable is the effect of men (gender = 1) hearing the information from a friend (source = 0) and added to the constant term, again not significantly different than women hearing from a friend. The interaction term becomes the effect of men (gender = 1) hearing the information from the radio (source = 1) added to all other terms, since values of both variables are 1. This is a weakly significant negative interaction, with the largest difference between men hearing the information from a friend and men hearing the information from the radio.

The third model, which contains the interaction term of gender x situation, and the fourth model, which contains the interaction term of situation x source, do not contribute much in terms of stronger predictions given the added complexity of the interaction terms. Neither interaction term is significant, and the R-squares are not sufficiently higher to warrant including the interaction term.

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Table 3. Regression models for self action

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Situation (0 = Restaurant)	.161* (.093)	.150* (.093)	.093 (.106)	.127 (.117)
What was the source (0 = Friend)	-.062 (.066)	.021 (.082)	-.056 (.066)	-.095 (.094)
How often do you go?	.161*** (.048)	.162*** (.048)	.157*** (.048)	.163*** (.048)
How much radio do you listen to?	.011 (.018)	.007 (.019)	.010 (.018)	.012 (.019)
Do you trust the radio?	.050 (.059)	.060 (.059)	.048 (.059)	.054 (.059)
Do you trust your friends?	.171** (.074)	.158** (.074)	.172** (.074)	.168** (.075)
Year in School	.032 (.034)	.032* (.034)	.036 (.034)	.032 (.034)
Gender (0 = Female)	.047 (.070)	.151 (.094)	-.049 (.098)	.049 (.070)
Gender x Source	--	-.230* (.139)	--	--
Gender x Situation	--	--	.192 (.137)	--
Situation x Source	--	--	--	.066 (.133)
Constant	1.036*** (.300)	1.019*** (.299)	1.082*** (.302)	1.047*** (.301)
R-square	.076	.084	.082	.076
N	299	299	299	296

* p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

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Table 4 contains the models for predicting other people's actions. None of these models are very strong, as the R-squares of all models never reaches .05. The weak positive relationship in the first model between source and other people's actions does point to a tendency to think that other people will be more likely to act on the radio information as compared to information coming from a friend. The interaction term in the second model is also significant, though weak. The direction of the interaction is now positive, and so the model can be interpreted as males are more likely to think others will act on information coming from the radio than from friends. In addition, the strong, negative effect of gender can be interpreted as males perceive that other people hearing the information from a friend are less likely to act differently than themselves. In the third model, there is no significant interaction effect, though source again is weakly related to

perceptions of other people's actions. Finally, while no significant interaction appears in the fourth model, the source variable is significant. The interpretation of this is that when the source is radio and the situation is a restaurant this scenario is significantly different from hearing about a restaurant from a friend (constant term).

Table 4. Regression models for other people action

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Situation (0 = Restaurant)	.043 (.147)	.069* (.147)	.060 (.167)	.190 (.182)
What was the source (0 = Friend)	.171* (.103)	.046 (.128)	.169* (.104)	.316** (.148)
How often do you go?	.103 (.074)	.099 (.074)	.105 (.075)	.098 (.074)
How much radio do you listen to?	.030 (.029)	.036 (.029)	.031 (.029)	.031 (.029)
Do you trust the radio?	-.009 (.092)	-.026 (.092)	-.009 (.092)	-.030 (.093)
Do you trust your friends?	.100 (.119)	.122 (.119)	.100 (.119)	.106 (.118)
Year in school	-.067 (.054)	-.065 (.054)	-.067 (.054)	-.067 (.054)
Gender (0 = Female)	-.122 (.111)	-.286** (.149)	-.097 (.157)	-.137 (.111)
Gender x Source	--	.361* (.220)	--	--
Gender x Situation	--	--	-.049 (.218)	--
Situation x Source	--	--	--	-.285 (.209)
Constant	1.517*** (.480)	1.539*** (.479)	1.505*** (.484)	1.496*** (.480)
R-square	.038	.047	.038	.044
N	279	279	279	297

* p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

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DISCUSSION

The debate over whether we are passive (modern) or active (postmodern) audiences continues in many arenas (e.g., Biocca 1988). This study, I think, does show that the modernity approach to the mass media is too constrained by links to a hegemonic view of society. The difference in level of trust in the radio highlights the active interpretation of mass-mediated information, while

a lack of correlation between trust in friends and radio ($r = .0025$) emphasizes that I have not captured some trust factor that is high for some respondents and low for others. Instead, respondents perceive themselves using information sources on a situational basis. While not absolute evidence that this is a postmodern age of active information consumers, these findings do tend to favor that interpretation.

The above interpretation should also take into further account information sources. If we look more closely at the differences between using a friend or the radio as an information source (Table 1), we see that these are not treated the same. First, it is more likely that the self will act on the information if it is coming from a friend (2.245 vs. 2.195). Second, there is a bigger difference between the actions of self and others upon hearing from a friend than when hearing from the radio. This fits with the modernity approach, in that the mass media are expected to be authorities across various situations. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, may argue that modernity is characterized by general levels of trust across situations, and that these differences reflect active participation in all exchanges of information. The fact that these differences are based largely on situational context is further proof of this interpretation.

The idea of gender differences in terms of message context needs further development. I would think that feminine theorists would be interested in finding out if men do more to distinguish between communication sources (does not mean their decisions are correct), while the socialization of women to be nurturing and caregivers weakens their ability to treat communication sources differently – they are expected to be kind and understanding to all. If this is the case, and the weak interaction terms makes this a very tentative case, it could possibly be used to demonstrate that women hold onto an ideology of modernity, while men have entered a postmodern state. I expect this stance to be voraciously debated, debunked, and advocated.

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Finally, I must admit that I have always questioned the generalists that stand by their grand theories of modernity, postmodernity, poststructuralism, and so forth. What led me to use these frameworks was the lack of romance and understanding conveyed by the terms "active and passive audiences." Modernity and postmodernity do offer perspectives on which to develop more insightful and useful approaches to both media organizations and audiences. Whether or not more useful terms and perspectives can be developed is a function of our own interpretations and actions.

FOOTNOTES

1 The basic premise of the third-person effect is that individuals will feel that they are less susceptible to mass media information than other people, and this effect typically increases as one moves further from the self (e.g., friends vs. generalized others) (e.g., Fields and Schuman 1976; Gunther 1991).

2 "Act on the information" refers to going to either the concert or the restaurant. While not going the concert or restaurant is also an "act," I use this terminology for heuristic purposes.

3 The frequency of going to eat or attending concerts was coded as follows:

1 = Not very often (less than once a month for restaurants; less than once a year for concerts).

2 = Sometimes (less than once a week but more than once a month of restaurants; less than once a month but more than once a year for concerts).

3 = Often (more than once a week for restaurants; more than once a month for concerts).

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