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Understanding Mass Self-Communication *Quick Look*

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IJO Quick Look Series

Scope and Intent

The SMA IJO effort assesses the ways in which the Air Force (and by extension the Joint Force) can most effectively consider and integrate information into its activities to influence attitudes and behaviors across the competition-conflict continuum. Whether intentional or unintentional, every action or inaction, communicates a message (i.e., we cannot *not* communicate). Therefore, it is important to include communication as a first-order concern in planning and operations rather than an afterthought. As the Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment (JCOIE) recognizes, “The future Joint Force will need to transition to a model that helps it visualize how audiences interpret information to facilitate effective and meaningful communication” (JCOIE, 2018).

The challenge of effectively using and communicating information is one that faces all individuals, groups and organizations. There is a broad body of research across multiple disciplines that addresses the issues faced by the Air Force and Joint Force. This Quick Look series mines that literature and identifies the theories, findings and applications that can provide a foundation for Joint Force efforts to effectively integrate information and influence into its activities across the competition-conflict continuum.

Series Structure

This series of Quick Looks builds out from a central hub; a model that lays out the elements and interactions that comprise an effective transactional communication process, and describes how internal and external influences can distort that process, causing miscommunication and misperception. Building from this, we have identified specific topics that bear most directly on the challenge facing the Joint Forces, and provided a deeper dive into these in a dedicated Quick Look. Figure A provides a visual of that coverage, and also illustrates how, through their connection to the central hub, each, while a stand-alone piece, both informs and is informed by the others.

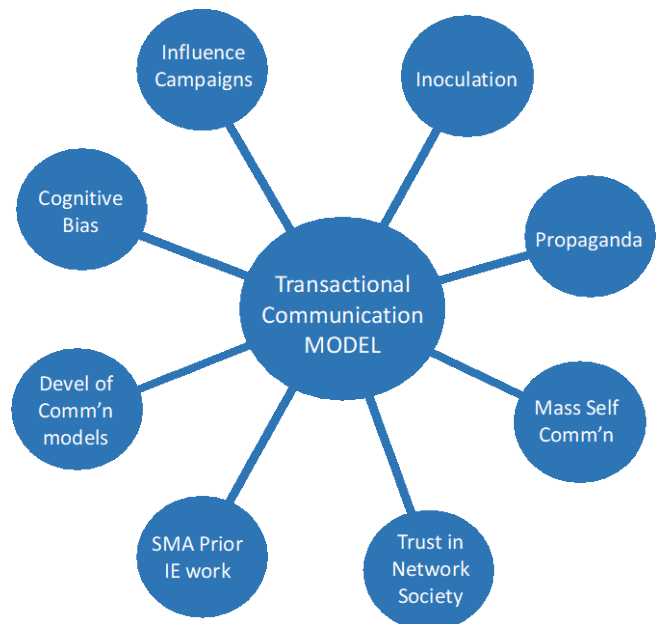


Figure A: Structure of IJO Quick Look Series

Understanding Mass Self-Communication

This brief discusses a new form of communication within networked societies—Castells’ so-called mass self-communication. The brief highlights how barriers between old and new media are disappearing as increasing technological access creates new forms of labor, challenges traditional understandings of the communication process, and empowers individuals to make otherwise inconceivable system-wide impacts.

Introduction—What is Mass Self-Communication?

This Quick Look introduces Manuel Castells’ concept of mass self-communication in a networked society.¹ Mass self-communication can be defined as a new form of communication, distinct from both interpersonal and mass communication and capable of reaching global audiences, where “the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, [and] the retrieval of specific messages (or content) is self-selected” (Castells, 2009, p. 55).

In other words, mass self-communication is the use of digital media in which users can create their own content via chosen software or sites and potentially reach a global audience. The cumulative effect of these actions by many communicators creates an undirected, emergent phenomenon in which a society effectively communicates with itself through the collective actions of its many communicators.

That mass self-communication relies on technology-driven communication access to users and information as part of a broader networked society is important. Each potential mass self-communicator can be conceived of as a node in a larger network, across which are dispersed various resources, expertise, and skills, among other nodes and subnetworks.² Nodes capable of autonomous or so-called “self-programmable” labor are able to independently weave together novel combinations of network access, information, resources, and skills to produce new knowledge, efficiencies, and solutions on their own accord.³

However, not only are nodes capable of such autonomous labor in networks, but the fruits of such self-programmed labor can actively interact with and impact other nodes in a networked society through the process of mass self-communication. If a networked society is imagined as representative of an integrated social consciousness, mass self-communication can be conceived of as a single generated thought—capable of originating anywhere, spreading everywhere, and indelibly leaving its imprint upon the functioning of the collective.

¹ See related Quick Look report on Manuel Castells’ Network Society, entitled “Communicative Power in a Globalized ‘Network Society’” (<https://nsiteam.com/communicative-power-in-a-globalized-network-society/>).

² A subnetwork is defined as a logical subdivision of a larger network into two or more networks through the process of subnetting. See <https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc950>.

³ The speed with which this can now be accomplished is an important technological distinction.

It is important to note that the novel products of mass self-communicating nodes are not necessarily healthy to overall network functioning, nor intentionally in service to any grander process or vision. Further, once novel products are introduced within the network, their artifacts can reoccur, be reinterpreted, and be (re)introduced irrespective of spatial time-distance through the process of mass self-communication. As illustration, see the following footnote.⁴

Before giving a fuller glimpse into the implications of mass self-communication, there is one further consideration to note: A key consequence of mass self-communication is that interpretation of reality becomes a hyper-individualized experience lacking grand shared narratives. An individual's cognitive processing power hits limits in respect to abilities to reimagine and reevaluate the environment; at some point, new information begins simply to reinforce previously understood interpretations.⁵ Thus, the increases in information processing required by mass self-communication can create societal fractures by reinforcing biased interpretations of the environment. Also, note that mass self-communication largely takes place within the context of competition-based economic exchange; that is, set against one another.

Other important considerations relevant to mass self-communication:

1. Mass self-communication blurs the distinction between sender(s) and receiver(s), as the intention driving messaging may be in service to construed network persona.⁶
2. Mass self-communication often mimics the design functionality of the media platform. As a consequence, messaging often resembles the branding/advertising techniques allowable within the platform rather than a conversation (viz., the medium informs the message⁷).
3. Mass self-communication renders message control impossible, as the number of access points and participatory nodes exercising agency disperses and democratizes system power.
4. An enabling aspect of mass self-communication is that available media content can be reformatted in almost any form and transmitted across the entire network at essentially the speed of thought.

Distinguishing Mass Self-Communication from Traditional Communication

The concept of mass self-communication needs to be understood and differentiated from the related concepts of mass communication and interpersonal communication. *Mass communication* is the process of

⁴ As a brief exercise in Mass Self-Communication, see the following link: <https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-claude-shannons-information-theory-invented-the-future-20201222/>. Note that as a node within the purview of the SMA sub-network, you are now exposed to information curated to complement an otherwise disconnected Quick Look briefing. Further, the linked article offers interpretative insights into a historical communication figure and an understanding of communication as probabilistic that are now capable of permeating across the entire SMA, though such was likely not the specific intention of the article's author. Note that as a potential self-programmable node capable of mass self-communication, you now have the ability to repackage, reinterpret, and otherwise utilize the information, comments, contacts, and images scattered throughout the article for your own purposes, across your individualized network contacts. Further, so long as the linked article remains a digital artifact, you may return and (re)utilize the article again and again, reinterpreting the information anew upon each visit.

⁵ See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26379489?seq=1>. Neurologically the process hardwires biases. See <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/articles/understanding-bias-and-brain> ("a process known as 'essentializing'").

⁶ E.g., in posting image(s) of self on social media, the social media user becomes both sender and receiver (repeatedly exposed to image(s) of self that were self-selected), emailing oneself a link to an article, reading one's own published material online; etc.

⁷ See McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (1967), *The medium is the message*, New York, pp. 123, 126-128.

imparting and exchanging information through mass media to large segments of the population. *Interpersonal communication* is an interactive form of communication where exchange of information happens between two or more designated people. Various forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self-communication) do not substitute for one another. Rather, they are able to coexist, interact, and complement each other. Interaction between and among these three forms of communication has considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change (Castells, 2009). As these communication forms converge into composite, interactive, and digital content, the most important dimension of this conversion happens within the brains of individual people and through their social interaction with others (Jenkins, 2006). Before the convergence of forms happens, a number of critical transformations occur within the communication process. Various academics have labeled these transformations as “the communication revolution” (Mansell, 2002; McChesney, 2007) and “the inflection point” (Cowhey & Aronson, 2009).

The key difference between mass communication and mass self-communication is the level of control at the point of entry into the communication environment (Castells, 2009). Within the traditional mass communication process, there are filters established by media outlet owners, advertisers, editors, and professional journalists that prime or block the information and images being distributed. Within the mass self-communication process, the internet becomes a marketplace for unsupervised messaging. These messages expand the scope of sources of information, misinformation, and disinformation. As a consequence, message credibility decreases, while diversity increases (Castells, 2009). As Andén-Papadopoulos writes, “source of authority to operate as a testimony-producer is no longer reserved for discourse elites but increasingly a function of the connectivity and the capacity . . . granted [to] average citizens and other non-officials” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 759).

Emergence of mass self-communication

Mass self-communication emerged as a new form of communication through several transformations. The *technological transformation* dealt with the digitization of communication, the emergence of advanced software, computer networking, and the wide spread of wireless networks. The *organizational and institutional transformation* happened through changes to the structure of communications, where senders and receivers became media producers as well as the audience. The *cultural transformation* occurred through the development of a globalized culture and the simultaneous rise of individualism and communalism as two opposing (but equally powerful) cultural patterns (Baker, 2005; Castells, 2009; Norris, 2000; Rantanen, 2005). The *power relationship transformation* is described through the growing influence of the private sector over public regulatory institutions and the shift towards the communication revolution in the service of business interests (Castells, 2009).

Castells argues that the broader “Network Society” in which mass self-communication takes place is constructed upon a global web of communication networks that engage in exchanges of information on a constant basis. There are four cultural trends that characterize the so-called “Network Society”:

- *Consumerism* is driven by the advertising industry and the global entertainment industry.
- *Cosmopolitanism* aims to construct a global public sphere around shared values of global citizenship. It can be viewed through ideological, political, or religious lenses.

- *Multiculturalism* refers to the astonishing diversity of cultural production and distribution of content.
- *Networked individualism* refers to the platform of choice in the diverse universe of mass self-communication, and the internet, as a communication network, in turn serves as an instrument for further diffusion of consumerism, cosmopolitanism, and multiculturalism (Castells, 2009).

Implications of Mass Self-Communication

Castells (2009) provides an extensive list of implications for mass self-communication, distilled as follows:

- Communicating actors in current society have more autonomy and freedom of communication. However, it is important to note that the power relationship between corporate media (mass communication) and creative audiences (mass self-communication) is asymmetric and privileges the first group (Fuchs, 2009).
- Mass self-communication creates new labor, new markets, and new opportunities across networked societies.
- Media groups have become more integrated into global multimedia networks. Global companies leverage partnerships and cross-investments with national, regional, and local companies to facilitate market expansion. As regional media groups actively import global content and localize it, global media organizations pursue local partners to deliver more customized content to audiences. As a result, two processes (localization and globalization) work together to expand a globalized network society.
- The formation of a new global multimedia system that connects media financing, production, and distribution within and between countries as interlocked multimedia businesses organized around strategic partnerships.
- Entry points in the communication process are multiplied and diversified. This is evident even within countries with state-controlled media (such as China).⁸
- As mass self-communication happens within networked societies, there is a loss of shared cultural and narrative guardrails that help individuals interpret broader messages and societal action; culture is effectively individualized or atomized within subnetworks.

Conclusions & Relevance for the Joint Force

The rise of mass self-communication has undoubtedly increased the autonomy of communicating agents, as individuals became both senders and receivers of messages. Further, the low barriers to entry to technologically networked societies give state and non-state actors the ability to spread information as mass self-communicators, blurring the distinction between individuals and organizations in media-based interactions.

For the US Joint Force, mass self-communication means that adversaries are capable of using information to gain advantages and impede advancements of US strategic efforts, the prime examples of which are disinformation campaigns.⁹ Disinformation campaigns do not happen in a vacuum; they are fueled by the

⁸ For an example of how online networks helped establish a social force that resisted the power domination of the state and the state-controlled media, refer to Fu & Chau (2014).

⁹ For a deeper look at disinformation and information, refer to the Quick Look, "Propaganda: Indexing and framing and the tools of disinformation" (<https://nsiteam.com/propaganda-indexing-and-framing-and-the-tools-of-disinformation/>).

audience's concerted efforts at spreading (sharing) content. Understanding how mass self-communication works gives the Joint Force advantages in identifying disinformation that is detrimental to US strategic interests. For example, we know that information in mass self-communication is multimodal (it can be reformatted in almost any form). Identifying disinformation in one form can be helpful in preventing its spread into other forms. Understanding how information changes from one form to another is also of value, as intelligible patterns emerge in each manifestation that can trace origin, entry points, and structuration.¹⁰

Further, power relationships between corporate media and technological platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Google, etc.) and their creative audiences (mass self-communicators) are not symmetrical, privileging the former over the latter. Therefore, strategic efforts to alter how platforms segment and target audiences, as well as, in concert with corporate designers, re-envisioning the platform functions allowing and encouraging interactions between audiences members, may prove more fruitful than focusing solely on disinformation detection and user literacy.

Additionally, the Joint Force places importance on changing or maintaining perceptions, attitudes, and other elements that drive desired behavior (in line with US strategic interests) (Mulgund & Kelly, 2020), and understanding the role of mass self-communication in this process is critical. How information travels within mass self-communication processes is relevant to two specific military uses of information (as identified by Mulgund & Kelly, 2020): (1) informing domestic and international audiences and (2) influencing relevant actors (Mulgund & Kelly, 2020, p. 3).

When the Joint Force's objective is to inform domestic and international audiences, the remixing of message meaning across a variety of subnetworks should be considered. In networked societies, the creation of message meaning happens as individuals "remix" the messages they receive with interpretations derived from participation within their own relational subnetworks.

In reality, the framing that informs human decision and action becomes a specific individual interpretation based upon selective exposure to content. Thus, the overwhelming amount of information available online, coupled with an expanding ability to mass self-communicate in expression of self, produces new labor value and new efficiencies at the expense of shared meaning.

¹⁰ See <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/11/an-ai-tool-can-distinguish-between-a-conspiracy-theory-and-a-true-conspiracy/>.

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