Polymedia Distinctions

The Sociocultural Stratification of Interpersonal Media Practices in Couple Relationships

André Jansson

Abstract

"Polymedia", a concept introduced by Madianou and Miller (2012), refers to the everyday conditions of abundant media resources. Whereas such conditions imply that the classificatory processes concerning media as cultural properties become increasingly complex, few studies have tried to produce a general picture of how interpersonal media practices are part of sociocultural reproduction. This study is based on a nationwide survey conducted in Sweden in 2012 and focuses on mediated communication among "polymedia couples" (39 percent of all Swedish couples). The article demonstrates that sociocultural factors are important for explaining media uses, also when media accessibility is more or less unlimited, and pinpoints how preferences for certain modalities of communication are linked to other lifestyle practices as markers of taste. Most notably, email communication attains a higher sociocultural status than online chat functions and social media, testifying to the enduring significance of asynchronous, text-based communication in a longer format as a culturally distinctive mode of intimate communication.

Keywords: close relationships, cultural distinction, interpersonal communication, media use, new media, polymedia, social space

Introduction

Today's polymedia environment offers a diverse array of resources, such as email, text messaging and online chat functions, for staying in touch with those we care about. When it comes to couple relationships – the empirical focus of the present article – studies show that the closer partners' relationship becomes, the more media they incorporate into their communicative repertoire. Synchronous online media applications in particular have become important in sustaining the phatic communication of intimate relationships (Miller 2008, Jensen & Sorensen 2013). Technologically mediated communication and face-to-face interaction become interwoven in complex, yet more or less routinized, ways (Baym 2010, Linke 2011, Caughlin & Sharabi 2013). It is also shown that mediated communication is important in sustaining both long-distance and physically proximate relationships, although different media work in different ways, depending or their modality. For example, the longer text format and asynchronicity of email may sustain intimate forms of information disclosure between partners who are geographically separated (Jiang & Hancock 2013; Madianou & Miller 2012). This testifies to the well-known assertion that (mediated) communication, even in a networked

society, is just as much about community maintenance over time (ritual) as it is about the conveyance of information through space (transmission) (Carey 1989).

At the same time, media practices have classificatory functions. The media devices and applications that individuals use can be understood as *cultural properties* that express the communicator's identity and social position. However, these processes of classification, famously explored by Bourdieu (1979/1984) in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, have received relatively little attention in analyses of mediated interpersonal communication. As indicated above, much of the research in this area has dealt with how the affordances of different technologies affect the qualities of social connectivity ("bonding" and "bridging") in general terms. Furthermore, such analyses (and generalized assumptions) are often based on samples from very limited segments of the population, which implies that it is impossible to draw any conclusions as to what interpersonal media practices stand for as cultural markers.

Against this backdrop, the present article initiates an exploration of how mediated forms of communication within couple relationships are shaped as classified and classifying practices. Such a Bourdieusian, practice-oriented approach implies that media uses are understood as being differently attuned depending on the sociocultural context and thus as part of the ongoing reproduction of social structures and hierarchies in society (see also Bräuchler & Postill 2010). Bourdieu included quite a few media practices (such as musical taste and regular reading of various newspapers and magazines) among other cultural practices in his analyses of lifestyles and social space. In a similar manner, the "cultural turn" in media studies during the 1980s brought about an interest in questions of distinction and symbolic capital, manifested for example in the work of Morley (1992), Silverstone & Hirsch (1992) and Moores (1993, 1996). But these studies pertain to the mass media era, and the gradual transition to conditions of converging technologies and transmedia texts (see Jenkins 2006, Evans 2011) has rather implied an epistemological reorientation towards questions of technological affordances and new forms of digital agency. Thus far, questions concerning how interpersonal digital communication is part of the sociocultural reproduction of society have received relatively little attention in media studies.

This epistemological development is somewhat paradoxical. The complexity of today's media landscape would instead seem to call for more nuanced explorations of cultural distinctions. There are, however, significant exceptions to the dominant stream, including studies that engage thoroughly with the interplay between habitus and media use (see, e.g., Bengtsson 2011, Danielsson 2014). Most significantly, the current analysis incorporates the assertions made by Madianou & Miller (2012: 125) in their introduction of the term "polymedia," a concept broadly referring to everyday environments of unrestricted access to a plethora of interconnected media. Under such conditions, the authors argue, "the very nature of each individual medium is radically changed by the wider environment of polymedia, since it now exists in a state of contrast, but also synergy, with all others." It thus becomes even more important to look beyond technical differences and affordances, and to develop a perspective that is sensitive to how "in a given cultural and personal context these contrasts become the idiom through which people express distinctions in the form of and purpose of communication itself" (ibid.).

Mediated communication among couples constitutes a particularly interesting case in this regard, as it involves cultural dynamics in which the habitus of two individuals

come together and are brought into mutual, (re-)classifying adjustment. This concerns questions of *what* to communicate (about) as well as *the modes* of communication and *the ways* in which different technological devices and infrastructures are appropriated (or not). For media sociologists, such dynamics provide a micro-cosmos for understanding how the mediatization of social life is related to the social and cultural reproduction of society. Both quantitative studies of stratified taste patterns and in-depth analyses of everyday experiences and negotiations are needed.

The work of Madianou & Miller (2012), which is based on ethnographic fieldwork among "transnational families" (more particularly Filipino migrant mothers working in the UK), demonstrates how contextually specific moral and emotional concerns play into the uses of various media for maintaining close relationships (especially at a distance). The present article implements the analytical framework of polymedia in a quantitative empirical setting to further the discussion on polymedia distinctions on a more structural level. The aim is to answer the following questions:

i) To what extent are the usages of different media, characterized by different modalities, for interpersonal communication among "polymedia couples" shaped by structural factors?

ii) How are such usage patterns associated with other lifestyle practices as distinctive expressions of classified tastes?

In sum, these questions will contribute to an understanding of how interpersonal media practices are linked to the reproductive force of habitus. It is important to note that the focus here is not on preferences for certain technologies, devices or applications; the aim is to differentiate between *the modalities of communication* that various media may enable. The study is based on a nation-wide survey (Society Opinion Media) conducted in Sweden during fall 2012. From this survey a more confined sample was selected, including only those respondents who state that they are in a couple relationship of some kind and whose living conditions broadly converge with the definition of polymedia (thus the term "polymedia couples").[1]

The article begins with an outline of the analytical framework, which integrates Madianou & Miller's (2012) view of polymedia with a discussion of interpersonal media practices as means of distinction, in line with Bourdieu (1984). The discussion also integrates results from recent studies on mediated communication in close relationships. Thereafter follows a section discussing the methodological approach and issues related to sampling and operationalization. The filtered sample, including only "polymedia couples," shows that polymedia is a rather widespread cultural-material condition in Swedish society today. The results section begins with an analysis of general stratification patterns of uses of particular media, and concludes by looking at how these uses are embedded within various lifestyles (based on correlation analysis). It is shown, above all, that email communication attains a more prestigious sociocultural position than do any other media in the study, notably in comparison to Facebook and online chat functions. This testifies to the enduring, and possibly growing, significance of text-based modes of communication in a longer format (akin to letter writing) as a culturally distinctive modality of intimate communication. The article ends with a concluding discussion on the further implications of this study.

Interpersonal Media Practices and the Social Space of Polymedia

Polymedia, according to Madianou & Miller (2012), is both a socio-material condition and an epistemological approach to media practices. As to the first aspect, polymedia refers to a private media environment where individuals can manage their interpersonal relations through a variety of interchangeable devices and applications. Under such "media abundant" conditions, the decision as to which media to use for making contact does not involve any economic considerations, but is rather dependent on which device and application are felt to be most adequate in moral and emotional terms for a particular type of relation, content and/or situation. The authors present a clear definition of the criteria under which one may talk about polymedia in the strict sense of term: First, the individual must have access to "a wide range of at least half a dozen communication media." Madianou & Miller do not justify why half a dozen should be the limit, but the main point is people's ability to afford multiple hardware (such as both a mobile phone and a computer). Second, the individual has to be sufficiently media literate to make use of the media in an adequate manner. Finally, polymedia implies that the costs of communication are linked to infrastructure (especially subscriptions of different kinds) rather than to the individual act of communication. For example, the price of sending fifty emails or text messages is the same as the price of sending one. In sum, polymedia is not an evenly distributed phenomenon. It implicates a material state that can only emerge under conditions of relative affluence. Nevertheless, it has successively become the normalized state of living for millions of people in contemporary (post)industrialized societies.

In epistemological terms, polymedia takes its cue from Levi-Strauss' (1963) anthropological structuralism, which actualizes an approach to media use that treats the media rather as a symbolic environment than as individual channels of communication: "Polymedia is a form of structuralism in which the understanding we have of any one medium becomes less its properties, or affordances, and more its alternative status as against the other media that could equally be employed for that message" (Madianou & Miller 2012: 137). This approach also has a great deal in common with Bourdieu's (1984) cultural sociology. It brings about a renewed interest in cultural distinctions related to interpersonal media practices.

Madianou and Miller note that distinctions were established in earlier stages of media development as well; for example, they point to the significance of letter writing as a sign of educational achievement among Filipino migrants in the UK (ibid.: 57). However, the increasing number of technologies and applications that individuals can use for communicating with one another today implies that the sign value, as well as the social functionality, of each medium is re-negotiated in relation to a more complex and rapidly shifting media environment (see Baym 2010; Broadbent 2011). It becomes increasingly difficult to define to what extent classified preferences and distinctions, as manifested through everyday cultural practice, pertain to certain devices (smartphone, laptop, etc.), applications (Skype, WhatsApp, etc.) or modalities (text-based, audiovisual, etc.) of communication.

Madianou & Miller (2012) discuss the emerging lines of research that polymedia gives rise to. Still, their empirical study is limited owing to its culturally and demographically constrained focus. While their ethnographic study of transnational families, focusing on Filipino mothers in the UK and their children, provides thick descriptions

of how the uses of different media are managed depending on situational and moral conditions, they have limited possibilities to relate these patterns to the overarching reproduction of social space. Their study, as well as other recent studies in various cultural settings, point to the prevalence of socially cohesive value structures – in terms of, for example, "bounded solidarity" (Ling 2008) or "family ideologies" (Gershon 2010) – that provide individuals with cultural and moral orientations concerning what media are appropriate for what types of communication under what circumstances (when/where/with whom). However, in order to understand the nature and significance of these moral orientations, one must also consider them as part of the ongoing classificatory processes through which social space is produced and stratified, both vertically, in terms of capital possessions in general, and horizontally, in terms of the composition of capital (cultural vs. economic) (Bourdieu 1979/1984). Socially classifying distinctions evolve along both dimensions and are continuously re-negotiated as part of the power struggles between classes and class-fractions. Such processes, which are conceptualized and analyzed in Bourdieu's cultural sociology, ultimately generate correspondences between classified and mutually classifying *social positions* (in terms of habitus, education and occupation) and *lifestyles* (in terms of both practices and possessions).

This is to say that whereas the decisions people make in everyday life are shaped through moral and emotional negotiations among their peers, giving rise to ritualized and "mediatized communicative repertoires" among couples (Linke 2011), there are also more fundamental cultural predispositions at play, which are linked to habitus and the logics of social space. As Bengtsson (2011) demonstrates, the connections between media morality, and what she terms "imagined user modes," and habitus can be unveiled through qualitative fieldwork. Based on a large number of personal interviews from different social settings, Bengtsson identifies the ways in which moral judgments pertaining to the quality of certain media texts and the value of (not) spending time on certain media technologies (avoiding television, for example) are linked to class-specific and seemingly "natural" expressions of (good) taste.

In addition to such anthropological lines of inquiry, survey research is needed to estimate how different factors are related to one another and, in a longer perspective, how the cultural status of certain media and media practices are (re)classified. It must also be noted that Bengtsson's study deals with media practices in general and not with interpersonal media practices in particular.

A number of quantitative studies have recently looked at the role of digital media in couple relationships. Baym (2010), for instance, shows how the usage of mobile phones and online interaction is enmeshed with social life on the whole (including face-to-face interaction), albeit in different ways depending on geographical distance and the strength of social ties between peers/partners. An overall conclusion is that those who use online communication the most are also more sociable in the first place (see also Baym et al. 2004; Licoppe 2004). In another quantitative study, comparing long-distance and geographically close relationships, Jiang & Hancock (2013) show that text-based and asynchronous applications (such as email) tend to foster mutual adaptations in terms of self-disclosure, and thus growing intimacy, in long-distance relationships. Text-based modes of communication obviously make it easier to express intimate feelings, and can thus compensate for geographical distances (see also Madianou & Miller 2012), whereas synchronous media are crucial to co-ordination and phatic communication in day-to-

day life (see also Licoppe 2004; Christensen 2009; Jensen & Sorensen 2013). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013) note, however, "distant love" can hardly be sustained in the long run through mediated communication alone, but requires a richer repertoire of communication and, indeed, the promise of future physical proximity (see also Caughlin & Sharabi 2013).

These studies highlight important general tendencies regarding how digital (online) communication is related to life conditions and modes of interaction among couples. Because they are not based on representative samples, however, they cannot be used to depict how the uses of different media and preferences for certain modalities of communication are stratified in relation to lifestyle spaces and social positions, that is, to what extent the above findings are valid in different strata of society. For example, the studies by Baym et al. (2004), Jiang & Hancock (2013) and Caughlin & Sharabi (2013) were all conducted among American university students. Such studies have a tendency to promote broadly shared generalizations within the international research community, even though the original researchers are open about the limitations of their work.

The present study is designed to compensate for some of these limitations by providing a generalizable view, albeit limited to Sweden, of how different social groups orient themselves towards different modes of interpersonal media practices. It contributes to our overall understanding of the socioculturally distinct ways in which digital media shape couple relationships, and vice versa.

Methodology and Sample

The present analyses are based on data from the 2012 national Swedish SOM survey (*Society Opinion Media*). The survey includes a variety of questions on political attitudes, values, lifestyles and media use, and is conducted annually by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg. The postal questionnaires were distributed during fall 2012 to a statistically representative sample of 3,000 respondents in the age range 16-85 years and living in Sweden (both Swedish and foreign citizens). The response rate was 58 percent, resulting in 1,631 participating respondents.

In the SOM questionnaire, a question was posed asking whether the respondents had been in touch with his/her husband/wife/partner during the past month using particular media: *telephone (landline/mobile)*, *video-call*, *email*, *chat* and *Facebook*. (Identical questions also pertained to contacts with parents, children, siblings and close friends, respectively, but these questions have not been analyzed here.) In accordance with Madianou & Miller's (2012) perspective on polymedia, the SOM question was not designed with specific technical devices or applications in mind, but focused on *modalities* of communication. Telephone (synchronous auditory communication), video-calls (synchronous audiovisual communication), email (asynchronous text-based communication) and chat (synchronous written communication) represent different modes of communication, which can be conducted through a range of technological devices and applications. Facebook represents an exception, however, as it overlaps with both "email" and "chat." However, Facebook was given as a separate category on account of its dominant position as a social networking site in Sweden, representing a form of communication that is potentially more public (e.g., through wall-postings) than the other forms listed. It is listed here as a representative of the increasingly fluid realm of social media.

Obviously, there are certain methodological problems involved in conducting a survey focusing on media preferences within polymedia environments, especially when it comes to specifying the research items in a valid way. This problem lies at the very core of polymedia, and is also why Madianou and Miller (2012) consistently refer to "media" instead of breaking that concept down into channels, devices, applications, and so forth. In a large survey, one has limited space for listing different items, yet one has to ensure that they operate on the same level. Whereas the items chosen for the SOM survey can be accused of being too broad, and thus incapable of grasping the complex conditions of polymedia, using more fine-grained categorizations or technological vocabulary would have led to other problems. For example, it would have been difficult for large shares of the sample to adequately understand and answer the question. The important point here has been to discern how the orientations towards broad modes/modalities of communication are distributed in social space.

The sample that has been analyzed here only includes respondents who have stated that they have a wife/husband/partner. In the total sample (1,631 respondents), there are 1,211 respondents who are in couple relationships. In order to grasp how media practices are stratified in polymedia settings, an additional filter was applied to the analysis; only respondents who had access to all of the following technologies were included:

- *telephone (landline)*

- *smartphone*

- *Internet connection*

- *personal computer*

The final sample was thus further delimited, amounting to 478 respondents (see Table 1). This means that 39 percent of all Swedish couples are "polymedia couples." This reduction of the sample should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, but does not jeopardize the main conclusions. With regard to validity, it is also worth mentioning that there is no exact correspondence between Madianou and Miller's (2012) definition of polymedia (see above) and the operationalization used here. Considering the basic rationale of the polymedia concept, however, it is fair to say that the final sample represents a population whose life conditions are marked by media abundance and probably also polymedia, in the strict sense of the term.

Who, then, are these "polymedia couples"? What distinguishes them from other couples? Table 1 presents the general composition of the sample and thus also the social landscape of polymedia in Sweden. Most strikingly, polymedia couples are in their lower middle age years; 50 percent are in the age range 30-49 years. A relatively small share, only 10 percent, of polymedia couples are older than 65 years (compared to 26 percent of all couples). There is also an over-representation of individuals with higher education, as well as white-collar types of households, among polymedia couples. The educational factor is also related to age, however, and the differences in terms of social position are not particularly great. This testifies to the fact that the penetration of digital media in Sweden is very high by international standards. For example, in 2013, 89 percent of the Swedish population (older than 12 years) had access to the Internet; 74 percent used it on a daily basis, and 65 percent of the population used smartphones to access the Internet (Findahl 2013). Table 1 also shows that there are no differences as

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of "Polymedia Couples" Compared to Overall Sample of Individuals in Couple Relationships (percentages)*

	Polymedia couples	All couples
Age		
16-29	9	11
30-49	50	34
50-64	31	29
65-85	10	26
Gender		
Man	48	48
Woman	52	52
Education		
Low	7	19
Middle-low	34	31
Middle-high	24	21
High	34	28
Social class (self-estimation of current household)		
Working class	31	39
Farmer	1	3
Entrepreneurial	12	9
White collar	38	34
White collar – high	12	7
Residency		
Countryside	15	17
Village	22	20
Town	48	48
Bigger city	16	15
N answers	478	1211

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

a function of area of residence; the proportions of polymedia couples living in urban and rural areas, respectively, are the same as in the sample at large. This demographic overview, and notably the over-representation of 30- to 49-year-olds, is important to keep in mind throughout the forthcoming analyses.

Generational Stratifications

The importance of age, which can be interpreted partly as "life stage" but probably more significantly as "generation," is obvious also when we look at the actual uses of different media for keeping in touch with one's partner. Whereas the telephone has an exceptionally strong position in all age groups, used by around 95 percent of the respondents during the past month, there are substantial age-related variations in relation to all other media. This is particularly striking with regard to Facebook, which is the second most popular media among couples in the age range 16-29 years (used by 47 percent), but practically insignificant to those in the older generation. Video-calls and chat functions reveal similar age profiles, but remain at lower levels. Nevertheless, in the youngest cohort, it is almost as common to use video-calls (18 percent) as to use

email (20 percent) for communicating with one's partner. Email, by contrast, has its stronghold among middle-aged couples, especially in the age range 30-49 years (41 percent). In the sample at large, email is the second most common media form, used by 35 percent of all respondents.

Table 2. *Shares Having Used Different Media for Communicating with Wife/Husband/ Partner during Past Month – by age, gender and marital status (percentages)*

	Telephone	Video-call	Email	Chat	Facebook	N answers
Total	96	5	35	8	16	478
Gender						
Man	96	4	34	6	14	251
Woman	95	6	35	9	18	227
Age						
16-29	91	18	20	27	47	45
30-49	97	5	41	8	20	237
50-64	96	1	31	3	5	147
65-85	92	2	29	0	0	49
Marital status						
Single	88	12	32	24	41	34
Cohabitant	98	5	32	8	18	120
Married	96	4	36	6	12	303

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

These variations between age groups depict rather distinct "media generations" and illustrate the rapid development and stratified appropriation of new means of communication. Even though an application like Facebook is becoming more common also among older people in Sweden (in terms of general use), it takes time to alter established communication habits and rituals. This may be the case particularly regarding communication between couples, which requires mutual adjustment of everyday communicative repertoires on the part of two individuals (Linke 2011). At the same time, younger groups generally tend to be early adopters of new technologies. One can thus expect that while certain generational gaps will decrease in the forthcoming years, new ones – tied to the introduction of new applications and technologies – will emerge.

The generational stratifications are also reflected in patterns of marital status. Non-married (younger) couples use new media to a greater extent than married (older) couples do. Among those who have stated that they have a partner to communicate with (which was a selection criteria for this study), there is also a small group (34 respondents) who have stated that they are "single." This group is characterized by their extensive communication via Facebook, and partly consists of young individuals who still live with their parents.

There are no major gender differences, which is also reasonable to expect if we consider the relational nature of the question. With very few exceptions, the respondents are in heterosexual relationships. Yet there is a slight over-representation of women among respondents who use Facebook and chat to communicate with their partners. This pattern is tied to the fact that Swedish women generally use social media on a more regular basis than men do. It is also among women that the major expansion of mobile online communication is currently taking place (Findahl 2013).

Polymedia Practices and the Space of Social Positions

Besides the generational variations identified above, Swedish couples' appropriation of different media follows a rather distinct sociocultural logic. As shown in Table 3, all media are used to a greater extent among those with a higher education. However, the impact of education varies depending on media form and is to a great extent inter-related with age patterns. Those in the category with "low" education, meaning only primary school, belong predominantly to the oldest generation in the sample. Likewise, there is an over-representation of younger respondents in the middle-low category, referring to a high school education (or equivalent), as these respondents still have not had the time to study at a university (middle-high level) or to complete a university degree (high level). The fact that new media (video-call, chat, Facebook) are rarely used among people with a low education is thus an effect of the age differences discussed above.

But educational level per se is also a conditioning factor. This is particularly obvious when it comes to use of email, which becomes more common the higher education people have. This can be interpreted partly as an outcome of the nature of jobs that require an academic education – jobs in which email communication is often an integrated element and in which the boundaries between the private and professional spheres are blurred. As Linke (2011) shows in her study among well-educated German couples, private communication (notably email) is often part of everyday rituals during working time that are associated with certain micro-slots of leisure. An additional explanatory factor is that higher education, taken as an indicator of cultural capital, fosters greater familiarity with text-based communication and a more naturalized approach to writing practices.

Table 3. *Shares Having Used Different Media for Communicating with Wife/Husband/Partner during Past Month – by education and social class (percentages)*

	Telephone	Video-call	Email	Chat	Facebook	N answers
Total	96	5	35	8	16	478
Education						
Low	94	3	21	0	3	33
Middle-low	95	4	23	9	17	164
Middle-high	95	3	31	6	13	115
High	98	7	51	9	19	162
Social class (self-estimated type of household)						
Working class	93	3	15	11	17	149
Entrepreneurial	95	2	30	0	5	56
White collar	98	4	42	6	18	181
White collar – high	100	7	67	9	16	55

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

This pattern is further established in relation to social class (Table 3). The use of email to communicate with one's partner is very common in white-collar households (67 percent), while it is a marginal practice among members of the working class (15 percent). Among working-class couples, Facebook has a more significant presence (17 percent)

together with online chat (11 percent). Video-calls, however, are used to a greater extent among people with more privileged positions in social space, which indicates that this mode of communication still has a more exclusive aura than does the broader realm of social media. What emerges is a view of everyday "communication cultures," showing that couples with greater economic and cultural capital use media, of different kinds, to a greater extent for communicating with each other. This pattern is probably related to the communicative ethos that can be found among individuals with higher education, as well as with the fact that couples in possession of more capital also lead more mobile lives – ultimately defining the class fraction that Elliot and Urry (2010) call "the globals" – where digital media applications are an indispensable part of the relationship.

What also emerges is a rough map of cultural distinctions, where email is classified as more distinctive than mainstream social media such as Facebook. As mentioned above, one must take into account a certain amount of co-variation between age and education level. Yet if one compares the use of email and Facebook among 30- to 49-year-olds, which is the biggest group of "polymedia couples," stratification persists in relation to both education and social class (Table 4). In this age group, 56 percent of the well-educated respondents use email, compared to 25 percent of those with a low education. The difference between privileged white-collar settings and working-class settings is even more striking: 79 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

The distinctiveness of email communication becomes even more obvious when we relate media practices to different forms of residency and mobility. Table 5 shows, first, that all media are used more frequently among urban couples than among rural couples (see also Table 4 for the group of 30- to 49-year-olds). These findings point to cultural variations that are independent of technological access (given that we are studying "polymedia couples" exclusively). Urban lifestyles seem to involve more complex patterns of mediatization, where interpersonal media practices saturate and amalgamate with both work and leisure (cf. Schulz 2004; Soukup 2012; Pink & Mackley 2013). This, in turn, can be related to the higher education levels and agglomerations of white-collar professions, and thus cultural capital, that distinguish the city from the country. The maintenance of couple relationships in urban or metropolitan areas demands more "communicative work," which may be a concrete matter of family logistics as well as a sign of how phatic communication operates in complex life environments (Jensen & Sorensen 2013).

Second, this leads us to the question of mobility. Table 5 confirms that email communication is to a greater extent than chat and Facebook associated with more prestigious types of mobility related to the professional sphere. Individuals who have substantial experience of living abroad (at least 6 months) and who go on business trips on a regular basis tend to write emails to their partners to a greater extent than others do. These distinctions persist regardless of age (Table 4), suggesting that whereas mobility establishes accentuated needs for interpersonal media practices, the cultural form of such needs varies depending on social position and cultural taste (Bengtsson 2011; Madianou & Miller 2012). This also confirms Jiang & Hancock's (2013) finding that email can be important for establishing a sense of intimacy in long-distance relationships. The next section will flesh out these findings in relation to other lifestyle practices.

Table 4. *Shares Having Used Email and Facebook for Communicating with Wife/Husband/Partner during Past Month – age group 30-49 years by indicators of social position (percentages)*

	Email	Facebook	N answers
Total	**41**	**20**	**237**
Education			
Low	25	25	33
Middle-low	29	18	164
Middle-high	31	14	115
High	56	24	162
Social class (self-estimated type of household)			
Working class	19	20	149
Entrepreneurial	39	9	56
White collar	45	21	181
White collar – high	79	25	55
Residency			
Countryside	25	8	36
Village	33	14	51
Town	43	23	106
Bigger city	56	30	43
Business trip past 12 months			
No	26	18	78
Yes	48	21	157

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

Table 5. *Shares Having Used Different Media for Communicating with Wife/Husband/Partner during Past Month – by residency, country of origin, experiences of living abroad and professional travel (percentages)*

	Telephone	Video-call	Email	Chat	Facebook	N answers
Total	96	5	35	8	16	478
Residency						
Countryside	97	4	21	1	10	72
Village	97	6	31	7	14	102
Town	94	4	34	8	16	225
Bigger city	96	7	53	14	24	74
Origin						
Swedish	96	4	35	8	16	433
Foreign	95	11	27	5	8	37
Lived abroad						
No	90	4	33	7	16	448
Yes	90	13	53	13	20	30
Business trip past 12 months						
No	92	5	21	8	15	218
Yes	99	4	46	7	17	257

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

Lifestyles and (Re-)Emerging Distinctions

In comparison to (semi-)public media practices such as cinema going, concert visits, or even television viewing, which feed into social life and everyday conversations at various levels, interpersonal media practices are of a more private and less expressive nature. Intimate communication practices between couples are rarely put on display – even though mobile telephone conversations in public spaces as well as Facebook postings from time to time cross the line between private and public – but tend to occur in the back regions of everyday life and/or at times when other people are not around (cf. Goffman 1959). The cultural value of such practices – involving a continuous differentiation between different media technologies and modes of communication – is not directly judged by others. Nevertheless, they follow rather distinct taste patterns in which each practice takes on an accentuated meaning in relation to the classifying practices and properties with which it is combined, which in turn contribute to the classification of the social actor him-/herself (Bourdieu 1979/1984). The fact that interpersonal media practices are typically carried out in the back regions does not make them less meaningful to the construction of selfhood. Rather, they express what modes of communication the individual feels at ease with at a more pre-reflexive level. As Bourdieu argues, the pre-reflexive nature of cultural practices, the degree to which a social actor is "at ease" with certain modes of behavior, tends to accentuate their distinctive potential.

Table 6 shows the results of a correlational analysis (Spearman's rho), in which the uses of different media for communicating with one's partner have been related to other lifestyle practices. The table presents only correlations that are statistically significant. Whereas it should be noted that the correlations are generally weak (below 0.200), email stands out as the mode of communication associated with most sociocultural prestige and capital. It is positively correlated with such practices as professional travel, public leisure activities (visiting bars, restaurants, theatre, cinema) and up-scale cultural interests (talk radio, opera, books). Most of these practices do not correlate with the other modes of communication. There are some parallels when it comes to, for example, cinema-going and restaurant visits, which are due to the general bias towards urban lifestyles, as noted above. In comparison to email, chat and Facebook stand out as being more linked to popular cultural practices and the domestic sphere, as they are positively correlated with computer gaming, online gaming and online downloading of film and TV series. Video/DVD rental is positively correlated with telephone and email, but not with newer media forms, which underscores the significance of age/generation where the appropriation of new technology is concerned.

Although email writing does not need to imply composition of longer texts, the findings of Table 6 actualize questions of literacy, and *the uses of literacy*, to paraphrase Richard Hoggart's (1957) classical work. Couples who communicate via email on a regular basis also tend to read books, listen to audio-books and talk radio, discuss politics and read article comments online to a greater extent than others do. They are largely oriented towards the written and spoken word, and towards media contents that are commonly understood as "serious," thus embodying cultural and educational capital. One might suspect that access to various technologies also plays an important role here; email is more convenient for individuals who have office-based jobs and use email regularly at work. However, in polymedia contexts, where people can bring their smartphones wherever they go, such obstacles of access become secondary. The cultural

Table 6. *The Cultural Embeddedness of Different Media among Polymedia Couples (two-tailed significant correlations, Spearman's rho)*

Telephone (landline/mobile)	**Video call**
Car driving .164	Breakfast outside the home .141
Professional travel .151	Cinema visits .127
DVD/video rental .119	Downloading film/TV-series online .125
E-mail	**Facebook**
Professional travel .273	Computer game/TV-game .250
Evening visits to restaurant/bar/pub .269	Online gaming .250
Public service talk radio (P1) .249	Evening visits to restaurant/bar/pub .194
Discussing politics .202	Drawing/painting .165
Using public transport .201	Breakfast outside the home .160
DVD/video rental .200	Socializing with friends .157
Reading book .179	Downloading film/TV-series online .155
Listening to audiobook .156	Cinema visits .146
Classical concert/opera visits .154	Using public transport .138
Drinking liquor/wine/beer .154	
Cinema visits .147	
Online radio listening .143	
Working overtime .142	
Exercising .136	
Theatre visits .133	
Breakfast outside the home .132	
Reading article comments online .127	
	Chat
	Downloading film/TV-series online .198
	Online gaming .178
	Computer game/TV-game .140
	Breakfast outside the home .135
	Cinema visits .134

Source: The national SOM survey of 2012.

landscape that unfolds in Table 6 is rather an illustration of how deep-rooted modern divisions – in terms of education, literacy and cultural taste – are re-enacted in an era of differentiated mediatization.

A key argument here would be that the orientation towards particular modalities, such as longer, asynchronous text formats, operates as *an intermediary factor between social position and actual media practices*. While email is still the second most common mode of communication, after telephone calls (Table 2), for communicating with one's partner, the results suggest that, in today's polymedia environment, email is being gradually re-classified and given a more delimited and distinct position. Compared to chat and Facebook, the use of email for intimate communication is becoming a marker of cultural capital, associated with lifestyles that signal seriousness, even slowness and conservatism.

This testifies to Broadbent's (2011) findings from her ethnographic study among Swiss families, which show how the symbolic meaning, as well as the very social role, of a

particular medium changes when new media enter the scene. It is also to say that polymedia provide an expanding space of distinction, as Madianou and Miller (2012) argue. In that respect, the current study presents just an outline of emerging distinctions, which are at the same time anchored in broader historical classification systems. The ongoing multiplication of online resources for interpersonal communication is likely to produce increasingly fine-grained systems of classification, for example pertaining to different genres, and indeed brands, of social networking, that deserve closer attention in the future.

Conclusion

Based on the 2012 Swedish SOM survey, the present study has highlighted the enduring significance of sociocultural distinctions regarding media use. It has shown that there are significant distinctions at play also within a sample where respondents share two fundamental characteristics: (a) they are in couple relationships and (b) their living conditions are marked by polymedia (Madianou & Miller 2012). Whereas the study has not made any attempt to operationalize Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural and economic capital in a precise manner, it has provided rich evidence for the general validity of the Bourdieusian theory of sociocultural reproduction for understanding modes of interpersonal communication among "polymedia couples." The study has contributed an empirical overview that should serve as a starting point for more fine-grained quantitative studies aimed at differentiating not only between basic modalities of mediated communication, but also between particular devices and applications, as well as for qualitative studies of how distinctions are actually played out in everyday life.

The most significant finding concerns the distinction between email and the realm of social media (Facebook and chat). Regardless of generational differences, which were also noted, email has a particular stronghold among well-educated couples of higher social standing, who also lead more mobile and culturally oriented lifestyles. This pattern can be related to established findings on media distinctions, asserting that cultural capital entails a pre-disposition towards more "serious" content paired with a distaste for "lighter" material that is not "intellectually rewarding" (see, e.g., Bengtsson 2011; Meuleman & Savage 2013), as well as a reserved attitude towards technologies that most clearly represent such kinds of content, for example television and satellite dishes (see Brunsdon 1991). Previous research also shows that cultural capital makes people more skeptical about new technologies, especially if they involve the potential loss of individual autonomy and control, for example through technological dependence and various forms of surveillance. Compared to chat and Facebook, email is not associated to the same extent with monitoring practices – even though one should of course differentiate between different email services – neither at the structural level (commercial surveillance) nor in the form of social monitoring (Jansson 2011, 2012). Whereas Facebook is largely conceived of as a commercially driven service, constituting a kind of social playground where people easily "get stuck," email allows for interpersonal expressivity in a longer and more constrained format. Due to its personal nature and generic form, an email may thus attain more durable cultural value, similar to that of the handwritten letter (see Madianou & Miller, Ch. 4).

Accordingly, the present study suggests that the dominant modality/modalities of certain media devices and applications are significant with regard to how they are cul-

turally classified. Interpersonal media practices between couples unfold according to structured and structuring patterns, where the orientation towards certain socioculturally classified modalities of communication constitutes an explanatory link between social forces and individual media choices. The preference for and mastering of longer texts (which email enables) constitute an enduring, and potentially accentuated, marker of sociocultural privilege. The hierarchies of cultural literacy are reproduced even in the most intimate realms of everyday life.

These conclusions are relevant not only to our understandings of how individuals navigate within increasingly complex polymedia environments, but also in a broader perspective, notably in relation to ongoing epistemological debates about mediatization, understood here in the social-constructivist (rather than institutionalist) sense of the term (Couldry & Hepp 2013, Hepp 2013). From such a perspective, an important conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that the historically accentuated dependency on and saturation of various media in everyday life (that is, mediatization) unfold in different ways in different parts of the Bourdieusian social space. Although mediatization is to be seen as an overarching historical meta-process of social change, it involves context-specific modalities and expressions related to which media forms are significant to different social groups and for what reasons (Krotz 2007). Here it is important to note that distaste for certain media phenomena, such as the above-discussed skepticism about social media among well-educated couples, is also an important expression of mediatization and its culturally and socially molded character. Cultural capital might even be considered an enduring form of resistance to and problematization of the seemingly all-encompassing spread of digitization and technologization (Jansson 2012, 2014, Jansson & Lindell 2014).

These cultural battles aside, there is hardly any reason to believe that the expansion, diversification and integration of new media technologies and applications within the realms of "ordinary culture" will stop. Polymedia is successively becoming the socially normalized condition. In order to understand the ways in which different groups handle this development, and how they are tied up with structural power, this article has pointed to the need for contextualizing approaches. Comparative and cumulative studies will allow us to identify the subtle differentiations through which seemingly banal media practices, such as keeping in touch with one's partner, are constitutive of social power in a broader scheme.

Note

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ANDRÉ JANSSON, PhD, Professor, Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, andre.jansson@kau.se