MULTICOMMUNICATING: A PRACTICE WHOSE TIME HAS COME?

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We offer the concept of multicommunicating to describe overlapping conversations, an increasingly common occurrence in the technology-enriched workplace. We define multicommunicating, distinguish it from other behaviors, and develop propositions for future research. Our work extends the literature on technology-stimulated restructuring and reveals one of the opportunities provided by lean media—specifically, an opportunity to multicommunicate. We conclude that the concept of multicommunicating has value both to the scholar and to the practicing manager.

Scenario 1: At five o’clock in the afternoon (local time), a crew drilling for oil in Indonesia encounters a problem. The field engineer contacts a twenty-four-hour-a-day technology center in Texas (local time, four o’clock in the morning). The engineer in Texas—with access to multiple communication technologies—interacts with two other engineers while responding to queries from Indonesia. Within forty-five minutes the engineer in Texas has worked out a solution and communicated it to the crew in Indonesia (Amin et al., 2001). The company estimates that such practices save the company more than $200 million per year (Smith et al., 2001).

Scenario 2: While supervising employees and receiving occasional calls from friends, a manager, Trina, has to respond to complex questions from executives engaged in legally binding negotiations. “What commonly happens for me is I’m typing an email and the phone rings so I’ll take the conversation [and] while I’m on the telephone . . . [also send a chat message to] somebody at the same time. So you have like three things going at once. In some cases . . . [I lose track] of what the person on the phone is saying and they can be irritated . . . [because] they have to repeat themselves.” Trina added that a mistake “could be very detrimental.” (We interviewed Trina and several other experienced multicommunicators during the preparation of this paper.)

The preceding examples point to an emerging trend in workplace communication—the use of technology to participate in several interactions at the same time (Cameron & Webster, 2005). We call this practice “multicommunicating” (cf. Turner & Tinsley, 2002), which we define as engaging in two or more overlapping, synchronous conversations. The first scenario shows how multicommunicating can contribute to performance; the second points to problems, including inefficiency, irritation, and mistakes.

Multicommunicating is facilitated by technologies, particularly chat software. But technologies do not determine behavior. They are, as Barley explains, only “occasions that trigger social dynamics” (1986: 81). Management scholars, therefore, have drawn on structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984) to explore technology-influenced changes (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 2000; Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura, & Fujimoto, 1995; Yates, 1989, 2005; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002b).

Prior research has focused on how a single technology—for example, a new X-ray technology (Barley, 1986), a new database management technology (Orlikowski, 2000), or a new planning technology (Boudreau & Robey, 2005)—offers an occasion for restructuring at a single workplace. Our research begins with an emerging practice rather than a technology—a practice that transcends a single technology or a single workplace (Giddens, 1984: 181). The practice of mul-
ticommunicating shows how individuals may combine two or more technologies to meet their needs and how their choices restructure interactions. We elaborate the mediating process between technology and human behavior, showing that humans both adapt technology in use and also adapt themselves to it (Giddens, 1979, 1984). By emphasizing conscious selection, we call attention to the role that human agency plays in technology use.

Furthermore, our analysis enriches the understanding of “lean” media (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; ElShinnawy & Markus, 1997; Markus, Bikson, ElShinnawy, & Soe, 1992; van den Hooff, Groot, & Jonge, 2005). Scholars have sometimes treated face-to-face interaction (the richest medium) as the ideal, but several researchers have questioned that assumption, arguing that “sometimes less is more” (Burgoon et al., 2002: 670; Markus, 1994; O’Sullivan, 2000; Walther, 1994). For example, team members interacting by audioconference with a client can use chat to conduct a second, concurrent discussion among team members. The team members can—in their concurrent chat interaction—develop strategies and coach one another during the client meeting. And the benefits gained from the chat interaction may outweigh the information lost from meeting with the client by audioconference rather than face to face.

In the following section we define multicomminating, identify factors that contribute to its intensity, and distinguish it from other practices. We then review precepts of structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984) and identify multicomminating as a structuring process. In the sections that follow, we describe some of the antecedents and consequences of multicomminating and offer propositions to guide future research. We conclude by considering implications for scholars and managers.

**MULTICOMMUNICATING**

Multicomminating is the practice of participating in two or more conversations or “speech events” (Hymes, 1972) using nearly synchronous media, such as face-to-face speech, telephone calls, videoconferencing, chat, and email.

We refer to media traditionally labeled synchronous as nearly synchronous in interactivity (cf. Burgoon et al., 2002) to note that all interaction proceeds across a spatial and temporal gap (Giddens, 1979: 103). Even face-to-face speech is delayed, if only briefly, as sound waves move through the air, impressions are conveyed by the receiver’s auricular nerve, and words and phrases are interpreted in the receiver’s brain. Thus, we prefer to think in terms of a continuum (degree of synchronicity), rather than a dichotomy.

Ordinarily, nearly synchronous conversations are governed by “unspoken rules” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000: 11), specifying, for example, that participants (1) do not allow gaps of silence and (2) do not intentionally overlap in speaking—rules that require participants to (3) remain attentive in anticipation of their speaking turns (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Conversation, like ballroom dancing, requires one to monitor the behavior of one’s partner in order to coordinate with that partner (Clampitt, 2000). When multicomminating, however, a participant divides his or her attention among two or more speech events, and this degrades coordination so as to delay some responses and create gaps of silence. Multicomminating has emerged as a common practice, therefore, only with the development of media that have two features. First, they allow a communicator to divide her or his attention unobtrusively so as to be less likely to give offense to a partner; we term this **compartmentalization**. Second, they are objectively and socially constructed to allow gaps of silence; we term this **flexibility of tempo**. But even with media that have these features, multicomminating remains a cognitively demanding practice.

**Intensity of Multicomminating**

Multicomminating can vary in intensity, depending on the number of open conversations, the pace of each conversation, the integration of social roles, and the number of topics being discussed. We consider each of these factors in turn.

**Number of open conversations.** Conversations are marked by an opening—including a verbal salute, such as “good morning”—and a closing—including a terminal, such as “by” (Fasold, 1990: 40–42). Circumstances that require people to be copresent (e.g., working side by side) induce “a continuing state of incipient talk” (Schegloff, 2002: 284), in which talk can break out and reach closure without explicit openings or clos-
nings (Schegloff, 2002; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In the absence of explicit openings and closings, it is still possible to identify a conversational thread—a collaboratively built-up sequence of speech acts that end when a task “has been brought to a successful conclusion” (Murray, 1989: 332; Winograd & Flores, 1986). A person who is multicommunicating will have begun to participate in—and not yet exited from—at least two conversations so that speaking turns from the two conversations are “interleaved” (Murray, 1989: 326). Thus, the number of open conversations (facilitated by the use of media that allow compartmentalization) is an index of the extent to which a person has divided her or his attention among speech events (Gergen, 2002). We posit that the multicommunicating experience becomes more intense to the extent that a larger number of conversations are initiated and not yet concluded. For example, everything else being equal, conducting three overlapping conversations is a more intense form of multicommunicating than conducting two.

**Pace of each conversation.** Nearly synchronous media (i.e., face-to-face speech, telephone calls, videoconferencing, chat, and email when used like chat) allow—but do not require—an interaction to move at a brisk pace, with a large number of words per minute and very short gaps between the end of one person’s speaking turn and the initiation of the next speaker’s turn (Edwards, 2003: 332; cf. Miller, 1987; Reisman, 1989: 113; Thomas et al., 2006: 266–268, 276). Thus, the pace of each of several interactions may move rapidly or more leisurely (facilitated by media that allow flexibility of tempo). For example, chat software (e.g., AOL Instant Messenger®) allows written interaction at speeds limited only by the electronic signal between two terminals and the typing speed of the participants (using the abbreviations and vocabulary characteristic of chat). Thus, chat can (and sometimes does) proceed at a pace equivalent to face-to-face or telephone interaction. However, the social construction (Fulk, 1993) of chat typically gives each participant the freedom to delay a response and, thus, to slow the pace of a conversation. We posit that the multicommunicating experience becomes more intense to the extent that the pace of the constituent interactions moves briskly rather than leisurely. As the pace at which an individual is communicating across several conversations becomes more accelerated, the intensity of the experience increases.

**Integration of social roles.** Speech events, such as conversations, evoke social roles (e.g., supervisor, subordinate, parent, spouse, friend), depending on the relationship with the interlocutor (Perlman, 1968). Since a change in partner requires a change in role, multiple interactions require a communicator to make transitions between roles or subroles as the individual moves among the conversations (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). These transitions will be relatively easy—but not frictionless—when a person shifts among highly integrated subroles, perhaps interacting with several different subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The transitions will be more difficult when a person moves among more segmented roles (Ashforth et al., 2000), perhaps simultaneously representing the organization in an interaction with a supplier, acting as a subordinate in response to a supervisor, and acting as a parent while exchanging messages with a teenager. Role transitions, particularly among segmented roles, may produce role conflict so that the greater the extent of segmentation demanded by the roles, the more intense the multicommunication will be.

**Number of topics.** Each conversation may also be described as focused on a particular topic. Topics may include organizational problems or decisions about where to go for dinner or who drives to soccer practice. Some topics (developing a new product’s marketing budget) will be more cognitively demanding than others (discussing what to buy for dinner). Note, however, that, unlike roles, the topic may remain fixed across different interlocutors (as in the first, but not the second, of the scenarios at the beginning of this paper). As the number of topics and the challenge of topics increase, so should the intensity of the multicommunication.

Thus, our definition identifies multicommunicating as a cluster of behaviors allowing for variations in number, pace, social roles, and topics. Observation suggests that these factors combine to produce a level of experienced intensity. (The manner in which they combine—perhaps by addition or by multiplication—is an appropriate subject for future research.) Experience and observation (supported by empirical research [e.g., Carpenter, Miyake, & Just, 1994]) show also that an individual is limited in the amount of information he or she can
process within a given period of time. Miller found that the relationship between input (receiving information) and output (responding to it appropriately) for a person traced an inverted U shape, with “output . . . rising as a more or less linear function of input until channel capacity is reached, then leveling off, and finally [at a breaking point] decreasing in [a] . . . confusional state” (1978: 164, 192, Figure 5-54; see also Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977: Chapter 5, and O’Reilly, 1980). Since information processing is an important component of multicommunicating, we expect that increasing levels of intensity will, at first, enhance one’s performance (e.g., making one more effective or efficient), followed by a leveling off and, finally, perhaps, a precipitous decline. In fact, several interviewees described themselves as good at “knowing when to reduce . . . [the number of conversations] to one” (Greg) or “being really good at knowing how far I can get extended [as multicommunicating grows more intense]” (Tracy).

Proposition 1a: A multicommunicating experience will be more intense for a person to the extent that (a) the number of open interactions is larger, (b) the pace of the interactions is more rapid, (c) the person’s evoked social roles are more numerous and more segmented, and (d) the interactions deal with more—and more cognitively challenging—topics.

Proposition 1b: The shape of the relationship between the intensity of multicommunicating and a communicator’s performance will be curvilinear (inverted U shape).

Distinguishing Multicommunicating from Other Behaviors

We define multicommunicating as a behavior, rather than a preference or attitude (although preference and attitude are likely relevant), and distinguish it from other behaviors. Sequential conversations, for example, are closely spaced but nonoverlapping speech events. Information desk staff or telephone receptionists ask interlocutors to form a real or virtual queue (“Good morning, Acme Corporation, please hold”) in order to produce sequential conversations. When an interlocutor insists on interrupting an ongoing interaction, the focal person either enforces the queue (“Please wait your turn”) or accepts the interruption and focuses on the interrupter and completes that task before returning to the interrupted interaction (Polanyi, 2003: 272). In an environment of sequential conversations, an interruption might occasionally produce a brief period of multicommunicating. But most of the time the focal communicator uses a queue to avoid multicommunicating.

Group interactions involve multiple communicators and can show complex speaking patterns. But group members share a single communicative space (either physical or virtual) and work together to develop a single, evolving conversational thread. Interaction norms encourage group members to coordinate their behaviors with others (perhaps even with formal rules, such as being recognized by a chairperson before speaking) and to be cognizant of the contributions of other group members. Furthermore, a participant displays one social role to all group members. In contrast, a multicommunicator typically engages with two or more persons who do not have access to each other’s messages. The interlocutors cannot coordinate their behaviors or be cognizant of each other’s contributions. The multicommunicator will change social roles as she or he changes partners. And the topical foci may diverge markedly.

Parallel conversations occur in group meetings conducted by means of an electronic meeting system (EMS)—software that allows everyone to see the keyboarded comments of others “but without knowing who contributed what” (Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991: 43). EMS allows “all participants to work simultaneously” (Nunamaker et al., 1991: 45, 43), producing parallel conversations (Dennis & Valacich, 1999: 7) within the communicative space of a group meeting. Parallel conversations and multicommunicating are complementary concepts and may coexist. But parallel conversations consist of a number of simultaneous one-on-one interactions in a group setting—for example, A with B, C with D, E with F. Each person is participating in one speech event at a time. Multicommunicating, on the other hand, is not occurring until at least one individual begins participating in two or more one-on-one conversations (e.g., A with B, A with C, and A with D).
Multicommunicating can be thought of as a special form of multitasking—an extremely demanding one (Crosson, 2000a,b) that is possible only because humans can think more rapidly than they can speak or type (Greene, 2000; Orr, Friedman, & Williams, 1965). A person participating in one conversation engages in (a) interpretation (e.g., defining the situation; making attributions... noting relevant aspects of the setting...), which gives rise to (b) goal generation (forming intentions pertaining to... instrumental objectives... [and] relational and identity objectives), which serves as the impetus to (c) planning or action assembly... which eventuates in (d) enactments (executing behavioral plans...), which is followed by (e) monitoring (observing and evaluating the outcomes...), the results of which may lead to (f)... recycling processes b through e (Burleson & Planalp, 2000: 222).

To multicommunicate successfully, then, an individual must cycle among two or more conversations, engaging in interpretation, goal generation, planning, enactment, and monitoring for each of them in turn, and the individual must do this on time schedules that are coordinated with each of the conversational partners. An individual may experience significant cognitive load while multitasking to compose a report and to analyze data in a spreadsheet. However, the person need not worry about the impression that the word processor derives from awkward language in the draft report, nor must he or she be concerned about eliciting censure from the spreadsheet when taking a break. Multicommunicating, however, engages other persons who do form impressions based on uncorrected language or periods of silence.

**MULTICOMMUNICATING AS A STRUCTURING PROCESS**

Structuration theory emphasizes the duality of structure—that is, viewing structure as both producing and produced by recurrent social practices (Giddens, 1996: 100–101). The interplay of “structure as both a product of and a constraint on human endeavor” (Barley, 1986: 79) is called the “process of structuring.” Multicommunicating is an example, since it is both shaped by and, in turn, reshapes rules for discourse (Sacks et al., 1974; Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

The unspoken rules that guide conversations discourage multicommunicating. Thus, when presented with two simultaneous face-to-face interactions, most people will choose to converse with the two interlocutors either in sequential conversations or in a three-person group conversation. Each of the alternatives allows the participant to focus attention on a single interaction and thereby to perform his or her role effectively (no gaps, no overlaps). New communication technologies, however, may allow or even encourage “slippage” (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002a) and so enable multicommunicating. The growing practice of multicommunicating, then, stresses the rules of interaction, producing evolutionary changes. Multicommunicating thus provides an example of a structuration process that can be situated in terms of both its antecedents and consequences.

**ANTECEDENTS OF MULTICOMMUNICATING**

Human agency and social structures interact within three arenas or, as Giddens prefers, “modalities”: facilities, norms, and interpretative schemes (Giddens, 1984: 28–29). Facilities refer to capabilities “over objects, goods, or material phenomena” (Giddens, 1984: 33), including communication technologies (Giddens, 1979: 103). Norms include rules for the “evaluation of conduct” (Bryant & Jary, 1991: 10). Interpretative schemes are mental models used “to make sense of what actors say and do” based on tacit and implicit knowledge of prior action and the current situation (Bryant & Jary, 1991: 10; Orlikowski, 2000). Two distinct features of multicommunicating—divided attention and delayed responses (gaps of silence)—emerge from these modalities as especially important for understanding where and when multicommunicating is likely to occur.

**Facilities (Communication Technologies)**

Multicommunicating is facilitated by technologies that, by reason of objective characteristics and social construction, provide supportive features. Perhaps the best example is chat software, which, while designed for nearly synchronous one-to-one interaction, has frequently been a stimulus for multicommunicating. As previously mentioned, conversational interaction in a face-to-face dyad or group is guided by rules that call for no gaps of silence, no overlaps in speaking, and a high level of attentiveness
these rules also guide interaction by telephone (Hopper, 1992). But chat software facilitates multicommunicating by compartmentalizing interactions and allowing for flexibility of tempo.

We define compartmentalization as the extent to which a medium restricts the concurrent availability of communicative cues from an interaction to only those participating in the interaction. While negatively correlated with social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986), compartmentalization concerns the cross-conversational availability of cues, rather than the number and types of cues available within a single interaction. Focusing on multiple, overlapping interactions allows us to see that certain media (typically those identified as lower in social presence and richness, in part because they convey few nonverbal cues) allow interactions to be conducted, as it were, within discrete compartments. Two overlapping chat interactions are fully compartmentalized, with one nonfocal interlocutor (e.g., person B in an A–B interaction) lacking access to the messages that are part of a concurrent chat conversation (e.g., A with C). Two overlapping telephone interactions (e.g., Buerk, 2006: 21; Caro, 2002: 587–589) are partially compartmentalized, with a nonfocal interlocutor (e.g., B in the A–B interaction) able to overhear only one side of another interaction (A’s messages to C but not C’s messages to A). And two overlapping face-to-face interactions are not at all compartmentalized, since each interlocutor has access to the verbal and nonverbal cues from the other interaction. We see compartmentalization—with its apparent potential to allow unobtrusive division of attention between more than one interlocutor—as a key enabler of multicommunicating. Of course, partial compartmentalization can be maintained when combining a chat interaction with a telephone conversation or even a face-to-face meeting.

We define flexibility of tempo as the extent to which a participant may delay a response (allow a gap of silence) without giving offense or disrupting an interaction. Once again, chat provides a clear example. Chat (like email) captures a message in an enduring form (unlike the fading sounds of speech; Herring, 2003: 615), which creates the possibility of delayed processing. Furthermore, chat allows overlap and does not allow surveillance. Chat allows overlap since A and B do not have access to nonverbal turn-taking cues, and each may begin simultaneously to type a message to the other, or, perhaps more to the point, A can send a message to B while simultaneously receiving one from C. Lack of surveillance (Barry & Fulmer, 2004)—once again the absence of nonverbal cues—means that the message sender cannot be certain that the recipient is still at his or her terminal when the message arrives. As one individual explained it, the people who send you a chat message “don’t even know if you’re at your desk. . . . You could be anywhere” (Alyson). Together, these (and perhaps other) factors create a situation in which a message sender is likely to tolerate delayed responses (gaps of silence). As explained by one person, “If someone . . . [sends a chat message to] you, you can put them on hold for a minute, two minutes, not be considered rude, whereas on the phone you can’t” (Brent). Of course, a communicator can maintain a degree of flexibility of tempo by combining a more flexible medium (e.g., chat) with a less flexible one (e.g., telephone).

We posit, therefore, that the emergence of multicommunicating in an organization or a community depends on the availability of media that compartmentalize interactions and allow flexibility of tempo. We further believe that the ongoing practice of multicommunicating—that is, individual decisions to multicommunicate or not in any given situation—will be influenced by the availability of media with the same characteristics.

**Proposition 2:** The frequency and the practice of multicommunicating within an organization will be associated with the availability of media (facilities) whose objective features and social constructions provide compartmentalization and flexibility of tempo.

**Norms**

Norms are guidelines for evaluating performance—identifying certain behaviors as more or less appropriate (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985; Bryant & Jary, 1991). Norms shape a communicator’s understanding of behavioral expectations within a particular organization and, therefore, the likely reactions of interlocutors to multicommunicating. 

(Sacks et al., 1974; Taylor & Van Every, 2000);
Openly multicommunicating could be regarded as inappropriate or even rude by one’s conversational partners, who receive only divided attention and experience gaps in their interactions. Yet some organizational norms may allow or even encourage divided attention and active management of tempo. For example, an organizational norm for productivity or efficiency—particularly when performance requires up-to-the-minute information—may encourage an individual to accept that others are juggling multiple conversations. Thus, if a person senses that a norm for productivity outweighs the norms for full attention or immediate response, he or she is more likely to participate in multicommunication. One respondent told us, for example, that he expected delayed responses to chat messages because of an understanding that “this person is probably doing a lot of other things” (Faisel). Another respondent explained that a new employee—not yet familiar with the organizational culture—would sometimes make the mistake of waiting for a response to a chat inquiry, “instead of opening up and responding to some emails” (Tracey).

Some of our interviewees also called attention to norms related to organizational membership and hierarchical status. One manager felt that a conference call with persons outside the company should preclude additional chat interactions, because the sound of typing “is . . . rude” (Ann). Another individual said that she would usually accept a chat inquiry during a face-to-face conversation unless she was “having an important conversation with . . . [her] boss” (Maria). This sentiment was echoed by several others, who felt that they should be constantly accessible to a supervisor and, when interacting with a supervisor, should focus on the supervisor’s agenda. Sometimes focusing on the supervisor’s agenda meant declining other conversations, and sometimes it meant initiating multiple interactions in order to secure information for the supervisor.

Proposition 3: The frequency and practice of multicommunicating within an organization will be shaped by norms perceived as justifying (or perhaps limiting or precluding) multicommunicating when interacting with various interlocutors.

Schemata (interpretative schemes) guide the interpretation of behavior, based on prior experience and knowledge (Bryant & Jary, 1991; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Schemata shape a person’s understanding of the impact and, therefore, the likely effectiveness of multicommunicating for a specific task. Thus, schemata reflect the role of task in a person’s decision to multicommunicate (Turner & Reinsch, 2007). For example, some interviewees said that they multicommunicated to quickly gather information from multiple sources (as in our opening vignette) or to deliver a more complete answer to a superior or customer. As Dennis and Valacich (1999) explained, most business communication tasks can be described as occasioned by lack of information (requiring conveyance of information) or lack of shared understanding (requiring convergence of views). Our interviews suggest that the task of information conveyance seems to evoke schemata that interpret multicommunicating in a favorable light—signalizing that people are being thorough when gathering information and remaining accessible even while communicating with others.

However, the task of achieving convergence appears to evoke schemata that interpret multicommunicating less positively. When seeking convergence, people desire prompt and multifaceted feedback (Barry & Fulmer, 2004; Dennis & Valacich, 1999). A person who desires prompt, multidimensional feedback is likely to prefer modes of communication that discourage divided attention and delayed responses.

As another example, interpersonal tasks, such as “therapeutic” conversations (Hunt & Lichtman, 1969; Ruesch, 1961), also appear to evoke schemata that interpret multicommunicating as inappropriate. One manager told us that he would not multicommunicate when having a “personal” conversation that involved “career guidance,” because “you need to give them your full attention” (Andrew). Another interviewee said that she wanted an interlocutor’s “undivided attention” on those occasions when she was “frustrated with something that’s going on” (Laura).

Proposition 4. The frequency and practice of multicommunicating by employees will be shaped by their schemata, which identify multicom-
municating as more (or less) effective for certain communicative tasks.

OUTCOMES OF MULTICOMMUNICATING

Just as the practice of multicommunicating is shaped by technologies, norms, and schemata, it also shapes them in turn. As previously noted, multicommunicating is facilitated by tolerance for slippage in conversational practices. When slippages are small and rare and can be subsumed under (or assimilated into) the current institutional context, they do not constitute change (Meyer, 1982). But as the slippages are replicated, the context does change (Barley, 1986). For example, when one person in a community multicommunicates, his or her interlocutors may allow for some slippage. But when those persons—or a critical number of them (Markus, 1990)—also become multicommunicators, slippage becomes the pattern rather than an exception. Incongruity between multicommunicating practices and the institutional context will exert pressure to socially reconstruct technologies and to change institutional norms and schemata. As an example, consider a phenomenon we call “connected time”—a new “temporal structure” (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Temporal structures are socially constructed frameworks that organization members use to understand, organize, and allocate time; they shape what people do and when they do it (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Sometimes a temporal structure has societal backing (e.g., the fiscal year), sometimes it has managerial support (e.g., a “casual Friday” policy), and sometimes it has emerged from employee practices (e.g., the work breaks described by Roy, 1968).

At one site where we conducted exploratory interviews, many employees seemed implicitly aware of an altered temporal structure and had given it a name that we paraphrase as “connected time.” Multiple persons described being connected and available for text messaging as “like breathing.” We heard many persons speak about “living,” “being,” or “working” either “on” or “in” a special form of time—connected time.

Our informal observations suggested that connected time had both objective and subjective dimensions. Objective dimensions included the physical act of getting connected (logging into the chat messaging system) in the morning and of disconnecting at the end of the individual’s workday, along with a sharp awareness of whether or not one was, at any given moment, connected. Subjective dimensions included the meaning assigned to connection (“like breathing”) and the appropriateness—indeed, the expectedness—of multicommunicating in connected time, since this behavior was interpreted as being “alive” (i.e., available for information exchange).

Since text messages were sometimes exchanged during group meetings or conference telephone calls, an individual working in connected time was not required or expected to focus all of his or her attention on a single interlocutor or a single group interaction. In connected time a person was assumed to be capable of interacting with multiple individuals, and was likely to be doing so. In fact, achieving interaction among disconnected individuals required assembly in a special place—an unwired meeting room—and rules prohibiting the use of portable electronic devices. Just as the temporal structure (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002a) of “banana time” (Roy, 1968) allowed otherwise proscribed acts (e.g., the daily “theft” of a banana), the temporal structure of connected time allowed individuals to participate in several simultaneous interactions. When we asked how many conversations each person typically participated in, the most common answer was four chat interactions and one additional interaction either face to face or by telephone, for a total of five. Such comments suggested that the people working in connected time had a new understanding of appropriate conversational behavior—more overlap, longer gaps (flexibility of tempo), and divided attention (compartmentalization). One interviewee described his supervisor as simultaneously able to conduct an interaction by text message, an interaction by telephone, and a face-to-face interaction. He added, “That’s why she gets promoted” (Rick).

As implied by Rick’s comment, some communicators on some occasions do not disguise the fact that they are multicommunicating. This raises the issue of the extent to which nonfocal individuals are aware of and approve of multicommunicating. It seems likely that the engineer in Indonesia (the first scenario at the beginning of the paper) would expect the engineer in Texas to multicommunicate. Despite the general practice of multicommunicating at Trina’s workplace (second scenario), it is questionable
whether the executives relying on Trina for information would recommend that she accept conversations with friends or family while answering their questions. And members of a consulting team who conduct a chat interaction among themselves while audioconferencing with a client team would know that the client team may be doing the same thing—the consultants tacitly tolerate that possibility in order to maintain their own opportunity to multicommunicate. Finally, when Rick interacts with his supervisor face to face, he is unavoidably aware that she is exchanging text messages or telephone comments with other communicators (and she knows that Rick knows this). These phenomena suggest that there is a continuum of tolerance for multicommunicating, ranging from circumstances in which it is frowned upon (and, consequently, hidden when it occurs) to circumstances in which it is so accepted that it need be only partially compartmentalized, if that, and might even be flaunted. We suggest that changes in the tacit or overt tolerance for multicommunicating may serve as a marker (or even a mechanism) by which a temporal structure such as connected time emerges in an organization.

We should note, however, that almost no one in the organization where we conducted our interviews perceived connected time as an unmixed good. Several persons acknowledged the increased risk of content errors, such as misunderstanding a message, misstating one’s own message, or sending a message to the wrong recipient. Other interviewees complained about the excessive gaps during interaction with multicommunicators, and one described her considerable frustration when people in another department would “talk [pause] so [pause] slow [pause] like their pauses . . . [and] I can hear them typing and they’re typing on something totally different than what I’m talking about” (Alyson). And a few challenged the ability of their fellow employees to keep multicommunicating at an appropriate (moderate) level of intensity.

*Proposition 5a: Multicommunicating behavior stresses the preexisting social constructions of media, norms, and schemata, exerting pressure for change.*

*Proposition 5b: Shifts in behavior can produce a new temporal structure in which multicommunicating becomes a frequent behavior within an organization.*

*Proposition 5c: The emergence of a temporal structure that supports multicommunicating will be marked by transitions in the tacit and overt approval of those interacting with a multicommunicating individual.*

*Proposition 5d: Errors and other unintended effects of multicommunicating may produce a subsequent wave of stresses on media, norms, and schemata, perhaps stimulating efforts to curb or regulate multicommunicating.*

**CONCLUSION**

Concept identification and explication play a major role in scholarship and are critical to the advancement of science (Chaffee, 1991; Lee, 2004). In this paper we have introduced the concept of multicommunicating to describe an emerging communication practice arising from human/technological interaction (Giddens, 1984). Multicommunicating is an example of an unintended use of technologies that emerges from (1) new technologies such as chat and email that enable compartmentalization and flexibility of tempo, (2) norms such as productivity and efficiency that—by encouraging speed and interpersonal accessibility—create a tolerance for divided attention and delayed responses, and (3) schemata that interpret divided attention and delayed responses as effective or even desirable when addressing certain communicative tasks.

This concept of multicommunicating contributes to the study and practice of management in several ways. First, multicommunicating offers another example of a technology-stimulated process of structuration—an example that differs in some significant ways from previous ones. Past research has explored the communication practices emerging from the use of one technology (Barley, 1986; Boudreau & Robey, 2005; Orlikowski, 2000). We extend the literature by identifying a structuration process that emerges from the use of multiple technologies. As people select various combinations of tech-
technologies, they demonstrate the role of human agency in structuration processes. This practice moves beyond using a predesigned technology and points to a socially constructed practice as people attempt to balance their need for communication efficiency and effectiveness.

Second, the concept of multicommunicating may offer a fresh perspective on some research streams. For example, management scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized the importance of work teams and distributed cognition (e.g., Hutchins, 1990; Weick & Roberts, 1993). Since some descriptions of distributed cognition refer to rich communication environments in which persons exchange messages with several team members (Heath & Luff, 1998: 113; Hutchins & Klausen, 1998: 15–16), we suggest that multicommunicating may prove to be a previously unrecognized component of some forms of distributed cognition. As another example, management scholars have often explored leaner media, calling attention to their presumed limitations in comparison to richer media. The practice of multicommunicating, however, reveals a new use for lean media—a use that capitalizes on their ability to compartmentalize and encourage flexibility of tempo. Finally, managers have increasingly noted the importance of time (e.g., Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001; Bluedorn, 2002), including an important distinction between objective time (chronos) and the subjectively appropriate time or moment (kairos) for an act to be performed (Miller, 1992; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002a). Multicommunicating—motivated by a desire to use time (chronos) efficiently—is apparently an activity that is appropriate at some times (kairos) but not others, and so provides a new lens for exploring these dimensions of time within an organizational context.

Third, the concept of multicommunicating provides a foundation for further research on workplace interaction—research of interest to scholars and potentially of great value to practitioners. Future studies might aim at identifying the individual differences in multicommunicating ability and the factors (whether innate or learned) that explain these differences. Other studies might focus on multicommunicating communities to understand the “collective rather than the individual character of media use” (Markus, 1994: 523). Finally, researchers might explore how the various dimensions of multicommunicating combine to contribute to its intensity and seek to identify the “breaking points” for various individuals and situational contexts.

Additional research should make it possible to develop appropriate guidelines and training programs. To our knowledge, few training programs address issues of multicommunicating, and they do so only from a negative and narrow perspective (e.g., “Turn off your cell phone before a sales call”). A better understanding of the phenomenon—along with a delineation of potential benefits, recognition of the circumstances in which benefits can be achieved, and sensitivity to its limitations—will help practicing managers make wise decisions about deploying and managing information technologies.

Multicommunicating requires a special skill set. In addition to knowing how to operate the features of the technology, the communicator also needs to recognize the sensitivity associated with certain audiences and tasks. Training people to multicommunicate effectively (when appropriate) will be critical, since people need to make decisions about messages (tone, audience, content, emphasis, etc.) relatively quickly. Moreover, because communication does not exist in a vacuum, mistakes made in one interaction may influence future interactions. Many of our interviewees believed they could multicommunicate better than most others, suggesting that honest audience feedback about a multicommunicator’s effectiveness will be critical for improving performance.

Multicommunicating seems to be a spreading—and sometimes polarizing—practice. But while it is spreading in some organizations, we cannot yet say with confidence whether it is a practice that abuses time or a practice whose time has come.

REFERENCES


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