

# Permanently Online, Permanently Connected Living and Communicating in a POPC World

EDITED BY

Peter Vorderer, Dorothée Hefner, Leonard Reinecke, and Christoph Klimmt



# PERMANENTLY ONLINE, PERMANENTLY CONNECTED

*Permanently Online, Permanently Connected* establishes the conceptual grounds needed for a solid understanding of the permanently online/permanently connected phenomenon, its causes and consequences, and its applied implications. Due to the diffusion of mobile devices, the ways people communicate and interact with each other and use electronic media have changed substantially within a short period of time. This megatrend comes with fundamental challenges to communication, both theoretical and empirical. The book offers a compendium of perspectives and theoretical approaches from leading thinkers in the field to empower communication scholars to develop this research systematically, exhaustively, and quickly. It is essential reading for media and communication scholars and students studying new media, media effects, and communication theory.

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Living and Communicating  
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*Edited by Peter Vorderer, Dorothée Hefner,  
Leonard Reinecke, and Christoph Klimmt*



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## **PART I**

# Introduction



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# 1

## Permanently Online and Permanently Connected

### A New Paradigm in Communication Research?

*Peter Vorderer, Dorothée Hefner, Leonard Reinecke,  
and Christoph Klimmt*

Talking to students in a class, meeting with friends at a restaurant, working with associates in a small group, discussing with your own children the schedule for any given day, even being intimate with your romantic partner: No matter how such an interpersonal communication situation is specifically shaped, the chances are pretty good nowadays that the person you are facing is dividing his or her attention between you and the device she holds in her hand. This person is involved and actively participating in some form of interpersonal communication with you and with somebody else he or she is connected to via a smartphone. Or, equally possible, he or she is being exposed to news sites, blogs, electronic magazines, television, video clips, or even movies. In other words, this person participates in online exchange or attends to mass communication while simultaneously communicating face-to-face with you.

While until recently communication scholars have systematically distinguished between mass communication and interpersonal communication (the latter being face-to-face or mediated), such classifications have become fuzzy, as different forms of communication are about to merge. More and more often, we socialize with peers, work on a task, or engage in some other activity while allocating (some of) our attention to the messages that appear on the screens of our smartphones, wearables, or other online devices. Despite the fact that we are socially involved with others who are physically present or engaged in a task in the offline setting, we are additionally and simultaneously retrieving information from the Internet (being almost permanently online [PO]) and we are yet connected to other individuals via any form of online communication (being almost permanently connected [PC]).

Such forms of POPC behavior of course also require a certain POPC mindset. A POPC mindset, we believe, is more or less constantly oriented toward digital communication content, be that in the form of possible interactions with friends and peers, new posts on social network sites, public information via newsfeeds, or new decisions and moves of co-players in an online game, to name just a few examples. The POPC mindset refers to (a) the close and intense relationship with the smartphone and its communication ecology to which it grants permanent access and (b) the communication-related expectations that are brought forth with one's own and others' permanent connectedness. These expectations play a key role in how users approach and interpret situations, solve problems, regulate their emotions, interact with others, make decisions, and many other fundamentally important domains of behavior and social life (see Chapter 3 by Klimmt, Hefner, Reinecke, Rieger, and Vorderer).

## The Present Volume

To digitally communicate or at least to be (permanently) accessible seems to be the “new normal” of our time. It appears as the default mode, whereas abstaining from the digital communication ecology needs to be justified among peers, friends, and colleagues. We believe that this shift from the “offline world” to the “online world” constitutes a disruptive change that affects individuals in their thinking, feeling, and behavior. Historically, one may compare the availability of such permanent communication opportunities with the advent of new infrastructures in earlier times: To be permanently online and permanently connected could have a similar impact on individual and social processes as had the installation of electricity nets or the mass availability of mobility enabled by cars, urban streets, and long-distance roads in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The new permanence in communication has a significant impact on the individual users, on dyadic relationships, on social groups, and on society and culture at large. With this volume, we aim at describing and—if already possible—explaining the diverse manifestations, implications, and consequences of the new and permanent opportunities of mobile online communication. Our focus lies on the individual processes and effects of being POPC, knowing well that POPC will also have a profound impact on macro-level processes, such as economic value generation or the formation of public opinion.

In order to address the great diversity of manifestations and implications of POPC, the present volume consists of six sections. Next to this kick-off chapter, the “Introduction” section explains the phenomenon of POPC from a historical (see Chapter 2 by Ling) and a theoretical (see Chapter 3 by Klimmt, Hefner, Reinecke, Rieger, and Vorderer) point of view and discusses methodological challenges of POPC for communication research (see Chapter 4 by Schneider, Reich, and Reinecke).

The second section, “POPC and Decision-making: Selecting, Processing, Multitasking,” is dedicated to the perspective of message choices and decision-making in permanent digital communication. In the first chapter within this section, Chapter 5 by Malka, Ariel, Avidar, and Cohen, the relevance of the uses-and-gratifications approach in the POPC context is demonstrated by explicating the use of “WhatsApp” in times of crisis. It then discusses how today’s media-rich environment can be a strong trigger of impulsive media use that may be in conflict with other goals and obligations (see Chapter 6 by van Koningsbruggen, Hartmann, and Du) and how the new permanence in online communication affects the development, but also the prevention and treatment, of pathological Internet use (see Chapter 7 by Klimmt and Brand). Finally, the increasingly important phenomena of multitasking and task switching are reviewed and discussed in light of the opportunities in a POPC environment (see Chapter 8 by Xu and Wang and Chapter 9 by David).

The third section, “Social Dynamics of POPC: Self, Groups, and Relationships,” addresses the consequences of POPC in the context of social and self-related processes. The first three chapters of this section address self-relevant processes in a POPC world, such as new forms of narrating the self and its consequences for well-being (see Chapter 10 by von Pape), potential conflicts of experiencing meaningfulness in a POPC world and protecting privacy simultaneously (see Chapter 11 by Trepte and Oliver), and how being POPC affects narrative engagement (see Chapter 12 by Woods, Slater, Cohen, Johnson, and Ewoldsen). The last three chapters are dedicated to the effects of POPC on social relationships. Their authors elaborate on how POPC affects group processes and dynamics (see Chapter 13 by Knop-Huelss, Winkler, and Penzel), how permanence in connectedness and interstitial communication in particular make a difference for social relationships (see Chapter 14 by Utz), and how being POPC alters beginnings, maintenance, and dissolutions of intimate relationships (see Chapter 15 by Rieger).

Section four, “Socialization in a POPC Environment: Development, Skill Acquisition, and Cultural Influences,” discusses factors of influence that affect socialization processes under the conditions of POPC. The first two chapters in this section are focused on the developmental phase in adolescence. While Chapter 16 by Jordan elaborates on the question of what it means to grow up “online” in a POPC world, Chapter 17 by Hefner, Knop, and Klimmt introduces a conceptualization of important competencies that help today’s adolescents respond to the challenges of living in a POPC environment. Chapter 18 by Wessler, Rieger, Cohen, and Vorderer discusses cultural influences on POPC behavior and how cultural identities are renegotiated in permanent cross-border POPC linkages between people from different cultural backgrounds.

Section five, “The POPC Citizen: Politics and Participation,” discusses deployments that (possibly) result from today’s media ecology and its opportunities for political communication and participation. Chapter 19 by Hefner, Rinke, and Schneider elaborates on how the POPC environment as a high-choice, high-stimulation media ecology shapes exposure to and processing of political information. Chapter 20 by Vromen, Xenos, and Loader deals with young citizens and their new forms of participation under conditions of POPC. Chapter 21 by Holbert, Weinmann, and Robinson is dedicated to the intersection of political communication and entertainment and discusses how the POPC environment affords citizens with new opportunities to combine entertainment and politics.

In the last section of the book, “Brave New World: Networked Life and Well-Being,” the affordance and obligations of a POPC environment and the resulting implications for different facets of health and the quality of life are discussed: Chapter 22 by Reinecke provides an overview of potential consequences of POPC behavior and a POPC mindset for psychological health and well-being. Chapter 23 by Sonnentag is dedicated to the role of today’s media and communication affordances at the intersection of work and private life and discusses the effects of POPC in work-life balance. Finally, Chapter 24 by Mata and Baumann addresses the question of how the POPC environment interacts with physical health and health behavior.

## Open Questions and Future Challenges

The various chapters in this volume are meant to describe and analyze the most relevant manifestations, implications, and consequences of mobile online communication for individuals and for societies at large. Most of the ideas presented in this volume refer to individual processes and effects of being permanently online and/or permanently connected, and this perspective alone comes with an impressive number of research challenges for communication studies, media psychology, and their neighboring fields. Conclusions on where to direct future efforts in our discipline will therefore build on basically all chapters collected here and will most likely emphasize individual or psychological perspectives. Yet, we argue that the POPC phenomenon is also of great importance for other, namely more global, perspectives and approaches in communication. One example is the well-elaborated reflections on how the online infrastructure and its use by significant parts of a population affect society at large (e.g., Castells, 2001). We suggest developing new research programmatic that will eventually connect current observations of individual POPC mindsets and behaviors with more global developments that are located and have been identified on a group, organization, and societal level. To illustrate what we have in mind, we would like to very briefly highlight a few examples and expectations and need to start, one more time, at the individual level.

At the level of individual processes, we believe that POPC is a phenomenon that holds the potential to radically affect perceptions of social reality, identity processes, motivational structures and needs,

health behavior, and the striving for well-being (Vorderer, 2016), to name just a few. Individuals who are practicing and relying on permanence in communication are likely to develop new perspectives and viewpoints on their (networked) self, new strategies for problem solving and self-regulation, and new desires and preferences for social interactions, romantic relationships, and their links to organizations and to society at large. They will simultaneously face new challenges for their health and well-being and experience new threats to and opportunities for their happiness, cognitive functioning, and their social capital. A POPC lifestyle may question traditional roles, such as the role of a citizen, an employee, a parent, or a partner. POPC individuals will likely hold alternative views, attitudes, expectations, and fears concerning loneliness, geographic distances to relevant others, traveling, and mobility in general. New sources of meaning and a specific purpose of life may emerge from living POPC, as well as new modes of experiencing and expressing aversive conditions such as personal loss, divorce, or depression. If this will be the case—and we believe that the collected chapters in this volume provide much evidence for this expectation—the permanence of communication will also challenge our scholarly theories, models, explanations, and predictions of many individual behaviors, experiences, expectations, emotions, and decisions.

One example of this is the often found and confirmed result that POPC behaviors both serve a person's needs while simultaneously challenging and stressing out this same individual (Vorderer, 2016; Vorderer, Krömer, & Schneider, 2016). The most recent trend of tailoring and customizing apps so that they can serve an individual's interests most effectively (Sundar, 2015) may exemplify this: Individually tailored or customized apps have become extremely popular despite the fact that media users are also concerned about the protection of their privacy when interacting with these programs. But the promise to be supported, helped, and relieved by a system that seems to understand oneself better than any real human being is apparently too tempting, so that many users more and more rely on such sources of support. This may go so far as to let an app make major personal decisions, not only by providing the "best and most relevant information" for oneself but also by telling, if not coercing, the individual to work out at a certain time, to eat more healthy, or to date somebody else. While in the history of our discipline we have always believed that most individuals want to keep agency about their lives as much as possible, today we observe the advent of more advanced technology to make these decisions more frequently than ever, hence relieving the individual from the strain of permanent decision-making.

At the level of dyadic relationships, mobile phones and their apps enable individuals to easily and constantly stay in contact independent from geographic distances. This yields many advantages, particularly for romantic partners, as being in touch certainly can create a sense of togetherness and stimulate new forms of intimate interactions over distance that might intensify relationships (Hassenzahl, Heidecker, Eckoldt, Diefenbach, & Hillmann, 2012). At the same time, it must be questioned if these new kinds of communication incidences can replace longer phone calls—that might become rare—with continuous interaction instead of often interrupted interaction threads via communication apps (cf. Rieger, this volume; Utz, this volume).

Another ambiguous facet of permanent digital connectedness in dyadic relationships concerns the dichotomy between perceiving social support from close others on the one side and—on the other side—insufficient opportunities or necessities to get along alone, resulting in fewer opportunities to experience successful coping competencies and self-efficacy. Of course, it can be comforting to permanently have the partner, best friend, or mother "in the pocket" and in constant readiness to help out in new and unfamiliar situations. Particularly in parent-child relationships, the temptation is high for both parties to be constantly on "stand-by," so that parents can always check if their children are well and children can always ask their parents for advice or support. However, adolescents need to learn to

master challenges without their parents, and constant parental support can adversely affect necessary, emancipatory processes of becoming independent (e.g., Schiffrin et al., 2014).

At the meso or group level, the fact that individuals are often acting in a POPC-specific way when it comes to interactions with groups may also come with profound changes to common practices. POPC, it seems, could lend more stability and cohesion to (some types of) groups and teams, but may also generate higher volatility and speed in alterations of group structure, membership, productivity, mutual trust, and overall social capital (cf. Knop-Huelss et al., this volume). Groups will become more visible and more easily accessible to members, because they now appear as virtual entities and through technologically defined “locations” and “headquarters,” such as stable chat rooms or WhatsApp channels. Perceived boundaries of groups, such as sharp distinctions of who belongs to the group and who does not, or the predefined mission or shared interest of a group, are likely to lose stability and rise in ambiguity. For instance, groups that originated at work may lose their focus on work-related issues, because the permanence of member communication will infuse other topics, discussions, conflicts, and contributions into the group’s proceedings (cf. Marwick, 2011). The POPC phenomenon may thus transform existing groups, their social architecture and their informal hierarchies, as the negotiation of within-group social status and leadership will be affected by new rules and alternative pathways to reputation (e.g., through strategic self-presentation, Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011). Likewise, the development and formation of new social groups is likely to follow new laws and complexities under the condition of POPC. Creating new groups is apparently a lot easier given the permanent availability of possible partners for communication. However, given the many communication opportunities and obligations that POPC brings to each possible member, important ingredients for group sustainability, such as reliable commitment and active contributions of members, may become more difficult to secure. Similarly to the proposed implications of POPC at the individual level (see above), then, group processes and dynamics affected by members’ POPC behavior are possibly more diverse, unpredictable, and both desirable and undesirable, depending on the goals and normative standpoints of the individuals involved.

At the macro level, finally, it is particularly interesting to debate possible changes that can be derived from the already postulated shifts at the lower levels of analysis. The POPC trend seems to be in synchronicity with other macro developments. Among them are those that sociologists have outlined as manifestations of radical change, for example, the general, multifaceted acceleration of life (Rosa, 2013) and the increased demands and burdens that advanced, knowledge-based economies impose on workers, employees, executives, and entrepreneurs (most importantly, permanent, life-long flexibility and uncertainty of the future, cf. Sennett, 1998, 2006). With regard to social cohesion and social capital, there is an interesting co-occurrence of POPC and increased polarization or (even extreme) diversification of political and normative points of view. These developments, we believe, have become visible, for instance, in the support for extremist political parties in many countries around the globe as well as in various backlashes—and, sometimes, surprising successes—for endorsers of civil rights, social equality, protection of minorities’ and citizens’ freedom, and democratic structures (e.g., Rød & Weidmann, 2015). Reconstructing possible bidirectional connections between POPC as a common practice of many individuals and these macro trends (acceleration, flexibilization, polarization) is an ambitious intellectual challenge and offers exciting new chances of understanding and predicting global change. For agents of social change—activists, legislators, NGOs, and many more—POPC may turn out as a pathway to understanding social dynamics and as an instrument to influence these dynamics at the same time.

The conviction that POPC is and will be a source of radical, disruptive change (with only a few historically comparable predecessors) calls for substantial effort by communication scholars to study this

phenomenon much further, in other words, more systematically and empirically. Some of the already existing individual studies and a few concepts, terms, and theoretical models related to the permanence in online communication have been discussed in the present volume. This diverse and inspiring work by many scholars should not only continue, but also grow further. What is needed is a common understanding of the permanence in communication and connectedness as a key element of defining the ontological nature of the field's very object of inquiry. Past propositions of the discipline's identity were often bound to either a specific (new or particularly important) part of the communication and media landscape (e.g., newspaper or television) or to the application of more tradition-rich philosophies and methodologies, such as sociology, psychology, political science, cultural studies, and media and communication (Craig, 1999). The powerful, multidirectional force of change that the new permanence in communication is creating will require communication scholars to integrate it into their definition of what the field is about, interested in, and responsible for within the family of academic disciplines. Communication of the future—private and public, entertaining and informing, persuasive and educational—will be *permanent* communication. And communication scholarship will thus have to take this permanence into account: In the future, we believe that we will have to study individuals, groups, and societies that are permanently online and permanently connected.

We would like to conclude with a piece of advice, if we may: We suggest turning off all other devices now and exclusively allocating your attention to the content of the various chapters in this book. We hope and quite honestly believe that it will be worthwhile to interrupt being online and connected otherwise and to deliberate the ideas, arguments, and suggestions of the authors collected in this volume. Technological as well as human developments are rarely straightforward but rather complex and multifaceted, if not oblique. Even in a dominantly POPC world, there will be islands of activities that stick out from the rest. Reading a book may—if only sometimes—be one of them.

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## Methodological Challenges of POPC for Communication Research

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## Reconceptualizing Uses and Gratifications vis-à-vis Smartphone Applications

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## Always On? Explicating Impulsive Influences on Media Use

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## Being Mindfully Connected

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