



“It’s just not that exciting anymore”: The changing centrality of SMS in the everyday lives of young Danes

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Abstract

This article considers the centrality of short message system (SMS) texting in the communication repertoires of young Danes. Recent years have seen dramatic changes in the mediascape with a multitude of new possibilities for text-based communication; Facebook, in particular, has become popular among young Danes. Some have suggested that the role of SMS texting, a technology that was previously an entrenched part of young people’s communication repertoires, has changed in this diversified media environment. Based on interviews with 31 Danish high school students and drawing on the domestication approach, this article examines the use practices and meanings associated with SMS texting in today’s complex and evolving mediascape. This article argues that SMS texting is becoming re-domesticated, its meanings changing, and the technology finding a new position in the communication repertoires of users.

Keywords

Domestication, Facebook, mobile communication, short message system, smartphones, social network sites, texting, youth

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Introduction

From the early to mid-2000s and onward, text messaging through the short message system (SMS) has been ubiquitous among Danish youth (Bille et al., 2005). Originally designed to distribute service messages, young people in the Nordic countries discovered the communicative potential of the SMS protocol and made it a fixture of the media they use for communication—their “communication repertoires” for short—and Scandinavian youth culture (Ling, 2004). Today, virtually all young Danes use SMS, and it remains the communication channel that they are most likely to use on a daily basis (Kobbernagel et al., 2011a; Statistics Denmark, 2012a).

Recent media developments have provided young people with a range of alternative opportunities for communicating beyond SMS; Facebook, in particular, has become popular and widespread. Based on this observation, it has been suggested that the use of SMS and the role this technology occupies in the communication repertoires and everyday lives of users may be changing (Bertel and Stald, 2013; DR Medieforskning, 2013; Helles, 2013). If and how such developments influence and interact with the use of SMS is, however, still unclear.

Building on 31 semi-structured interviews with Danish high school students, this article examines the centrality of SMS texting¹ in the everyday lives of young Danes in the light of changes that have occurred in the media landscape in recent years. Drawing on the domestication of media and technology framework (Haddon, 2011; Silverstone et al., 1992), it argues that SMS texting is undergoing “re-domestication” (Green and Haddon, 2009; Sørensen, 1994); the meanings and everyday use practices associated with the technology are changing, and the technology is finding new position in the media repertoires of youth.

Danish youth and communication media

Denmark has a long history of early adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Drotner, 2001), and ownership and use of communication technologies are commonplace. In 2012, 92% of families had in-home access to a computer (Statistics Denmark, 2012b), and a survey from 2008 found that 79% of the 6- to 17-year-olds used their own mobile phones (Bucht et al., 2009: 34). Among the 15- to 34-year-olds, 77% in 2012 owned smartphones (Aarup et al., 2012: 20). All young people in Denmark aged 16–24 years use the Internet (Statistics Denmark, 2012c), and 78% of young people aged 16–19 years in 2012 used the Internet on mobile phones (Statistics Denmark, 2012a).

Although young Danes have access to a wide range of communication media and services, two media activities—SMS texting and Facebook—are particularly popular and top the list of daily media activities among 13- to 23-year-old Danes as number one and two, respectively (Kobbernagel et al., 2011a: 17).

SMS texting in 2012 was used by 98% of the 16- to 19-year-olds (Statistics Denmark, 2012c), and 87% of the 13- to 23-year-olds used SMS on a daily basis in 2011. Only 54%, in comparison, used voice calls on a daily basis, but the total use of voice calls was also very high at 97% (Kobbernagel et al., 2011b: 27). Although SMS texting is ubiquitous among Danish youth, traffic data have shown that the number of SMS messages that

were sent on Danish networks has been declining in recent years. The total volume of messages peaked in 2010 and has been declining since, most significantly in the recent past (The Danish Business Authority, 2013).

Facebook since 2008 has become the most well-known and used social network site in Denmark (Jensen and Sørensen, 2013). It was the most popular service on the web in Denmark in 2012, measured by the amount of time users spent on the service, and the 15- to 24-year-olds used Facebook the most (Association of Danish Media, 2012). A survey from 2009 found that among 18- to 24-year-old Danes, 90% used social networking services and 77% specifically used Facebook (Jensen and Sørensen, 2013: 52). Another survey from the same year conducted among children and young people aged 9–16 years found that 73% of those who had an online profile had this with Facebook (Bucht et al., 2009: 60). Furthermore, 64% of the 16- to 19-year-olds used “social networking services” (which in most cases means Facebook; cf. the previous lines) on their mobile phones in 2012 (Statistics Denmark, 2012a).

Literature review

Domestication of media technologies

The domestication of media and technology framework is an approach to studying how users appropriate technologies, fitting them into everyday life and making them their own (Silverstone et al., 1992). The most distinctive features of the framework are its emphasis on user agency in shaping technology through everyday life practices (Bakardjieva, 2006) and on the nuanced, complex, and context-dependent negotiations and meaning-making processes that take place when technology is introduced into the everyday lives of individuals and groups (Haddon, 2011). Studies using the framework typically (although not exclusively) employ a micro-sociological perspective on media use, and qualitative methods are often preferred (Haddon, 2006). Using such a perspective and approach thus may yield rich and contextually grounded understandings of media use, but at the same time, the generalizability of the findings may be more limited than other (typically quantitatively oriented) perspectives.

This article examines the meanings and use practices associated with SMS texting in the contemporary media environment. The domestication framework is particularly relevant in this context because it stipulates that the appropriation and use of media technology in everyday life is an ongoing and continuously negotiated process where meanings and use practices are never entirely fixed. Consequently, even deeply entrenched media technologies may become “re-domesticated,” their meanings and uses fundamentally transformed in the face of changed circumstances (Green and Haddon, 2009; Sørensen, 1994). Drawing on this insight and the general domestication framework this article argues that SMS texting is undergoing re-domestication among the respondents of the study—that the meanings and uses of the technology are changing in the contemporary mediascape.

In order to make such an argument, the remainder of this review focuses on three key aspects of the literature on SMS texting (and to a lesser degree voice calls) to examine how this technology was domesticated and which role the technology consequently came to play in the everyday lives of users. These three aspects will then be revisited in the

analysis of the current media practices of the young Danes in the sample. First, the literature of instrumental uses (e.g. coordination and other goal-oriented communication) is reviewed.² Then, the expressive uses (e.g. process-oriented communication) are considered. Finally, the relationship between SMS and social ties is explored. The focus of the review will predominantly be on the use of SMS prior to the introduction of Facebook and other recent media developments.

SMS texting and instrumental communication

Instrumental communication practices were always fundamental to mobile communication. Indeed, the ability to communicate with others for instrumental purposes irrespective of the time and place was an early driver of both the manufacturing (Green et al., 2001) and the adoption of mobile phones (Ling, 2004).

One very prominent instrumental use practice associated with mobile communication that the literature has found to be widespread among both youth and adults (Green, 2003) is that of “micro-coordination” (Ling and Yttri, 2002), the continuous flexible coordination made possible by mobile phones. A classic example of micro-coordination is the ability to call or text ahead when running late for a meeting, rescheduling arrangements on the fly. Such uses, it has been argued, have had profound social consequences in leading to a relaxation of the norms around clock-based timekeeping and punctuality; schedules and time have softened (Ling and Yttri, 2002), and a new flexible punctuality has become the norm in many contexts (Larsen et al., 2008).

Although mobile communication has thus been associated with an increased flexibility in the schedules and coordination of everyday life, the fact that communication through SMS texting and calls is dyadic in nature, however, makes it inflexible for group communication where many need to communicate with many (Larsen et al., 2008; Ling, 2012).

SMS texting and expressive communication

While both adults and young people use the mobile phone for coordination, the extent to which teens have used SMS texting for expressive communication set them apart from other groups. For teens, “the most important thing in mobile communication remains building up and maintaining their social networks” (Oksman and Rautiainen, 2002: 28). This is reflected by the fact that a large proportion of the content of their SMS messages is relational and phatic (Thurlow and Brown, 2003).

Continuously keeping in touch through SMS (and in some cases calls), young people have been found to create a sense of “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004) with their peers. Messages are exchanged in a form of gifting economy guided by rules and expectations of reciprocity (Johnsen, 2003). SMS is, for instance, used for playful forwarding of chain messages (e.g. jokes), for gossip, for phatic communication in seemingly pointless messages, as well as for deep discussions of highly personal topics (Kasesniemi, 2003).

Young people have developed elaborate texting cultures (Caron and Caronia, 2007; Goggin, 2006), including specialized argot and norms, the mastery of which has helped to define group membership (Grinter and Eldridge, 2001).

The asynchronous and text-based character of SMS has allowed them to flirt and be more confident than they might have dared in real life (Kasesniemi, 2003), as well as to communicate under the radar of adult supervision (Campbell and Park, 2008).

As such, texting has been a central medium for the increasing orientation toward the peer group in youth as well as for the negotiations of dependency and autonomy from the family also characteristic of the period (Ling and Bertel, 2013; Mesch and Talmud, 2010).

SMS texting and social ties

The mobile phone is primarily a tool of the intimate sphere (Ling, 2008), in particular the core group of family and friends (Ling and Stald, 2010). Most often, mobile communication is used for coordination of daily activities (Ling and Yttri, 2002) or staying updated with the closest friends (Reid and Reid, 2005). Indeed, Ling et al. (2012), in an analysis of a large set of mobile traffic data, found that the circle of people that one typically texts and calls is quite small; about half of all communication goes to only five persons in the case of texting and three persons in the case of voice calls.

Less often discussed in the literature is the use of mobile communication with the network of weaker ties. This does, however, not mean that SMS is not used for communication with such ties. Kasesniemi and Rautiainen (2004), for instance, found that among young people, SMS texting is often the venue of choice for initiating contact and exploring new relationships. Oksman and Turtiainen (2004) similarly found that romantic relationships between teens frequently begin through SMS. Grinter and Eldridge (2001) found that teens sometimes prefer to use SMS with people they do not know well, for instance, when flirting. Oksman and Rautiainen (2002) describe how humorous chain messages are sometimes used to initiate a relationship and gauge the interest of the other. Gradually, the relationship then develops from this starting point, becoming increasingly intimate and personal.

One aspect of SMS that has been found to facilitate communication with weaker ties is the greater interactional control associated with the text-based and asynchronous communication format. By using SMS, users are given time to compose their messages, avoiding awkward silences and unwanted nonverbal cues typically present in synchronous communication. This serves to make “difficult” communication easier to manage (Geser, 2004; Ling, 2000) and lowers the threshold for taking up communication (Ling and Yttri, 2006).

Another aspect is the mobile contact list. As documented by the literature, mobile telephone numbers have been considered something to be collected and compared, the number of entries in the contact list serving as a form of popularity measure (Kasesniemi, 2003; Ling, 2004). Numbers have been collected as part of the contact ritual (Ling and Yttri, 2002), and the mobile phonebook often has come to make up the “social universe” of users (Ling and Campbell, 2011: 10). Indeed, according to Kasesniemi (2003) “an empty [phonebook] memory can be interpreted as symbolic of an empty life” (p. 126). In some cases, the contact information of even latent ties has been saved and kept “just in case” (Kasesniemi, 2003: 142) as “a potential resource pool” that could prove useful in the future (Geser, 2004: 19).

Method

The study was conducted using a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). A total of 31 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Danish high school students over two rounds in October 2011 and in April 2012. The respondents were aged between 16 and 21 years ($M=17.7$ years, standard deviation [SD]=1.1) and were approximately evenly spread across high school years 1–3. Of the respondents, 17 were female and 14 were male; 27 owned smartphones, 30 used Facebook, and 25 used mobile Facebook. The respondents were recruited from three different and geographically dispersed high schools in an effort to diversify the empirical material, and the interviews were conducted at the school premises, providing students a “protected place” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011:188) to feel confident and at home. Audio recordings of the sessions were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using ATLAS.ti 7, where coding was conducted by a single analyst in an iterative coding process following Charmaz (2006).

Analysis

The teens participating in this study use SMS texting, mobile phone calls, and Facebook to cover the majority of their general communication needs. In addition to these technologies, other media are used for more specialized purposes. Email is typically used for various subscriptions (e.g. newsletters) and what is considered “formal” communication (e.g. work); it is, however, seldom used for communication with peers. Messages sent via the multimedia message system (MMS) are popular for sharing images that for various reasons are not suitable for a larger audience (e.g. on Facebook). Skype is often used for keeping contact with friends or family who are far away. Very few use Twitter, and only one respondent uses Instagram.

Because Facebook occupies such a central role in the communication repertoires of these young Danes, the use of SMS in what follows will predominantly be discussed vis-à-vis the use of this technology.

SMS texting and instrumental communication

The interviews show that among the respondents in this study, micro-coordination is still an essential use of both SMS and voice communication; whether arranging meetings with friends, a pick-up by car, or telling parents whether they will be home for supper, traditional mobile phone functionalities remain central.

While such coordination is often associated with SMS, it may occur across any connection, including Facebook. As the mediascape occupied by young Danes has increasingly become a “polymedia” environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013)—where cost, access, and media literacy barriers no longer make certain communication media clearly preferable over others—choosing among media to a large degree becomes a matter of affordances and interpersonal negotiation. For communicative couples who have access to multiple channels of communication, the choice of where to micro-coordinate thus, to a large degree, has become a matter of “whatever works” for a given purpose or preference and habit among the communication partners.

Although it is no longer the only option for mobile coordination, often SMS texting or voice calls remain the preferred channel of micro-coordination as virtually everyone from peers to parents to soccer coaches are reachable by SMS and voice calls:

SMS is, like ... well ... more reliable. Because then you know that they'll see it if they have their phone on them. Then there's no excuse. (Martin, male, age 19)

Other more recent means of mobile communication—such as mobile Facebook—require access to and mastery of more sophisticated technology in the form of a smartphone and the relevant apps. At the time of the interviews, many (e.g. around a quarter of young Danes, see Aarup et al 2012) still do not own smartphones, and these individuals are not reachable through mobile Facebook. SMS and voice calls, on the other hand, remain reliable communicative “baselines” as everyone has this technology baked into their handsets and most people know how to use it.

Coordination of larger groups (and sometimes smaller groups as well) according to the respondents mostly occurs on Facebook, which offers convenient functionality specifically designed for group interaction where many communicate with many. A prominent example of how Facebook is used for group communication and coordination is that many respondents describe how their classes have set up closed groups for communication among classmates. Within these groups, all can see and participate in the ongoing conversation simultaneously. At the same time, these groups also limit the communication to just the group members, making it a safe and semi-private space, where students can ask (and provide answers to) questions about homework or lost items as well as to plan the next class party, comment on how boring the current class is, or inform others that they have found out class is canceled the following day:

In the beginning in our class we had a telephone chain so we could write around to everyone if class was cancelled. And I've never seen that get used. But since then someone started a group on Facebook called [the class name] where everyone is a member. And then there was a day where class was cancelled and it got posted there. Someone posts it. Then everyone gets a notification [...] [the group] has been used a lot. I'm actually surprised. If there's a party for the class or something then this is the place it gets announced because everybody is a member and everybody checks Facebook. (Matthias, male, age 19)

Another common but more specialized example of group coordination is that of Facebook “events.” This functionality—a kind of temporary forum—is typically used for occasions where a larger number of people need to coordinate or be updated about a specific social event and where communication through SMS would be inefficient:

Me and my sister are throwing an 18th birthday party [...] and we've written like “this is my wish list” and “this is where you have to go” and “you have to be there at this time” and things like that. And it's also very practical that they can find out things [...] so you avoid being spammed with SMS messages about “when am I supposed to be there?,” “when are we doing this and that” and so on. It's all in there. I think it's brilliant that you can just keep everything right there in this one place rather than everyone coming over and asking and texting. (Anne, female, age 17)

While much group coordination appears to have been taken over by such purpose-tailored and more efficient group communication functionality on Facebook, SMS texting (and voice calls) still serves an important function as an immediate and reliable group coordination medium in situations where Facebook for various reasons cannot, to the same extent, be relied on, for instance, when coordination occurs at the last minute and on the move:

Well, in the days leading up to [the event] we do it [coordinate] via Facebook. And then on the day [...] it's SMS. I think that's easier. Because you can keep a phone in your pocket and you can't do that with a laptop. And not everyone has a smartphone with Facebook access. So I think it's easier with the mobile phone. (Christian, male, age 17)

SMS texting and expressive communication

The focus now turns to the area of expressive communication. Being a vast area that would be very difficult to cover exhaustively, we focus here on the dimensions of the expressive uses of SMS (and Facebook) that emerged as the most salient in the interviews.

As a first point, it is clear that the respondents still use SMS widely for expressive communication purposes, particularly for communication with strong ties. Yet, it is also clear that their expressive use of SMS has changed. These young Danes grew up when the use of SMS was at its peak, and many of them describe how in this period of their life they used SMS much more for expressive purposes than they do today:

I actually do not write as much over SMS as I did when I was younger [...] it's just not that exciting anymore. And you have like ... Back then it was cool to write with boys and those kinds of things. It's a little bit, like, you're past that now. Now Facebook is what's new. (Christina, female, age 18)

When I was younger I did it a lot. Then it was like all the time, right. But now [...] having conversations over SMS is like a little bit ... It is OK, right, but ... In case someone writes me I might call them back instead. (Alexander, male, age 19)

Previous research from the Nordic region shows that SMS texting when it was approaching its peak was most used by the 17- to 19-year-olds (Ling et al., 2012). Interestingly, the respondents in this study—who belong to the same age group—experience that their use peaked several years ago. While it is impossible to account for all the factors likely to influence such a change, a few that were brought up by the respondents deserve to be mentioned.

First, there is the sense in the interviews and in the above examples that the intense exchanges of relational messages (as epitomized by messages of the mainly phatic “what are you up to?” type) that were common when the respondents were growing up are something that they have grown out of, something that now seem outmoded or perhaps even a little childish to them. This is similar to the observation by Harper and Hamill (2005) that for teens sometimes “what was accepted when 13 years old is laughed at and a source of embarrassment by the time they are 18 years” (p. 69). Associated with this is

the fact that SMS was new and exciting at the time these respondents were in their pre- to early teens. Today, SMS, on the other hand, has become taken-for-granted, mundane, and unspectacular. Part of this taken-for-grantedness, then, is that the technology has lost the sense of excitement it was initially associated with.

Second, as the mediascape these respondents occupy approaches a state of polymedia where the choice of how to communicate through media is less determined by external factors such as cost, access, and literacy (Madianou and Miller, 2013), the respondents are also freer to choose among media according to personal/interpersonal preference and habit. Indeed, with prices of both data and voice telephony dropping significantly in recent years, the previously so dominant economic incentive to use texting over other mobile communication channels has decreased and made such media more viable alternatives; many respondents, for example, describe how they will often prefer voice calls over texting, particularly if they have something important to discuss.

Furthermore, young Danes today also have the option to use remediated SMS-like functionality in many other media contexts—including Facebook—and may, for various reasons, prefer to use these media over SMS for some of their communication:

Facebook is for the longer conversations, I'd use Facebook for that. Whereas SMS is more for the brief and clear message "I'll meet you at this place" or "Where are you?" (Jacob, male, age 17)

On SMS I don't write those "what are you doing?" messages. I can do that on Facebook. (Nanna, Female, age 16)

As Silverstone et al. (1992) remind us, media are (at least) "doubly articulated" as conduits of symbolic content and as material objects. One aspect that influences media use in situations of choice, then, is the material affordances of the device-objects. The personal computer (PC) as a physical object may, for instance, better afford longer textual interactions and more complex use than does a smartphone (Bertel and Stald, 2013). Thus, both the larger screen and the greater ease of writing longer messages on the full-size keyboard of the computer are frequently emphasized as motivations for using PC-based Facebook instead of SMS (and for using PC-based Facebook instead of mobile Facebook):

When I am sitting by the computer then I don't like to SMS, then I hate it. Then I hate [using] my phone except for calls. So every time someone [SMS] texts me then I write "come on Facebook if you want to talk with me." (Mohammed, male, age 17)

As we will elaborate on later, Facebook is used for communication with a wider network of friends and acquaintances than SMS, which is also reflected in the use of these media for expressive communication. Among the respondents, Facebook is typically considered the venue for "small talk" (Sørensen, 2012) and casual exchanges with the extended network of friends:

[On Facebook] you can write with a mix of people [friends and acquaintances] and then it can just be quick conversations that aren't necessarily very personal. It's just, like, "it was fun what you did in school today" or something. But you don't do that over the phone. (Christina, female, age 18)

I spent a year at a boarding school and then there's all those people from that school [on Facebook], where you just write to say "hi" and "how are you doing?" I wouldn't do that on the phone. (Line, female, age 16)

SMS, on the other hand, is typically used more exclusively with strong ties, and this, to some, makes SMS a more personal communication channel than Facebook:

I can have deep conversations [via SMS], no problem. But it is not with everybody. I don't write that over Facebook. There, the phone is a bit more personal in some way, writing an SMS. (Camilla, female, age 17)

On Facebook, that's where you talk about the lightweight stuff. So if you look at it [like that], it might be that my SMS conversations mean a bit more. Their content has more meaning than Facebook. (Matthias, male, age 19)

Contextual factors also influence the meanings users ascribe to these media. For instance, the fact that Facebook is often used on big screen computers in crowded classrooms where others can easily read what is on one's screen to some makes Facebook less suitable for private and personal communication even through direct communication such as chat. Furthermore, if one fails to log out of Facebook and leaves the computer unattended, this, according to some, may put the conversations at risk of been seen by nosy classmates. SMS, on the other hand, is tied to a specific handset which rarely leaves the user, guaranteeing what we suggest might be thought of as "privacy by proximity." Here again, we see the importance of the material articulation of media.

As Caron and Caronia (2007) have noted, new esteem may sometimes be granted to old technologies in the light of newer and more efficient alternatives. In line with this observation, some respondents describe how SMS is becoming an increasingly personal medium in the light of the more effortless interaction of Facebook. An SMS, for instance, can be seen to signal that someone has thought of the recipient without being reminded (directly or indirectly) to do so by Facebook:

To me it really means a lot to get SMS messages ... well, I get them every day, but it means something to me because I like it when another person has thought of you and thought "damn it, I'm going to send her an SMS!" And that's also why I think it's more personal. [On] Facebook it's so easy, there you can see if she's online or not and then you can write. But I think SMS ... there ... it's a bit like a postcard or something. (Sandra, female, age 18)

SMS texting and social ties

In the literature review, it was clear that although SMS has mainly been a medium for strong-tie communication, it has also been used for communication with weaker ties. The young Danish high school students in this study, however, rarely use SMS (or voice calls) to communicate with weaker social ties. Indeed, it appears that among the respondents, communication with weaker ties in most cases occurs on Facebook. The interviews show that access to phone numbers and the use of mobile voice calls and SMS texting are often reserved for strong ties and "necessary" communication, for instance, practical

matters such as coordinating face-to-face interaction. Family, close friends, boy- or girl-friends, co-workers, and co-commuters are typical examples of persons the respondents communicate with through SMS and voice calls:

The people I contact via mobile are the ones I need in my everyday life. The rest takes place online. (Maria, female, age 17)

Who I write with on Facebook differs a bit more [than SMS]. When I'm lying around and writing SMSs that's more for some specific people [...] the people I have on SMS that's like mostly my family. My mother, my little brother and my father and then some of the top friends. My best friend and some of the others. And on Facebook it's more all-round. (Line, female, age 16)

Where exchanging telephone numbers in previous research was found to be a fixed part of the contact ritual among Nordic youth, several of the respondents in this study describe how when meeting new people they will instead add them first as friends on Facebook and let the relationship develop from there. Indeed, rather than the mobile phonebook, today it is Facebook that makes up the most complete catalog of the individual user's social world (Larsen, 2009).

Two aspects are particularly relevant to this change. First, it is easier to add someone on Facebook than on the mobile phone. Partly this is because one does not need a number to do so, meaning that a person does not need to key in, memorize, or write down the telephone number of a newly met contact immediately but simply needs to remember a name to look up on Facebook. Partly it is because asking someone to be a contact on Facebook also adds a layer of mediation to the transaction, making it less awkward than requesting a telephone number face to face:

It might be a little bit awkward to ask for someone's phone number, I think it is. [Adding someone on Facebook] is also not quite as embarrassing as having to stand there and ask "what is your phone number?" (Christian, male, age 17)

Second, where SMS and voice calls are reserved for communication with stronger ties, Facebook has become an all-purpose communication platform for handling both weaker and stronger ties and is often the first medium one uses with a new contact. It is typically only after a relationship develops that one is included into the circle of SMS texting (and voice call) partners and the more exclusive and direct communication this entails:

If you can put it like that then being friends on Facebook ... you don't necessarily need to have ever talked. But then if you write together in [Facebook] chat then you're a bit closer. And if you then have each other's mobile phone numbers then it's a bit more intimate ... the relationship is a bit more intimate [laughs]. (Maria, female, age 17)

It's like different levels that you reach. When you're, like, [starting out, it is] at the Facebook level and then if you get to the phone level [SMS texting] then you use both. And if you get to the level of calling then you use all three or something. I don't know. I just think it is something you, like, have to build up in a way. (Sara, female, age 18)

Taken together, the above suggests that there has been a migration of weak tie communication from traditional mobile communication functionalities to Facebook, effectively

rendering traditional mobile phone communication an even more specialized and exclusive environment for strong-tie communication.

Multimodal mobile communication

So far, the analysis has mainly discussed the use of SMS texting vis-à-vis PC-based Facebook. Most of the respondents, however, also use mobile Facebook, and this deserves special mention. Some respondents have taken up using mobile Facebook for most of their mobile communication:

Facebook, I use that all the time. I use Facebook Messenger more than I use SMS [...] yeah, actually instead of SMS almost. That's more for those I know do not check Facebook that often or do not have smartphones. (Jacob, male, age 17)

The most characteristic use of mobile Facebook among the respondents, however, is to frequently check the Facebook app to stay updated with the happenings among their networked contacts, "tuning in, checking the frequencies to hear the latest, and then disengaging" (Goggin and Crawford, 2011: 228):

Just going in there [on mobile Facebook] 15-20 times a day, just looking: "OK, what's happened ... I've got no notifications ... oh well." And then done. Out. It takes like 30 seconds being on Facebook if nothing has happened. Then you scroll down a bit and have a look: "Oh, she's been for a run, interesting [ironic]. All right." And then on to the next thing. (Sara, female, age 18)

Since using Facebook on the smartphone is easy and convenient for the basic and most frequently used functionality (albeit arguably less so for more laborious writing tasks or more complex use), it is becoming the default way of accessing Facebook for some respondents:

If I need to go into groups or something and write, then I prefer to use my laptop. But it's almost always on the mobile phone. (Line, female, age 16)

To others, however, the computer remains an important medium for accessing Facebook. Aside from access at home, these respondents bring laptop computers with them to school and thus have access to PC-based Facebook through much of the day. To them, mobile Facebook is, at the time of the interviews, mainly a technology for when they are away from the computer and not necessarily one that they cannot do without:

I think it is nicer to be on the Internet when it's on, like, a big screen. And the need can't be that big to get on Facebook that you like, *have to* [emphasized], right now when you're lying on the couch. I don't need that. Then I'll just go to the nearest computer. (Katrine, female, age 18)

Conclusion

In the light of the increasingly complex mediascape, it has been suggested that the role of SMS texting may be changing among Danish youth (Bertel and Stald, 2013; DR

Medieforskning, 2013; Helles, 2013). The above analysis in general supports this view; among the 31 Danish high school students interviewed in this study, SMS texting is undergoing re-domestication, finding a new position in their media repertoires. This is reflected in the types of social ties SMS has been found to support, the use practices associated with it, and the meanings that users ascribe to the technology.

Among these respondents, SMS is increasingly used exclusively for communication with strong ties, typically the closest network of friends and family that users have a (practical) need to communicate with in daily life. Facebook, on the other hand, has become the preferred platform for communication with weaker ties and is the medium that is typically used first with a new contact. Phone numbers are rarely exchanged until later; only after a relationship has developed will a person typically be included into the circle of texting partners (and later again voice communication partners).

Among the respondents, SMS remains an important tool of micro-coordination. Indeed, negotiating various appointments and meeting with friends and family appears to be the most central use of the technology. While (micro-) coordination can also be performed over other channels than SMS and choosing among the many possibilities is often a matter of “whatever works,” SMS (and voice calls) remains an easy-to-use and direct channel to the individual that is at the time of the interviews still more reliable than competing technologies. While Facebook has indeed taken over much group coordination through such purpose-tailored functionality as groups and events, only SMS and voice calls can be used for coordination with people who do not have or do not master smartphones and the relevant apps. SMS, on the other hand, is ubiquitous and its use to a higher degree taken-for-granted. Thus, it functions effectively as a communicative “baseline” in the communication repertoires of the respondents.

Patterns of social communication are more complex and variable among the respondents. In general, the respondents report that SMS is used less for social communication than used to be the case when they were younger. One aspect of this change is that SMS texting simply is not as exciting to them as used to be the case; indeed, with the introduction of Facebook, they now have an advanced multi-environment and multi-media platform for doing much of the “heavy lifting” of general sociability. Often, Facebook is described as a venue for entertainment and having fun, for communicating about matters that are “lightweight.” Conversely, SMS to some is a more personal medium than Facebook (even than the SMS-like Facebook chat) and one that is more suitable for discussing private matters. In some cases, SMS is perceived as increasingly personal because of the less personal communication occurring on Facebook. Some, however, prefer to call when they have something important to discuss, and some prefer to call altogether because this to them is easier than texting or simply experienced as a nicer interaction.

Taken together, it is clear that the use and meanings of SMS are undergoing re-domestication at both functional and symbolic levels. The SMS technology today does not have the same central position that it did in the 2000s. It does, however, have a well-established and well-understood position, particularly as regards the more instrumental aspects of its use and its use with strong ties. The social communication aspects (that are not easily reducible to affordances and greater ease of use of one platform over another), however, are still negotiated to a higher degree.

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Notes

1. We do not distinguish between texting that occurs over the SMS protocol and, for instance, Apple's iMessage. The difference between these formats is mainly a technological one; to the user they are, for all intents and purposes, the same thing.
2. Following Ling and Yttri (2002), we distinguish between instrumental and expressive uses as a means of structuring the presentation and analysis to follow. It should be noted that in empirical research practice, these categories would often be difficult to operationalize since an act of communication can often be considered simultaneously instrumental and expressive.

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