

Predicting the next decade of mobile communication studies research: More mobile media, fewer mobile phones

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The growth of *Mobile Media & Communication (MMC)* in the journal's first decade has been both remarkable and somewhat understandable. On the one hand, the journal—and mobile communication studies (MCS) as a field more generally—have made amazing strides in just 10 years, going from a brand-new journal in 2013 to one of the International Communication Association's top journals by 2022. On the other hand, the growth is somewhat explainable because mobile phones have now become the dominant form of contemporary communication media. Back when *MMC* published its inaugural issue, smartphones were still relatively new (at least in academic research terms) and there was a relatively small number of communication researchers who focused on mobile phone practices. But that is obviously no longer the case. At this point, *most* media studies research focuses on smartphones because most media are accessed through smartphones. Consequently, while the rise of the smartphone helped *MMC* and MCS grow, simply studying smartphones has not been what has cemented MCS as an identifiable field of research (Campbell, 2019).

Instead, MCS has continued to develop as a field because of the community of researchers and, maybe most importantly, *MMC*. Without the mobile research community and *MMC* as a venue to set the tone for the field, we could have easily been swallowed up by more established communication fields. In fact, I suspect that's exactly what would have happened as smartphones became ubiquitous and smartphone research became far too prevalent to group it all under the MCS label. If all we had tying us together as a research community was “we study mobile phones,” then we would have little reason to exist in 2022 when most communication research is at least tangentially

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focused on mobile phones. Rather, MCS has developed because of both a (somewhat) shared body of mobile communication literature and a shared interest in topics like mobility and social context. Smartphones have obviously been central to the last 10 years of MCS research, but MCS research has never just been about smartphones, and I argue that point is key to how our field will continue to thrive over the next decade. Namely, what I'm arguing in this editorial is that the next 10 years of *MMC* will be *less* about smartphones as more and more forms of mobile media spread throughout our environments. Maybe most importantly, I believe that MCS is well positioned to stay on the cutting edge of communication research and adapt to analyze those changes.

Of course, my predictions could be wrong and 10 years from now the pages of *MMC* might still be dominated by smartphone research. But with the growth of next-generation 5G mobile infrastructure and the continuing development of the Internet of Things, I expect the next decade will involve a rapid expansion of new forms of mobile media that shape how people move and communicate. Just as MCS has adapted to capture the evolution of the smartphone, we will need to adapt to capture the evolution of the role many types of communicative mobile media, ranging from autonomous vehicles to drones to mobile technologies we haven't thought of yet, play in shaping new practices that intertwine mobility and communication.

A major reason I am confident MCS will be able to capture shifts in the mobile media landscape over the next decade is precisely because of the previous decade of *MMC*. As the field's main journal, *MMC* plays a significant role in shaping what MCS is as a research field, and *MMC* has explicitly refused the urge to tie itself too closely to the smartphone itself. Obviously, most *MMC* articles have been about smartphones, but in the editors' introduction to the inaugural issue, the editors warned that "[f]ocusing too much on an existing tradition (namely, 'mobile phone research') would hinder the further evolution of academic inquiry" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 4). In the 10 years since that inaugural issue, *MMC* has continued to shape our field in ways that made sure we never became "smartphone studies." The journal has published non-mobile phone research on various topics, including the social shaping of mobile phone infrastructures (Campbell et al., 2021; Horst, 2013), analyses of data infrastructures that shape mobility and communication (Wilken, 2019), and examinations of more invisible forms of mobile media like radio frequency identification (RFID) and Bluetooth beacons (Frith, 2015; Nicholas & Shapiro, 2021).

In 2019, *MMC* made its acknowledgment of an expansive understanding of mobile media and communication even more explicit with the publication of a special issue called "Mobile media beyond mobile phones." That special issue argued that many forms of non-phone mobile media serve communicative functions and need to be researched from a mobile communication perspective (Frith & Özkul, 2019). The articles in that special issue include historical examples like the centuries-old hand-fan and the "portables" of the 1980s (Alper, 2019; Davies, 2019) alongside more contemporary examples that have shifted with the growth of the supposed Internet of Things (Glover-Rijkse, 2019). As authors in that special issue argued, everything from cars to drones should now be thought of as communicative mobile media (Alvarez Leon, 2019; Hildebrand, 2019). Mobile phones still may be the face of our field and will likely continue to be so for much of the next decade. However, as these examples

show, MCS research has always been willing to broaden its scope to focus on other forms of mobile media, and that ability to develop as a field without being tied to one—albeit amazingly successful—form of mobile media has positioned MCS to address the many changes coming over the next 10 years.

Discussing changes in the mobile media landscape raises an important question: what will those changes look like? The best anyone can offer is an educated guess because if we could truly predict the future, we would probably be rich enough that we wouldn't be academics. Some forms of mobile media will almost certainly become more prevalent. More and more cars, for example, will become networked and communicative. More mundane mobile objects will be able to communicate with both people and other objects as part of the Internet of Things. Wearables will likely continue to develop and become both more prominent and more communicative. But we will also see shifts that are far harder to predicted. Maybe microchip implants, which have existed for decades, will move beyond niche bodyhacker communities and mediate between bodies and mobility in new ways (Frith, 2019). Maybe not. Regardless, what we can predict with some confidence is that 10 years from now new forms of mobile media will have emerged that we did not expect, and some of these new forms will become the new “bleeding edge” of communication media; consequently, MCS research will have the opportunity to stay at the forefront of communication studies by capturing the emergence of non-phone mobile media as the media landscape continues to change.

Of course, emerging forms mobile media will not only provide opportunities for MCS research; they will also present challenges I suspect will be discussed repeatedly over the next decade at our conferences and in the pages of *MMC*. And the main question as we continue to grow is simultaneously rather straightforward and wickedly complex: What are the contours MCS research are and what kinds of work *MMC* will feature as a journal? Contained within that broad question are countless number of sub-questions. Are cars that communicate part of MCS? How about implanted microchips? What about supposed “metaverse” mobile tech like the Microsoft HoloLens? Or even robots that may carry objects or messages between humans? Going even further, if facial recognition technology develops to the point where it simultaneously tracks mobility and then communicates with someone *about* their mobility (probably in the form of advertising because that's the world we live in), would that fall within the scope of MCS and fit within the pages of *MMC*? My answer would be “yes” if the technologies are analyzed at the intersection of communication and mobility and grounded in our shared literature, but I know not everyone might feel the same. Consequently, while embracing a broad definition of mobile media and communication will give our field opportunities to continue to grow, we could also lose the coherence that has developed with the smartphone as a primary, though not sole, object of study.

Whatever way the field develops over the next decade will have benefits and drawbacks. Focusing mainly on smartphones will enable MCS to retain a coherent, identifiable identity. But that focus could also run the risk of MCS not keeping pace as the mobile media landscape shifts. Embracing a capacious view of what counts as MCS research will enable the field to be nimble and quickly adapt, but doing so will run the risk of MCS becoming so broad that we lose the shared interests that helped our research community develop in the first place. I have no idea what the pages of *MMC* will look like a

decade from now, but I do know that these are important questions for the future of our field that need to be actively discussed and debated.

Luckily, these are discussions MCS and *MMC* are prepared for. As I detailed above, MCS and *MMC* have never just been about smartphones, so we have a tradition of non-mobile phone research to turn to as a research community to think through the shifting mobile media landscape over the next decade. Maybe most importantly, our research tradition is established enough that we can ground analyses of emerging mobile media within existing conversations. We have a shared body of research on everything from mobility to context to privacy we can draw from to understand emerging mobile media forms. Consequently, my hope is that even if MCS does become broader as non-mobile phone research expands over the next 10 years, we will be able to retain our identity as a field by situating emerging mobile media within our established work on the social impacts of mobile media and communication. Even if the smartphone loses some of its power as a primary object of focus, we have more than enough work to draw from to situate future research, whatever that research may look like, within the excellent tradition MCS scholars have already established. Whatever happens, the conversations about what we are as a field will become even more important, and I am excited to see those conversations play out in the pages of *MMC* in the journal's second decade.


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Author biography

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