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Presence in Everyday Life

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Panel Organizer

Dr. Paul Skalski

1. Rationale

Since various researchers introduced (tele)presence to the discipline of Communication/Media Studies, most notably Frank Biocca and Matthew Lombard [1,2], attention to the concept has grown tremendously in the field. To demonstrate this growth, Lombard and Jones reported that of the top ten peer reviewed journals publishing research on (tele)presence, four were Communication journals (*Communication Research*, *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, and *Journal of Communication*) [3]. These four journals published a total of 49 articles on (tele)presence between the years 1995-2004. Importantly, the vast majority of these studies were on presence reactions to everyday media such as television and personal computers.

Although many think of presence as an outcome of exposure to advanced and emerging technologies such as virtual reality, it has considerable potential to inform the study of currently popular media as well. This panel proposes to highlight the importance of presence in considerations of popular media types and their effects on users. It brings together five scholars from the Communication/Media Studies discipline who are conducting research on presence as it relates to a popular traditional media form (television), a popular new media form (computers), and the effects of popular media both on enjoyment and other outcomes of exposure (including to media violence, sex, and health messages). The presenters will discuss the current state of scholarship in their area and future directions for research on presence in everyday life.

The panelists believe that understanding presence is vitally important to understanding how people experience media. Their discussion will be rooted in scholarship on popular media from Communication/Media Studies and related fields but should appeal to the entire cross-disciplinary Presence

community, since it addresses fundamental theoretical questions about the causes and effects of presence based on a vast body of existing theory and research.

Following are the abstracts for the panel presentations, along with the names and contact information of the presenters:

1.1. Abstract One: *Presence in Popular Media*

This presentation reviews the many ways presence scholars define and measure presence. It begins with a survey of presence conceptualizations, from the objective existence of an object or entity in a physical space to subjective perceptions of sharing a virtual space with another person. The definition of the International Society for Presence Research (ISPR) is then presented and discussed in the context of popular media. This definition holds that presence (a shortened version of the term "telepresence") occurs when part or all of an individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of technology in an experience, and includes perceptions related to physical space, immersion, realism, interactions with people, and more. Examples from media including comics, photography, television, HDTV, film, the Internet, and video games are discussed to illustrate the breadth and significance of the concept. The presentation then turns to the challenges of measuring presence, the variety of techniques that have been used to assess it, and recommendations as to the most appropriate techniques in the context of the diverse characteristics of media considered on the panel.

Presenter:

Dr. Matthew Lombard

1.2. Abstract Two: *Presence and Television*

Television has been the most used medium for the last 60 years. In the United States, television technology is poised to make the largest impact on television viewers since the

introduction of color. Specifically, the conversion to digital and high definition television will be made in February of 2009.

High definition is being sold to consumers as a desirable technology because it allows viewers to feel a sense of “being there” at a sporting event, in exotic locations, etc. It offers improved image quality (1080i) and often has widescreen presentation (16:9 aspect ratio). Dupagne and Seel assert that these two changes to television will “accentuate the psycho-physical perception of ‘telepresence’ ” [4]. The viewing experience is highly desirable for viewers who want a home theatre experience. High definition represents a potential highly immersive television viewing experience for home audiences

High definition has been established as being able to evoke a sensation of (tele)presence [5]. There are several explanations as to why. These include larger screens, sound, and image quality. Each of these formal features and the research relating to presence will be discussed.

The second part of the presentation will detail what is known about (tele)presence and high definition. The bulk of these studies investigate HDTV. Specific attention will be given to High definition and perceptions of credibility, third-person perception, and body image distortion have also been studied in conjunction with other media effects. There are also several studies that have explored the impact of high definition video games are also discussed.

In the conclusion of this presentation, the connection between high definition and (tele)Presence will be re-iterated. The studies discussed have share the conclusion that HD appears to strengthen the effect of known media effects, and that viewing high definition programming may impact other media effects not yet explored at this time. The presentation will conclude with directions for future research and predictions regarding audience responses to high definition television and video game content, including some recently collected empirical evidence.

Presenter:

Dr. Cheryl Campanella-Bracken

1.3. Abstract Three: *Presence and Computers*

To many people, the idea of feeling present in a computer environment may conjure up scenes from the *Matrix* film trilogy. While computers have not reached that level yet (unless we are all unknowingly part of the matrix now), computers are a medium ripe with potential to evoke feelings of presence. This presentation will describe the ways in which computers can lead to presence in two main domains of study: Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). It will review the extant literature on presence in both fields and will discuss how presence applies to many computer applications used widely today. The presentation will argue that while computers may not particularly good at creating feelings of spatial presence, they

may be the best popular medium for inducing feelings of both social and self-presence.

The presentation will start with discussion of HCI as a foundation for understanding computers and presence. Drawing on the computers as social actors (CASA) literature [6], it will be argued how the very nature of computers--which are interactive, seemingly intelligent entities--make them more likely to instill a sense of social presence than any other form of media by itself.

The discussion will then move from interaction between man and machine to interaction between man and man mediated by machine. CMC forms such as email and IM are thriving right now despite being mostly text based. One would think that the lack of traditional markers (such as nonverbal cues) in CMC would make it difficult to feel as if someone else is with you, and, on the surface, text-based systems would seem to have limited potential to create a sense of social presence. However, people have reported feeling social presence using such systems as e-mail [7] and IM [8]. It may be that people have found ways to compensate using devices such as emoticons [9] and avatars [10]. Both the social information processing approach [11] and mental models approach [12] will be offered as explanations for why this may occur.

Computers also offer unparalleled potential among popular media for the experience of self-presence. Applications such as online social networks like Facebook allow users to create a sense of social presence with a variety of "friends," but they also allow users to put a version of their self into the medium. In fact, some scholars argue that the online self people can create in such worlds in more of a “true” self than the physical self is [13]. Finally, some attention will be given to the computer's potential to become the ultimate self-presence medium, drawing on the thoughts of Kurzweil [14].

Presenter:

Dr. David Westerman

1.4. Abstract Four: *Presence and Enjoyment*

There is no media technology that has not very early after its invention been utilized for entertainment purposes. Fictional narrative was (and is) the driver of the global success of books. Movie entertainment became the killer application of cinematography. Music and soap operas have boosted the diffusion of early radio broadcasting technology. Early television built systematically on these radio formats to evolve as the key medium of entertainment [15]. Computing technologies and the internet have paved the way for radically new modes of entertainment such as online pornography and video games [16,17], and the latest innovations in media technologies, virtual environments, clearly hold the potential to create again completely new forms of enjoyment [18]. In this chapter, we will discuss the general assumption that presence is

a key factor in audience enjoyment *for all these media technologies*. Presence will be demonstrated as one important mediator variable that links properties of media products (such as immersive capabilities of a TV show displayed by an HDTV set, cf. [5]) to the quality and intensity of users' experience of enjoyment. "To be there" or "to be together with mediated others" is argued to enable and/or to amplify media enjoyment.

The analysis will begin with a brief review of those characteristics of the Presence concept that are most relevant to media enjoyment. For this purpose, conceptualizations of Presence [19, 2, 12] will be briefly reviewed (e.g., Presence as lower-order/automatic or higher-order/conscious nonmediation) and connected to models of media entertainment [20,21]. This integration of conceptual models will lead to a number of conclusions about how Presence is positively associated with media enjoyment. In general, it is argued that enjoyment arises from the complex interplay of the users' perceiving the scripted "virtual environment" as non-mediated while at the same time holding the information that it is just an illusion/imitation. Thus, users are experiencing a rich and dense continuous flow of different situations depicted by the media environment as more or less real or authentic, what causes among other processes immediate bodily reactions, while they remain at all times in control of the overall situation. By remaining in control users can make use of the offered chain of media-stimulation to the extent they prefer.

We argue that, from such a broad perspective, facets of Presence, like absorption, flow [22] or psychological immersion, share much experiential qualities with a fully developed state of entertainment (to focus attention, to forget about time, to feel closely connected to an environment). In fact, flow has already been identified as an important property of media enjoyment [23]. However, while sharing many similarities, Presence, flow, and entertainment still can be conceptually distinguished. Building on the general approach to Presence and enjoyment, several distinct constructs will be focused:

- Presence, in the notion of transportation, can be conceptually linked to *escapism* [15]. Presence could be construed as the desired state that escapism describes, namely the complete dissociation from the troublesome real world and the complete "arrival" [24] in the mediated world. Thus, Presence is closely linked to the diversion motivation that is inherent to much entertainment use [25].
- Presence, when regarded as non-mediation, is conceptually linked to *suspension of disbelief* [12], which has been discussed as important contribution that media users have to make to enable media enjoyment. If users do not accept the mediated world but remain critical towards it, most dimensions of media enjoyment cannot occur [26]. Similarly, Presence has been argued to depend on users' readiness to suspend disbelief (for instance, to ignore

cues that render the mediated nature of the media experience salient, cf. [12]).

- Presence, when regarded as social Presence, is conceptually linked to processes of *identification and simulated role experiences* [27,28,29] To identify with media characters or related groups unlocks specific qualities of enjoyment such as developmentally relevant experiences of masculinity for male adolescents or "reflected" processes of increased self-esteem [30].

In order to "add flesh" to the previous theoretical conceptualization of Presence and entertainment, these three theoretical connections between Presence and media enjoyment will be discussed in more detail and illustrated by various examples from existing media technologies such as novels, TV broadcasts, and video games. As far as it is available, empirical evidence will be cited to back up the conceptual integration. The general conclusion of the chapter will be that Presence is indeed a key variable in media enjoyment, and that the oldest known types of media entertainment have already sought to evoke a sense of Presence to enable or intensify users' appreciation. A brief outlook on more systematic and empirical examinations of the role of Presence in media enjoyment will complete the discussion.

Presenter:

Dr. Tilo Hartmann

1.5 Abstract Five: *Presence and Media Effects*

The study of media effects has a rich history dating back to investigations of such high-profile phenomena as World War II propaganda [31] and the classic 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast that reportedly panicked millions of Americans [32]. Although this early research did not include the concept of *presence*, it seems plausible that presence played a key role, for example, in the fright reactions observed by Cantril [32] following the "invasion from Mars." Radio listeners who were especially frightened may have felt more "in" the invasion (spatial presence) or "with" Martians (social presence), causing them to be more fearful of the broadcast. The concept of presence has the potential to help explain fright reactions such as these as well as many other responses to media, making it a valuable consideration for media scholars.

This presentation focuses on the potential for presence to influence media effects that have received recurring attention in the mass communication literature. Beyond the role of presence in entertainment and persuasion, which have recently received attention from scholars [18,33], theory and empirical evidence suggests that presence can also affect aggression and other important outcomes of media exposure.

This presentation begins by identifying linkage points between presence and four major media effects theories/perspectives—agenda setting [34], social cognitive theory [35], cultivation [36], and priming [37]. These will serve as examples of how presence can be integrated into theories and models attempting to explain the media's impact. They will also provide a springboard for considering the nature of the presence construct in media effects research, e.g., whether it mediates or moderates outcomes.

The second portion of this presentation investigates the current and potential role of spatial and social presence in research in a variety of media effects domains, including:

- Violence effects (e.g., aggression, hostility, desensitization)
- Fright and emotional responses (e.g., fear, laughter, sadness)
- Sexual media effects (e.g., arousal, sexual attitudes, sexual aggression)
- News and political media effects (e.g., perceptions of issues and candidates)
- Additional effects areas (e.g., stereotyping, health and safety campaigns)

Within each of these sections/research areas, attempts will be made to identify concepts related to presence (e.g., perceived realism, salience) and discuss their place in light of relevant theory. In addition, research incorporating presence will be reviewed, and future directions for research involving presence will be laid out.

Ultimately, this discussion will highlight the importance of the concept of presence to considerations of media effects, both positive and negative. In doing so, it will point to the future of media effects research along with shining new light on its present and past.

Presenter:

Dr. Paul Skalski

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