Private and public in mass media communication: From letters to the editor to online commentaries

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Abstract
In recent years, the public and the private spheres have been blended in interesting ways. The mass media make the private aspects of the lives of celebrities public and also the lives of ordinary people regularly feature in their publications. Letters to the editor (and more recently online commentaries) have always been a format for ordinary people to make their private voices heard in public. However, on the basis of data from The Times published in 1985 and from Times Online published in 2008, we argue that in the development from the letters to the editor to the online commentaries, dimensions of public and private are discernible. This development affects the communicative situation, the content and the linguistic realization of the texts in different, albeit not independent ways. For the purpose of this argument it is necessary to develop a new communicative model which integrates formal, contextual and linguistic characteristics of the letters in question. For this purpose, Dürscheid (2003) uses the distinction between communicative setting and content for analyzing private communication on the one hand and public communication on the other. He distinguishes systematically between the communicative situation (the scale of public accessibility), the content (the scale of privacy) and the linguistic realization (the scale of linguistic immediacy). On this basis, the model can be extended to reach the online scenario and can be applied to the analysis of private and public communication in the mass media.

Case study
For our case study we compare letters to the editor from The Times in 1985 with comments written on Times Online in 2008. Despite various differences in the inclusions in the letters which represent the most frequent way in which direct audience feedback was delivered to newspapers at the time of their publication.

The scale of public accessibility
Both letters to the editor and online comments are published in a public setting. The better availability of texts globally and over time however places online comments a bit closer to the end of the accessibility scale than the printed letters.

The scale of privacy of topics
Although the topic of the letter to the editor and online comments is to a large extent defined by the article they refer to, there are still considerable differences in the ways in which writers present and support their opinion by either referring to private or non-private issues. In our data, non-private topics and a focus on effects on number of people who are affected or potentially affected by the content under consideration. Private topics are those that affect single individuals or very small groups of people while public topics are those that lack this concentration on a private individual or a very small group. The scale of linguistic immediacy, finally, includes all levels of language, such as the formality of the vocabulary, sentence structure, choice of address forms and adherence to standard orthography and punctuation. Given these three dimensions, it is now possible to locate every communicative act in the virtual space of this model. Two examples have been placed in figure 3 above for illustrative purposes. The aim of our model is to characterize texts more precisely and to observe characteristic patterns on different levels of this scale. The clear analytical distinction between communicative setting, content and linguistic realization is a necessary first step if we want to observe interactions between these different dimensions. In other words, if we want to analyze private features of public texts, we first need to specify what exactly these features are and how they combine within a single text.

Existing models
Heller (2006) develops a three-dimensional model that integrates accessibility, content and medium (see figure 1). The first dimension of the model distinguishes between “direct” forms of communication (sections A, B, C, D) and “mediated” communication (sections E, F, G, H). The second dimension distinguishes between “private” ones (sections B, D, F, H) and “public” ones (sections A, C, E, G). The third dimension, finally, distinguishes between “publicly accessible” communicative acts (sections A, B, E, F) and “non-public” communicative acts, i.e. those with restricted accessibility (sections C, D, G, H). This model allows the precise location of individual communicative acts, but in our opinion it does not sufficiently distinguish between the content and the access dimension on the one hand and the medium dimension on the other. While the former two dimensions are scales with countless positions between the two extremes, the latter is a dichotomy. Communication is either direct or mediated. Positions somewhere in the middle are not possible.

Our model
We propose that Koch and Oesterreicher’s scale of communicative immediacy needs to be differentiated into three separate scales. The scale of public accessibility is defined by the ease of access for other (i.e. non-contributing) parties. The more people have access to whatever is communicated, the higher on the scale the communicative situation has to be placed. The scale of private and non-private topics is determined on the basis of the number of people who are affected or potentially affected by the content under consideration. Private topics are those that affect single individuals or very small groups of people while public topics are those that lack this concentration on a private individual or a very small group. The scale of linguistic immediacy, finally, includes all levels of language, such as the formality of the vocabulary, sentence structure, choice of address forms and adherence to standard orthography and punctuation. Given these three dimensions, it is now possible to locate every communicative act in the virtual space of this model. Two examples have been placed in figure 3 above for illustrative purposes. The aim of our model is to characterize texts more precisely and to observe characteristic patterns on different levels of this scale. The clear analytical distinction between communicative setting, content and linguistic realization is a necessary first step if we want to observe interactions between these different dimensions. In other words, if we want to analyze private features of public texts, we first need to specify what exactly these features are and how they combine within a single text.

Letter to the editor in The Times 1985
From the Chairman of Wycombe Health Authority
Sir, Your leading article, “The biggest kill” (November 28) was welcome and encouraging. The ministers who are renegotiating the agreement on advertising with the tobacco companies should be fortified by your support for a total ban. They should see that a substantial reduction in advertising and sponsorship is brought about immediately. Legislation will ultimately be needed. The Government has promised a safe future for the National Health Service. It should now promise action, which will greatly benefit the nation’s future health.

Yours faithfully,
J. E. CAMP, Chairman,
Wycombe Health Authority,
Oxkendon,
Shelford Road,
Buckinghamshire

Online comments on Times Online 2008
Libraries should ALWAYS be silent places. Many people use them during their studies. I don’t want some insensitive twat talking loudly on a mobile phone when I’m trying to read or compose an essay. If someone cannot keep quiet without eating or talking loudly then they should stay away.

Rob, London, UK

We don’t need libraries. Full-stop.

Abdul Majeed, Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK

Abdul Majeed - Well some of us DO actually read and use libraries to study in. We’re not all dunces who can’t see their point and think playing games and talking on mobiles is a good thing. To those people, just stay well away and use Starbucks for eating, drinking, loud talking etc etc.

Rob , London, UK

Conclusion
We propose that Koch and Oesterreicher’s scale of communicative immediacy needs to be differentiated into three separate scales. The scale of public accessibility is defined by the ease of access for other (i.e. non-contributing) parties. The more people have access to whatever is communicated, the higher on the scale the communicative situation has to be placed. The scale of private and non-private topics is determined on the basis of the number of people who are affected or potentially affected by the content under consideration. Private topics are those that affect single individuals or very small groups of people while public topics are those that lack this concentration on a private individual or a very small group. The scale of linguistic immediacy, finally, includes all levels of language, such as the formality of the vocabulary, sentence structure, choice of address forms and adherence to standard orthography and punctuation. Given these three dimensions, it is now possible to locate every communicative act in the virtual space of this model. Two examples have been placed in figure 3 above for illustrative purposes. The aim of our model is to characterize texts more precisely and to observe characteristic patterns on different levels of this scale. The clear analytical distinction between communicative setting, content and linguistic realization is a necessary first step if we want to observe interactions between these different dimensions. In other words, if we want to analyze private features of public texts, we first need to specify what exactly these features are and how they combine within a single text.