

COMMUNICATION AND CINEMA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIDEOCALLS AND TELECOMMUNICATION IN FILM WORKS BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

Weronika Saran

 orcid.org/0000-0003-2430-0510

Institut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

ABSTRACT

Communication has changed profoundly during the coronavirus pandemic, as many researchers have pointed out. The pandemic has affected human interactions, use of space and interpersonal communication. However, some aspects of Internet-based communication can be seen as an extension of the previous primary way of interacting from afar – telecommunication. Accessing information not intended for public view and controlling how one is perceived in online conversations are topics widely discussed in the context of videoconferencing. The purpose of this article, however, is to argue that these phenomena are already familiar to people from telephone conversations. A comparative analysis of *Locked Down* (Doug Liman, 2021) and other films of different genres has been carried out to draw parallels between two methods of communication – phone and video calls.

Keywords: communication, videoconferencing, telecommunication, pandemic, films

Introduction

2020 has witnessed a huge growth in works discussing the communicative changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic (Adami et al. 2020), the functions and challenges of communication during the pandemic (Rashid 2020), the impact of the pandemic on public and private spaces (Ülkeryıldız, Can Vural, Yıldız 2020) and the effects of wearing a face mask on interpersonal communication (Carbon 2020; Mheidly et al. 2020).

In their 2020 manifesto, Adami et al. stressed the need to study the changes caused by the pandemic, their consequences and interconnections (Adami et al. 2020, p. 11). According to these scholars: “The pandemic has unprecedented effects on the ways we organise and regulate all aspects and domains of our social lives, including how to conduct activities, how to interact with others, and how to manage space [...]” (Adami et al. 2020, p. 3). Based on Rom Harré’s argument on the roles of bodies, these above researchers argue that imposing restrictions on social contact as well as implementing safety measures, have resulted in changes in the way people interact (Adami et al. 2020, p. 4). As the authors of the manifesto note: “We are not habituated yet; in other words, what was familiar before is no more, while there is not a «new familiar» yet” (Adami et al. 2020, p. 6).

The scholars also note that moving activities online has affected the public-private dichotomy (Adami et al. 2020, p. 10). For example, people, using their domestic spaces for public duties, both revealed their private spheres to others and have been provided with an insight into the private lives of others (Adami et al. 2020, p. 10).

The changes in the separation of public and private that have occurred as a result of the pandemic have been also noted by Ülkeryıldız, Can Vural and Yıldız (2020). According to the scholars, digitalisation has led to the creation of “«boundary-less» cyberspace” which became the only way to maintain contact with others (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, p. 201). “The private living space has suddenly opened to the world and has transposed itself into cyberspace by blurring dimensions of inside and out, here and there” (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, p. 204). Moving private spaces into the realm of public cyberspace, in turn, results in a privacy loss (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, p. 204). Like Adami et al., the scholars also argue that the pandemic will significantly affect people’s lifestyles and the way how they interact, work, etc. (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, p. 201).

The importance of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic has been also discussed by Afsana Rashid in her 2020 article “Communication Scenario During COVID-19 Pandemic: Issues and Challenges”. According to Rashid, human interactions during the pandemic have changed drastically, and as a result of lockdown and social distancing restrictions, online communication has become the dominant mode of interaction (Rashid 2020, pp. 13–14). The scholar also notes that communication during the pandemic faced several limitations, e.g.:

Communication overload under such circumstances poses a serious threat to human society. Misinformation about the number of fatalities, diagnosis and treatment options, vaccines, medicines and government policies created more panic and anxiety among the population. This even resulted in widespread chaos, violence, hoarding of essential items, price rise, panic buying, discriminatory attitude, conspiracy theories and so on (Rashid 2020, p. 14).

Rashid also observes that technology-assisted communication can also lead to social exclusion of people with less digital experience due to insufficient technological support available to them (Rashid 2020, p. 15). A similar observation

is made by Adami et al., who note that moving online has resulted in “[...] heightening of the social injustice and exclusion effects produced by the digital divide in our societies [...]” (Adami et al. 2020, p. 7).

Since the start of the pandemic a significant amount of research has been also conducted in the field of face masks and interpersonal communication (see Adami et al. 2020, p. 9; Carbon 2020; Mheidly et al. 2020). Claus-Christian Carbon notes that wearing a face mask can have a significant impact on social communication (Carbon 2020, pp. 1–2). As the scholar observes, “[...] masks cover an area of the face that is crucial for the effective nonverbal communication of emotional states” (Carbon 2020, p. 2). According to the results of the study, wearing a face mask hinders the process of correct facial emotion recognition (Carbon 2020, p. 4). “With the exception of fearful and neutral faces, for which ceiling performance effects were observed, all emotional states were harder to read in faces with masks” (Carbon 2020, p. 4). As face masks interfere with reading facial expressions, wearing them can render social communication more complicated (Carbon 2020, p. 6).

Nour Mheidly, Mohamad Y. Fares, Hussein Zalzale and Jawad Fares note that the pandemic had a significant impact on interpersonal communication (Mheidly et al. 2020, p. 1). As the scholars observe, “[...] wearing face masks hindered the ability of seeing and understanding people’s expressions during conversations, and decreased the impact of communicated material” (Mheidly et al. 2020, p. 1). The masks reduce sound volume, impede the ability to understand what the other person is saying, and cover emotional expressions formed by the middle and lower part of the face (Mheidly et al. 2020, p. 2).

With the rise in popularity of technology-based communication, there has also been a huge increase in articles offering guidance on how to prepare for virtual meetings. A wide range of topics were covered, from choosing the perfect meeting background (for examples see Canny n.d.; Wilhelm 2020), dressing for video calls (see Elias n.d.; Leach 2020; Stolch 2020), setting up the best lighting (see Hession 2020; Whitehead 2020), conducting productive meetings (see Carr 2020; Ferreira 2020) and styling real backgrounds for video calls (see Fenton 2021; Steele 2020), to the step by step guides on how to use video meeting apps (see George 2021; Osborne 2021). Guidelines for online communication have further developed into video conferencing etiquette and the dos and don’ts lists for hosts and attendees of virtual meetings (for examples see Ahuja 2020; Chaudhry 2020; George 2020).

The phenomenon of exhaustion caused by constant phone calls has also received attention during the pandemic. Jeremy N. Bailenson, for example, distinguished four possible causes of “Zoom Fatigue” such as: “[e]xcessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility” (Bailenson 2021, p. 1). The past few months have also witnessed a huge increase in other online articles providing guideline on how to deal with video call fatigue (for examples see Fernstrom 2021; Fosslien, Duffy 2020; Jackson-Wright 2020).

Split screen

While this work does not focus on the use of split screen in films, discussing phone and video conversations would be incomplete without introducing the concept of this film technique. When split screen is applied, “[...] two or more different images, each with its own frame dimensions and shape, appear within the larger frame” (Bordwell, Thompson 1990, p. 172). Split screen as a tool used since the early cinema to present characters talking to each other on the phone has made a comeback in wide-screen comedies of the 1960s (Bordwell, Thompson 1990, p. 172). Among many others, the examples of split screen in the 2000s films include *Down with Love* (Peyton Reed, 2003), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), *Ocean’s Thirteen* (Steven Soderbergh, 2007), *The Circle* (James Ponsoldt, 2017), *Last Call* (Gavin Michael Booth, 2019), *Holidate* (John Whitesell, 2020). Split screen as a tool for showing conversations has been also used in recent films made during the coronavirus pandemic, such as *Songbird* (Adam Mason, 2020) and *Locked Down* (Doug Liman, 2021).¹

Cinema and COVID-19

Locked Down is one of the first films about characters living in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The film’s main characters are Linda (Anne Hathaway) and Paxton (Chiwetel Ejiofor), an ex-couple who have to live together due to lockdown being implemented in London. The house is often the locus of tensions between the characters who try to deal with the pandemic in their own ways. One day, Linda and Paxton decide to change their lives (they both are not satisfied with their current jobs) and steal a diamond worth 3-million pounds. The film ends optimistically with the characters quitting work and getting back together.

As befits a film about the COVID-19 pandemic, videoconferencing plays a significant role in communication between the characters. Linda and Paxton regularly communicate with their bosses, co-workers (in Linda’s case) and friends using their tablets and laptops. The film’s director Doug Liman said of this use of video calls in the film:

I really wanted to make *Locked Down* be a film that reflects our world today, not the way we used to look, not the way we fantasise about it being, not some other planet, but take place in the world we’re living in today. I was excited not to use Zoom as some sort of gimmick, but to just tell a story that takes place in the world that we’re living in (Cremona 2021).

¹ For discussion on the relationship between media history, the split screen and video conferencing during the pandemic see Hagener (2020). For the list of video conversation scenes in films see Malia (2012). On the expressive use of split screen in the cinema see Bizzocchi (2009).

The director's statement reveals that using videoconferencing in *Locked Down* was not intended to serve as a pure visual attraction but to reflect contemporary practices. The video conversation scenes can therefore be read as a historical record of communication strategies developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the research on pandemic communication focuses currently on investigating changes, the aim of this paper is to proceed in the opposite direction.

According to Hagener:

[...] the videoconferencing tools that we have learnt to use in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic are numerous, and their cluster-like appearance is often seen as proof of their novelty. But as film history and media archaeology has taught us incessantly, such ideas of innovation and newness have to be taken with a grain of salt (Hagener 2020, p. 33).

The same, as Hagener notes, applies to video conferencing (Hagener 2020, p. 33).

Work's Aims and Limitations

The following analysis examines the similarities between video calls in *Locked Down* and phone conversations in other films. The main aim of this discussion is therefore not to analyse changes, but to draw attention to parallels between video and phone communication.

The analysis is divided into two sections, each of which explores the relationship between communication strategies in different films. Firstly, the paper examines how "seeing too much" during a video call parallels the experience of "hearing too much" on the phone. Secondly, the issue of self-presentation is discussed by analysing how the characters want to be perceived by their interlocutors during video and phone calls. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

Comparisons of films of different genres that were additionally produced in different years raise a justified question on this work's limitations. After all, just saying that technological and sociocultural factors have shaped the nature and quality of distance communication over the years, is patently obvious. Furthermore, there is the question of how genre conventions impact the representation of conversations in cinema. Phone calls in comedies will certainly be structured differently from phone calls in horror films even if the subject of the characters' conversation would be the same. The similarities can be, however, found within these limitations. What is more, all of these variables can show how, despite the differences between the films, the continuity between two methods of communication exists(ed) regardless of time, place, and context.

When You Accidentally Hear or See Too Much

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Internet has been flooded with short films showing video conferencing fails. There were videos of people revealing the intimate aspects of their lives due to unmuted microphones or cameras left on; workers wearing underwear instead of trousers; children interrupting live interviews; or workers applying inappropriate filters on their faces by mistake. Although the causes of these often-embarrassing incidents were various, their common feature was showing what was not intended for public view. As Ülkeryıldız, Can Vural and Yıldız note, during the pandemic people shared much of their personal spheres with others online (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, pp. 203–204).

“Seeing too much” during a video conversation is, however, not new to cinema. In a 2013 British comedy *The Love Punch* (Joel Hopkins, 2013), Kate (Emma Thompson) and Richard (Pierce Brosnan) videocall their son to ask him for help. As they wait for their son to come back with another computer, his flat-mate (unaware of the call taking place in the room) goes to the toilet and leaves the door opened. Kate and Richard see the boy through the webcam and ask him to close the doors. In a 2016 American comedy *Why Him?* (John Hamburg, 2016), Ned (Bryan Cranston) and his wife Barb (Megan Mullally) video chat with their daughter Stephanie (Zoey Deutch) during Ned’s birthday party. As the conversation progresses, the parents notice in the background a man walking into Stephanie’s room. The man takes his trousers off and starts dancing half-naked in front of the camera despite Stephanie’s objections. This way, both the spectators, the conservative parents and guests at the party get to know Stephanie’s new boyfriend Laird (James Franco). In a 2019 comedy *Serial Bad Weddings 2 (Qu’est-ce qu’on a encore fait au Bon Dieu?*, Philippe de Chauveron, 2019), Claude (Christian Clavier) video chats with his daughter’s father-in-law André Kofi (Pascal N’Zonzi). Claude shows Kofi a piece of ham that he bought for him as a gift, and then ends the call to go to the airport. Suddenly, Claude realises that he forgot to take the gift for Kofi. He returns home and sees the ham being eaten by his dog. The incident is also observed by Kofi due to webcam not being turned off. These characters, like many video conference users during the pandemic, have accidentally seen what was not meant to be seen by others.

A similar “accident” happens in *Locked Down*, in a scene where Linda talks on a video call with her boss Guy (Ben Stiller). At the beginning of their video conversation, Guy brags about moving to Vermont with his family. He also tells Linda that he bought himself noise-cancelling headphones which mute all sounds around him. As their conversation progresses, the boy (Quinn Dempsey Stiller) hangs two pieces of paper behind his father with the inscriptions “Fuck Vermont” and “Vermont Sucks Ass”. Without Guy knowing, his son also gestures expressively towards the camera, shows thumbs down and makes the cutthroat gesture. Linda, in turn, tries to remain serious. Guy stays unaware of his son’s actions until the end of the video call.

The equivalent of “seeing too much” during a video call would be “hearing too much” during a phone call. The history of cinema includes many examples of the characters hearing information not intended for them during phone conversations. In a 1948 American thriller *Sorry, Wrong Number* (Anatole Litvak, 1948), the disabled Leona (Barbara Stanwyck) hears a conversation between two men planning to murder a woman. The men remain unaware of being heard by Leona on the phone. In the course of the film, the woman tries to find out who the criminals are, only to discover at the end that the planned murder was aimed at her. In a 2016 Italian film *Perfect Strangers* (*Perfetti sconosciuti*, Paolo Genovese, 2016), a group of friends decides to reveal all incoming text messages, emails and phone calls to each other over the course of the meal. Callers, unaware of being put on speakerphone, unwittingly reveal the secrets of the main characters which leads to a series of quarrels between the friends. While the end of the film suggests that the exchange never took place, the story shows what could have happened if the characters had heard messages not addressed to them.

Another example of “hearing too much” can be found in a 2006 film *The Holiday* (Nancy Meyers, 2006). While on the phone with her brother Graham (Jude Law), Iris (Kate Winslet) receives a phone call from Amanda (Cameron Diaz), a woman with whom she swapped houses for two weeks. As Iris switches between the phone calls, she realises that her brother and Amanda slept with each other. “I can’t believe that you had sex with the woman staying in my house”, Iris says thinking her brother is on the line. It turns out, however, that she is still speaking to Amanda. The situation repeats itself after a few seconds.

A similar incident happens in a 2004 comedy *Mean Girls*, in the scene where Regina (Rachel McAdams) talks to her “friend” Cady (Lindsay Lohan) on the phone. At some point, Regina asks Cady if she is angry with Gretchen (Lacey Chabert) for revealing her secret (Cady likes Regina’s ex-boyfriend). Cady, unaware of being listened to by Gretchen, tells Regina that Gretchen likes being the centre of attention. Suddenly, the audience sees Gretchen joining the conversation and Cady realises that her message has reached the wrong person.

Communication and Self-Presentation

Ülkeryıldız, Can Vural and Yıldız note that during the pandemic:

Information and communication technologies present the use of cyberspace as a public sphere to be a “digitalized” self to the public, and a new version of the self that is purely for public needs for working, education, paying taxes visiting digital museums, etc. (Ülkeryıldız et al. 2020, p. 201).

Hagener also notes the role of self-presentation during the pandemic. According to the scholar, while with mobile displays, people witness constant changes within the screen frame when video calling, they also pay close attention to how they show

their surroundings to others (Hagener 2020, p. 38). During video calls and like on social media “[...] the private becomes increasingly public, but often in a staged and curtailed form” (Hagener 2020, p. 38).

Monitoring how oneself is perceived digitally is also evident in *Locked Down*. In one of the scenes Linda previews her video before joining a work meeting, and notices that her glass of wine is visible within the camera frame. The character quickly changes the height of her webcam to hide the glass. In the end, however, she decides not to bother and move her camera to the default position.²

Trying to make the right impression is also evident in phone conversation scenes. In this 2001 romantic comedy *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001), there is a scene where Bridget (Renée Zellweger) takes a call from her friend Jude (Shirley Henderson) during her working hours. As the conversation progresses, Bridget calls Jude’s boyfriend “a big knobhead with no knob”, only to realise that her boss Daniel (Hugh Grant) stands in front of her. To get out of an awkward situation and impress her boss (she likes him), Bridget starts using sophisticated words and pretends she is talking to Professor Leavis about a newly published book. In *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), Mary (Donna Reed), on the other hand, modulates her voice during a phone call to make her crush George (James Stewart) jealous. In one of the scenes, after a meeting between Mary and George ends in an argument, Mary receives a call from her suitor Sam (Frank Albertson). Mary greets Sam indifferently. However, the moment George walks into her house (he forgot to take the hat), Mary immediately changes the tone of her voice and starts flirting with Sam. Similarly, in a 2009 American comedy *The Ugly Truth* (Robert Luketic, 2009), the romantic Abby (Katherine Heigl) performs a series of actions during a phone call to make Mike interested in her. She deliberately makes her crush wait on the line and tells him that she is seeing someone else. In all these films, despite the huge time difference in which they were made, the characters try to pretend to be someone else on the phone to make their crushes interested in them.

The film characters also enter new roles during phone conversations to protect their secrets. In *Sorry, Wrong Number*, for example, Sally (Ann Richards) pretends to give Leona a recipe over the phone as she cannot speak openly about suspicions against Burt (Leona’s husband) in the presence of her husband Fred (Leif Erickson) who works as a lawyer. In *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), Walter (Fred MacMurray) calls Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) Margie on the phone as he cannot talk openly about a jointly planned murder in the presence of his boss. In a 1993 comedy *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993) Daniel (Robin Williams), thanks to his great voice acting skills, pretends on the phone to be poor-quality applicants for the housekeeper position advertised by his soon-to-be ex-wife. He then pretends to be an ideal candidate for the job and introduces himself as Mrs Doubtfire to get the position and win his wife and family back.

2 It is worth noting, however, that throughout the film Linda does not reveal the pyjama trousers that are part of her work-from-home uniform.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to examine the similarities between video calls and telecommunication in cinema. Analysis of *Locked Down* and other films of different genres showed the parallels between two methods of communication. Despite the fact that the films in question come from different epochs and cultures, it can be observed that accessing information not intended for public view during a video call also has its equivalent in telecommunication. The characters, hearing on the phone information not intended for them, like many people during video calls, accidentally access the private spheres of their interlocutors. Self-presentation during video calls also applies to telephone conversations. As film history shows, the characters change the topics of their conversations, modulate their voices, or pretend to be someone else during phone calls to achieve their personal goals or keep secrets from others. By doing so, they also create images of themselves that often have no reference in reality.

Communication has undeniably changed during the coronavirus pandemic. Film history, however, shows that there are significant similarities between online communication and telecommunication. These findings are not without limitations considering the total number of films including conversation scenes which are not described here. In no way does this paper also argue that these statements can be generalised to all aspects of video communication. As Hagener notes: “[...] film history still offers a rich and dense history that can be mined in relation to our current media environments” (Hagener 2020, p. 40). It is, therefore, hoped that these findings will contribute to the current debate on changing interactions, provide new insights for exploring the relationship between cinematic representations and social phenomena, as well as inspire scholars to engage in research on continuity between different types of communication.

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STRESZCZENIE

Komunikacja i kino: analiza porównawcza rozmów video i rozmów telefonicznych w filmach przed pandemią i w czasie pandemii

Komunikacja uległa głębokim zmianom podczas pandemii koronawirusa. Pandemia wpłynęła na interakcje międzyludzkie, wykorzystanie przestrzeni i komunikację interpersonalną. Niektóre aspekty komunikacji internetowej mogą być jednakże postrzegane jako „przedłużenie” poprzedniego podstawowego sposobu interakcji na odległość – telekomunikacji. Uzyskanie dostępu do informacji nieprzeznaczonych do publicznego wglądu i kontrolowanie sposobu, w jaki jest się postrzegającym podczas rozmów online to tematy szeroko omawiane w kontekście wideokonferencji. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest jednak wykazanie, iż te zjawiska są już znane ludziom z rozmów telefonicznych. W celu nakreślenia podobieństw między dwoma sposobami komunikacji – rozmowami video i telefonicznymi – przeprowadzono analizę porównawczą filmu *Skazani na siebie* (*Locked Down*, Doug Liman, 2021) i innych filmów reprezentujących różne gatunki.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja, rozmowy video, telekomunikacja, pandemia, filmy

