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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 most 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 the *Times Online* published in 2008, we argue that in the development from the letters to the editor to the online discussion forums new configurations 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 that clearly distinguishes between the relevant dimensions of public and private. Koch and Oesterreicher (e.g. in Koch and Oesterreicher, 1985) developed a model of communication that relates the communicative situation to strategies of linguistic realization and distinguishes consistently between the phonic and graphic realization of language on the one hand, and between the language of immediacy and the language of distance on the other. This model will serve as the backdrop for our own model. We propose that their dimension of immediacy versus distance needs to be separated into three different dimensions. We, therefore, distinguish 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 the basis of this model it is possible to describe the traditional letters to the editor as being characterized by non-private contents and the language of distance while the discussion sections of recent online newspapers are characterized by private contents and the language of immediacy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, it has often been observed that the private and the public have become more and more mixed or blended. One way in which the dividing line between the private and the public is blurred is by what Imhof and Schulz (1998) call the "privatization of the public": What used to be private increasingly enters the public sphere.[1] Today, the Internet is perhaps

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[1] Imhof and Schultz use the expression "Privatisierung des Öffentlichen", 'privatization of the public', to refer to private topics and language conquering and thereby depoliticizing the public space (Imhof and Schulz, 1998:10–11; Imhof, 1999; see also Imhof, 1998). As a related process they name "Veröffentlichung des Privaten", 'turning the private into the public', which refers to the introduction of social questions into political discourse (Imhof and Schulz, 1998:10).

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the first medium that comes to mind to illustrate blends of public and private (Dürscheid, 2007), but this development had already started before the widespread use of the Internet. Twenty-five years ago, Meyrowitz (1985:308) argued that electronic media, especially television, led to new social situations and behaviours by blurring the distinctions between private and public. Also radio phone-in programs have been identified as an important medium for bringing the private into the public, by making personal problems of listeners accessible to a large audience (Imhof, 1999:718; Burger, 2005:25). Another obvious medium for the blending of private and public are reality television shows, such as Big Brother, which focus on the unscripted activities of ordinary people, on the humorous, romantic and dramatic events of their daily lives. News programs increasingly liven up their news with sound bites or short interviews of ordinary people who are affected by some newsworthy events. Local residents are interviewed after the flooding of their area, or a bush fire threatening their homes; workers are interviewed whose employer had to announce redundancies; and so on. But the media is not only interested in the private lives of ordinary people, it also publicizes the private lives of celebrities. A well-known actor goes shopping in New York, or a singer spends an afternoon together with her partner and her dog in a London park, and both events make it into the (web)pages of a national British newspaper.[2]

The Internet does not only play an important role in bringing private topics into the public sphere, it also leads to new communicative settings in which private individuals can make their voices heard much faster and with less editorial control than in print and electronic media. Online forums and private blogs are examples of such spaces, but also commercial news media let their readers respond to their articles online. The newspaper section "letters to the editor" has always provided an opportunity for private individuals to make their own voices heard, to make their private opinions public as it were. Today this kind of "talking back" to the mass media has become more immediate. It is easier and quicker to respond online to a newspaper article published on the Internet, and presumably the selection and editing of such reactions is less rigorous than it used to be. All a reader of an online newspaper article usually has to do is to press a button, write a few sentences in response to the article and press another button to send off his or her contribution.[3] As a result of the very short time span between the publication of an article and the possible publication of reactions to it, further readers can then react both to the newspaper article itself and to the reactions already published.

The increase of private topics in the public sphere has also been associated with a trend towards more informal language. Fairclough (1995:37–38) argues that the trend towards a media language imitating informal, colloquial and conversational speech is one way in which mass media try to bridge the gap between the public sphere in which media is produced and the often private sphere in which it is consumed. We would not want to go as far as to postulate such a deliberate intention on the part of the media producers. Nevertheless, the degree of formality of language use certainly has strong associations with different degrees of privacy of topics and settings, which is why we think formality of language needs to be included in the discussion of shifts between public and private in media texts.

Thus, we are confronted with media texts that combine private and public aspects on various levels. They may be public in the sense that they are within the public space and can be read by a large and anonymous audience, while at the same time discussing topics which we think of as "private" and using language which is associated with informal and private conversations. It is necessary, therefore, to develop a new descriptive model to disentangle the various dimensions of "private" and "public" that seem to interact in these situations. It is our aim in this paper to develop a model that distinguishes clearly between the different relevant dimensions of private and public. We see such a model as a necessary first step for further investigations into the shifts between public and private in mass media communication. Differentiating public and private into distinct dimensions will allow for more precise observations and descriptions of the relations between the individual dimensions.

As a case study, we will provide an analysis of the development of traditional letters to the editor in *The Times* to online news comments in the *Times Online*. Our data for this study were drawn from letters to the editor of *The Times* published in 1985 and online comments on articles of the *Times Online* published in 2008. This case study mainly serves the purpose of illustrating the application of our model. At the same time, it provides a starting point for further investigations of the characteristic features and developments of this genre.

2. "Public" and "private"

In order to analyze the blending of the public and private taking place in the news media of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we need to say precisely what we mean by "public" and "private". The public/private distinction is used in many contexts and, as Weintraub (1997:1–2) points out, some of the problems in defining "public" and "private" arise because they can mean different things, and sometimes even several things at once. To give an example, "public" means very different things in "public-private partnerships", "public opinion" and "public appearance". In the first case, "public" refers to the state, as contrasted to companies owned by individuals; in the second case it refers to the majority of the community; in the third to a context that is characterized by being accessible to everybody. The difficulty of exactly determining which of these (and other) meanings is evoked by a particular use of "public" is also expressed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

[2] "Amanda Holden squeezes into an LPD (little purple dress) as she bids for fame Stateside" (*Mail Online*, June 2, 2009), an article on the actor Amanda Holden, who went shopping in New York; and "Sarah Harding shows off her legs in tiny hotpants as she enjoys a day in the park" (*Mail Online*, June 2, 2009) on Sarah Harding, a singer of the pop group "Girls Aloud", who spent an afternoon in London's Hampstead Heath with her boyfriend and her dog.

[3] In many cases, readers are required to register first before they can submit a comment, but this makes the process only marginally more difficult.

Table 1
Weintraub's, 1997:5 dimensions of public and private.

	Public	Private
Visibility	Open, revealed, accessible	Hidden, withdrawn
Collectivity	Affects the interests of a collective	Pertains only to an individual

Table 2
Dürscheid's (2007:32) classification of private and public communication online (our translation).

	Public	Non-public
Non-private	Website of a company	Spam emails
Private	Recreational online chat	Holiday greetings via email

> The various senses pass into each other by many intermediate shades of meaning. The exact meaning often depends upon the noun qualified; in some expressions the precise sense is unambiguous, but in others more than one sense is vaguely present, and it is difficult to determine in what sense precisely the thing in question was originally called 'public'. (*OED*, entry for "public", adj.)

These different senses of "public" are related to each other through the association with a complex and more abstract concept of "public" which depends on the cultural and ideological context (Benn and Gaus, 1983:5). Benn and Gaus illustrate this with the example of public libraries. Public libraries are public in two distinct senses: by being open to everybody and by being financed through the community. These two senses of public are related through the cultural convention that what is financed through the community should be accessible for everybody (Benn and Gaus, 1983:4–5). The fact that such relations between different aspects of public are based on cultural conventions and not on strictly logical relations or inherent properties of the concept means that they are subject to cultural variation and change (Dürscheid, 2007:30). Not everything that today belongs to the public sphere has always done so. Aspects of sexuality and contraception, for instance, were strictly private matters until the middle of the last century, while today they are discussed relatively freely on the media.

Blends between private and public do not necessarily mean a loss of distinction between the two concepts. When the cultural conventions about what is considered to belong to the public sphere change, we can observe, for instance, that topics that are considered to be private start being discussed in public settings. Not only "public" has several related meanings, but also "private" topics are private in different respects. On the one hand they are private because they are (usually) not accessible to everybody. On the other hand they are private because they concern personal matters that are of no relevance to others. While the first aspect is lost when a private topic is increasingly discussed in public settings, it is still private in the second sense. When analyzing blends between private and public it is therefore important to distinguish clearly between the two levels of the public accessibility of the communicative event and the private nature of the topic of the conversation (Weintraub, 1997; Heller, 2006; Dürscheid, 2007).

Weintraub (1997:5) argues that in all fields in which the public/private distinction is used, two different underlying criteria characterize the public and the private: visibility and collectivity (see Table 1). With visibility, everything that is accessible is public, whereas what is hidden or withdrawn is private. The criterion of collectivity, in contrast, asks who is affected. If an event affects the interests of large groups or whole communities, it is considered public, whereas it is private if it pertains only to an individual.

These two dimensions of the public/private distinction can well be applied to the analysis of blendings of public and private in texts. Visibility then refers to the communicative setting: the accessibility of a text. Collectivity applies to the content of the text. Thus, a text can for instance have private content that affects only few individuals, but be accessible to a large audience. Dürscheid (2007:30) uses this distinction between the communicative setting and the content for analysing private communication on the Internet, such as blogs. She also reserves the term "public" for the accessibility of communication and "private" for its content, a convention which we will adopt in the following. This allows us to distinguish between public and non-public settings on the one hand and between private and non-private contents on the other (see Table 2).

As Dürscheid points out, to classify recreational online chat as private does not mean that only private topics are discussed. However, in contrast to the website of a company, private topics are expected in chats. Dürscheid also notes the concomitant differences in the language used in these situations: There seems to be a tendency for private communication in public settings to be realized in rather informal language, especially in the case of digital media (2007:37–38).

Heller (2006) uses the terms "public"/"private" to refer to the content dimension and the terms "public"/"non-public" to refer to the accessibility dimension. She also builds the dimension of the medium into her model, making it three dimensional (see Fig. 1).

The first dimension of the model distinguishes between "direct" forms of communication (sections A, B, C, D), e.g. face-to-face communication and "mediated" communication (sections E, F, G, H), e.g. telephone conversations, emails, short text messages and the like. The second dimension distinguishes between "private" topics and issues (sections A, C, E, G) and "public" ones (sections B, D, F, H). The third dimension, finally, distinguishes between "publicly accessible" communicative

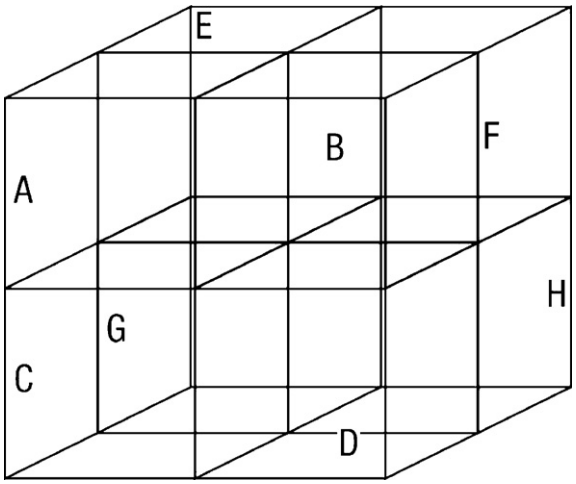

Fig. 1. Heller's (2006:326) three-dimensional model of content, medium and access.

Table 3
Four classifications of "private" and "public" on the content and the access dimension.

	Content dimension	Access dimension
Weintraub	Collectivity: public/private	Visibility: public/private
Heller	Public/private	Public/non-public
Dürscheid	Non-private/private	Public/non-public
Landert/Jucker	Non-private/private	Public/non-public

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.

Table 3 gives an overview of the terminological distinctions that have been proposed to distinguish between the content dimension and the access dimension.

In our own model, we use the same terminological distinctions as Dürscheid (2007). However, we want to integrate not only the content and the access dimension but also the formality of language. We therefore now turn to a communicative model that maps the interaction between the topic of the communicative act, its accessibility and also its linguistic realization.

3. A communicative model

Language can occur in more formal ways, typical for written language, or in more informal ways, which we might characterize as "oral". Koch and Oesterreicher (1985:21) state that there are preferences for specific communicative strategies depending on the conditions under which language production takes place. Specific settings tend to lead to language with more formal or "written" qualities while others privilege language with more informal or "oral" characteristics. This relation between the setting and the linguistic realization is, however, not imperative and untypical combinations of informal language in formal settings or vice versa can be observed. Koch and Oesterreicher, therefore, argue that it is not sufficient to just distinguish between written and spoken language, since there is more than just the medial factor that characterizes language.

It is necessary to distinguish between medial and conceptional aspects in order to talk about a piece of written language which we feel has some kind of "oral" quality. Koch and Oesterreicher (e.g. in Koch and Oesterreicher, 1985, 1990, 2007; Koch, 1999) have proposed and developed a model of communication that distinguishes consistently between the phonic and graphic realization of language on the one hand, and between the language of immediacy and the language of distance on the other. We shall use this model as a starting point to develop our own multi-dimensional model (see Fig. 2, from Koch, 1999:400; see also Koch and Oesterreicher, 1990:12, 2007:350).

This model captures the medial dichotomy between the graphic and the phonic realization of language and the scale or continuum between the realization in the language of communicative immediacy and communicative distance. An intimate conversation between members of a family, romantic partners or good friends, for instance, is realized in the phonic medium and in the language of communicative immediacy (area A in Fig. 2). An academic lecture or a church sermon is also realized in

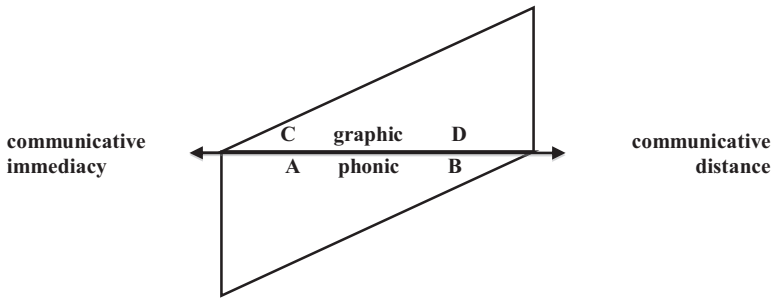

Fig. 2. Koch and Oesterreicher's model of communicative immediacy and distance (Koch, 1999:400).

the phonic medium but the language is much closer to the language of distance (area B). A short text message between close friends, on the other hand, in spite of being realized in the graphic code, is typically close to communicative immediacy (area C). A legal contract, finally, has all the hallmarks of the language of communicative distance and is realized in the graphic medium (area D). The shape of the triangles visualizes our intuition that the language of immediacy is typically but not necessarily realized in the phonic medium and the language of distance typically but not necessarily in the graphic medium. Areas A and D mark the more prototypical situations, areas B and C the less prototypical ones. Koch (1999:400) factorizes the scale of communicative immediacy into a range of different communicative parameters.[4] Extreme communicative immediacy is characterized by the following communicative parameters (Koch, 1999:400):

(a) physical (spatial, temporal) immediacy,
(b) privacy,
(c) familiarity of the partners,
(d) high emotionality,
(e) context embeddedness,
(f) deictic immediacy (*ego-hic-nunc*, immediate situation),
(g) dialogue,
(h) communicative cooperation of the partners,
(i) free topic development,
(j) spontaneity.

Extreme communicative distance, on the other hand, is characterized by the opposite values of these parameters, i.e. physical distance, lack of familiarity, low emotionality and so on. For every single situation it is then possible to set the values for these parameters and as a result the approximate position on the scale between communicative immediacy and distance.

When Koch and Oesterreicher first introduced their model, they pointed to the fact that the continuum between language of immediacy and language of distance is in fact not linear, but rather represents a multidimensional space (1985:21). Nevertheless, they did not include a systematic distinction of different levels on which the above listed communicative parameters lie (see Ágel and Hennig, 2006:13–14). We believe that in order to analyze current trends in mass media communication, Koch and Oesterreicher's model needs to be enriched. In this paper we propose that their scale of communicative immediacy needs to be separated into three different scales. We, therefore, distinguish systematically between the communicative situation (the scale of accessibility), the content (the scale of privacy) and the linguistic realization (the scale of linguistic immediacy). Fig. 3 visualizes this model. The dichotomy of phonic versus graphic realization is not included in this visualization. In fact, our conceptualization of the model requires two such systems, one for phonically realized language and one for graphically realized language. The model, therefore, is essentially four-dimensional. Our case study is drawn from printed and from electronic texts. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, we ignore phonically produced language, but we maintain that our model would be equally applicable to spoken language.

This model crucially builds on Koch and Oesterreicher's important insight that the distinction between the phonic and the graphic realization of language is a dichotomy while the linguistic realization can be placed on a scale between the language of immediacy and the language of distance. Based on this insight, we claim that all the dimensions in Fig. 3 should be seen as scales and not as dichotomies.

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. An intimate

[4] Other conceptualizations of linguistic distance and immediacy have been proposed by various scholars both before and after Koch and Oesterreicher (1985), some of which make use of very similar parameters to characterize different poles of linguistic realization. These include the concepts of "immediacy" and "non-immediacy" (Wiener and Mehrabian, 1968), "involvement" and "detachment" (Chafe, 1982), "high involvement style" (Tannen, 1984), "linguistic expressions of affect" (Ochs, 1986), and "parlando" (Sieber, 1998).

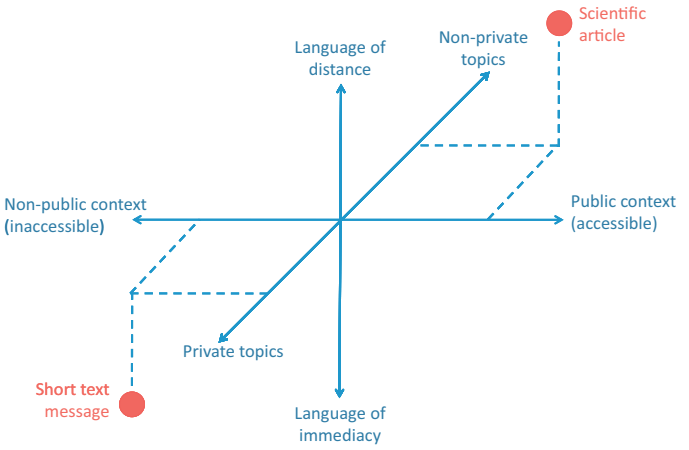

Fig. 3. Enriched communicative model.

chat between lovers in a secluded part of a private home with no possible witnesses would be an extreme case of a non-public context. A conversation in a public place, e.g. on a bus or train is somewhat more public, but the accessibility is still restricted to very few individuals. A lecture at a conference may have a large audience, but in comparison with a news media audience, accessibility is still restricted. Display advertisements, likewise are accessible to many people because they can be viewed and read by whoever passes by, but at the same time their accessibility is restricted to people who happen to be in that location. Television broadcasts, newspapers and other mass media products reach even larger audiences. The largest potential audiences today are possible on the Internet. The only restriction is imposed by the availability of the necessary computer equipment, Internet connection and access rights.

The definition of private and non-private topics is more difficult, even though we may have fairly clear intuitions about what constitutes a private topic (e.g. what I had for breakfast today) and what constitutes a non-private topic (e.g. some geographical facts about Australia). The problem is in part caused by using the context in which a topic appears as an indicator for the degree to which it is private. Commonly, topics which (traditionally) are not suitable for discussion in public contexts are considered to be private topics. We argue, however, that significant shifts are going on and that more and more private topics intrude into communicative situations in public contexts. And therefore, as argued above, we need a definition that is independent of the scale of public accessibility.

We propose to determine privacy of content 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. This allows for the scale between private and public that we are proposing. The smaller the group of affected people, the more private a topic is. What I had for breakfast does not immediately affect anybody apart perhaps from my family. In this conceptualization romantic relationships, routine everyday-life events and so on are private topics. Work-place affairs, events at school or in our local community are somewhat less private because a larger range of people is affected. National and international politics, sports and finances, and scientific findings clearly lack this concentration on small groups of people who are affected, either because they affect large numbers of people or because there is no discernable direct effect at all.

Heller captures the content dimension in a rather similar fashion. She defines the opposition between "non-private" (which she calls "public") and "private" as follows:

> In this sense, 'public' denotes – and of course, privileges – a special group of interests: 'everybody's' interest is the 'public interest', the interest of the state as *res publica*." (...) [The] 'private', *privat* or *privé* sphere is considered to be particular, linked to individuals or groups of individuals and exempt from public scrutiny. (Heller, 2006:317)

Where Heller uses the term "link" to connect topics to individuals or to groups of people, we have introduced the term "affected". This introduction of the notion of "affected" shifts some of the problems of definition to the term "affected". We use it in a fairly loose and intuitive sense as exemplified above, but it has to be conceded that for some topic areas this definition is more problematic than for others. National and international sports events are a case in point. Obviously they affect a large number of people who take an emotional interest in them. In this sense, they lack a focus on a small group of people who are affected and, therefore, they are classified as public. But in the same way mundane everyday-life events of celebrities appear to be of great emotional interest to large numbers of people and therefore would have to be classified as public. We want to describe this widespread interest in the every-day life of celebrities as a "privatization of the public" and not as public topics by definition.

The scale of linguistic immediacy, finally, includes all levels of language. It corresponds largely to Koch and Oesterreicher's scale of communicative immediacy, but excludes those aspects of their model that belong to the

communicative setting or the topic. The language of distance is characterized by a formal, scientific vocabulary and full sentences with complex syntax. The address forms are formal, consisting of last names and titles, and punctuation and capitalization are standard. The language of immediacy, on the other hand, makes use of slang and colloquialisms. The syntax is less complex and sentence fragments can be found. Address forms include nicknames and terms of endearment, as well as terms of abuse. On the level of orthography, non-standard punctuation and capitalization are used, often expressing emphasis. This type of language, albeit for German, has been described as "parlando" language by Sieber (1998:142–143). He uses this term that in singing refers to a speech like quality for features of orality in written language.

Given these three dimensions, it is now possible to locate every communicative act in the virtual space of this model. Two examples, both in the graphic code, have been placed in Fig. 3 above for illustrative purposes. A scientific article is placed high on all three scales. It deals with a non-private topic because its impact is not restricted to only a few individuals. Depending on where it is published, it is accessible to a large number of people. But even low circulation academic journals can often be accessed on a world-wide scale. If it is published on the Internet, it may even be easily and immediately accessible on a world-wide scale. Scientific articles are generally realized in a fairly formal language with no hesitations, few colloquialisms, sentence fragments and so on.

Short text messages exchanged between romantic partners, on the other hand, are placed at the opposite end of all three dimensions. In this case, the conversation is only accessible to the two participants. It is a non-public situation. The topics under discussion may be of a very private nature, affecting only the two interactants. And the linguistic realization may rely on a large number of features that are typical for the language of immediacy.

The aim of our model is to characterize texts more precisely and to observe characteristic patterns on different levels of texts. The model proposed by Ágel and Hennig (2006:24) includes only communicative parameters which can be shown to have a direct influence on linguistic features. In contrast, we do not assume a direct causal relation between the characteristics of the different axes. Thus, we do not argue that there is a *necessary* relation between the communicative setting in which a text is produced and its linguistic realization. Instead, we see the clear analytical distinction between communicative setting, content and linguistic realization as a necessary first step if we want to observe interactions between these different aspects of texts. 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.

4. A case study: letters to the editor

For our case study we compare letters to the editor from *The Times* in 1985 with comments that were written on *Times Online* in 2008. The data from 1985 consist of eight letters that were published on five different days between November 30 and December 7 1985. They all comment on the same question: whether or not tobacco advertisement should be legal. This debate was initiated by a leading article, printed on November 28. The data from 2008 come from 31 online comments that were written in response to an article reporting on public libraries allowing their users to drink and eat in reading rooms. This article was published on September 19 and the articles were all written within a few days of its publication.

These two sets of data differ in several respects. They were published 23 years apart, through different mediums (print and online), and under different conditions of editorial control. It is reasonable to assume that they also differ to some extent with respect to the functions they fulfil. Nevertheless, the two sets have in common that they represent the most frequent way in which direct audience feedback was delivered to newspapers at the time of their publication. Our main aim in using this data is to illustrate the use of our communicative model in pointing out different configurations of public and private in different texts. At the same time the results will provide a starting point for further analysis of systematic differences between earlier letters to the editor and current online comments.

4.1. Communicative situation: the scale of public accessibility

Accessibility to a large audience makes the communicative situation public for both letters to the editor in *The Times* and comments on *Times Online*. It is difficult to determine how large this audience exactly is. For the printed *Times* in 1985 circulation figures are around 450,000 (see Jucker, 1992:47). Circulation figures can give a rough idea of how easily accessible the texts are, but can of course not be taken to indicate the actual number of readers. A single copy is often read by more than one person, but certainly not all of them read each text. For *Times Online* accessibility is maybe even more difficult to pin down. One benchmark is the rate of Internet access, since access to the Internet theoretically provides access to all texts that are published online. According to the OECD, 71% of all UK households had access to the Internet in 2008 (OECD and Eurostat, 2009). Another indicator of the availability of online texts is the number of visitors to the platform. ABCe, which periodically surveys this figure for *Times Online*, found for June 2008 16,369,620 unique users worldwide, 5,731,085 of which were from the UK (figures reported by *Times Online*, August 19, 2008). These figures suggest that online comments can at least potentially be accessed by a larger audience than printed letters to the editor. Whether or not the comments are actually read more often is of course a different question.

Apart from the number of readers, restrictions on the accessibility of letters in 1985 and online comments 2008 differ in some essential ways with respect to space and time. Outside the UK *Times Online* is usually more easily accessible than a printed issue of the newspaper. In accordance with this the ABCe circulation figures indicate that only about 1 out of 4 visitors access the site from within the UK. As a consequence, the readership and the authorship of online comments are

more international than for the letters. In addition, while printed newspapers are most easily available within a few days of their publication, *Times Online* provides access to articles back to 1998, from 2007 onwards including comments.[5]

The fact that print and online newspapers differ with respect to how easily previously published articles can be accessed has consequences for the audience feedback. Letters to the editor in printed papers appear a few days after the text (or texts) they refer to and readers of the letter cannot be expected to remember the details of the article, or even to have it at hand. To establish the reference and contextualize the reply, letters therefore often begin by introducing the text they comment on.[6] This usually includes the date of publication, the text type (report, article, leading article, letter) and either title or topic of the text. The following two examples both start by introducing the same leading article.

(1) Sir, Your leading article, 'The biggest kill' (November 28) was welcome and encouraging. (*The Times*, 30/11/85)

(2) Sir, In your leading article (November 28) you suggest that the campaign to ban smoking in public places comes close to unacceptable infringement of individual liberty. Two days later you carried a report about compensation being awarded to a non-smoker in Sweden whose lung cancer was considered to be caused by ''passive smoking''. (*The Times*, 4/12/85)

Online comments, in contrast, appear directly below the article they reply to, so that there is no need to summarize the text in order to contextualize the comment. Specifications are however necessary when comments are not written in reply to the article, but to a previous comment. Since the time lag between writing a comment and its publication is minimal in the online setting, interactions between readers are much easier and more common than in printed newspapers. In example (3) the two users Rob and Abdul Majeed debate over several comments whether libraries are still needed.

(3) 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 dumbos who can't see their point and think playing games and talking on mobiles is a good thing. To these people: Just stay well away and use Starbucks for eating, drinking, loud talking etc etc.
Rob, London, UK

Rob, London, UK: thank you for your point of view. My comment was in the vein of we have the Internet and don't actually NEED the libraries any longer. Having said this, I like to nostalgically nip off to a local borough library occasionally, to the reading rooms there. [Full stop to discussion]...
Abdul Majeed, Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK

(*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

These comments are printed in direct sequence here, but there are in fact eight intervening comments by different authors between Abdul Majeed's first comment and Rob's reply. The name at the beginning of the comment therefore signals the addressee and serves to attract his or her attention.

In sum, 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 public end of the accessibility scale than the printed letters.

4.2. Topics: the scale of privacy

Although the topic of letters 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 society at large can mainly be found in the letters to the editor of 1985. The author in example (4), for instance, appeals to the Government to take action against tobacco advertising, pointing out the implications for society of such a step.

(4) 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. (*The Times*, 30/11/85).

[5] In February 2007, *Times Online* launched a redesigned website, which introduced direct commenting of articles. Direct commenting was at first restricted to opinion articles and columns, whereas today it is available for almost all the articles. Before direct commenting was possible, letters to the editor could be sent to the *Times* by e-mail, a service that was introduced in June 1997. When we collected our data, users could post their comments of up to 300 characters without signing up for a user account. They however had to indicate name and town, which were both published, and an e-mail address, which was not visible to other users. In summer 2009 the commenting function was redesigned, now requiring commentators to log into their user account. With the introduction of the new function, all the old comments were deleted from *Times Online*. Before that, comments were still accessible for articles ranging back to February 2007.

[6] Not all letters to the editor directly comment on an article. While some letters contribute to an ongoing debate without explicit reference to texts previously published, others comment on events that have not been reported at all. In our data two of the eight letters express views on smoking without explicit reference to any of the articles or letters published on this topic. A relation to the debate is still created through the topic itself and by their placement together with a third letter, which makes such an explicit reference (*The Times*, 3/12/85).

Also the author of the letter in example (5) highlights social consequences, though with a different aim. Here it is not the national health that is at stake but the national industry and the threat of rising unemployment.

(5) If there were to be a total ban on advertising in the UK the British tobacco industry would lose its only viable defence against such brands [= cheap unprofitable brands imported on a marginal costing basis from Europe], so you are probably right in your assertion that the UK industry and UK jobs would suffer irreparable damage.

Unless you were to ban smoking altogether [...] the market would simply be supplied from Europe, observed from the dole queue by our former employees. (*The Times*, 4/12/85)

Quoting scientific findings and statistical data is another way in which authors rely on non-private evidence to argue their point:

(6) The latest Government figures show that by age 16 nearly 40 per cent of children are smokers; this is an increase since 1982. (*The Times*, 7/12/85)

(7) Several studies have shown a higher than expected incidence of lung cancer in non-smoking spouses of heavy smokers. It is also possible that exposure to high levels of cigarette smoke may decrease natural resistance to chest infection. (*The Times*, 5/12/85)

The source of such studies and statistics is usually not specified; the authors however adopt a professional role, which lets the information appear more objective and credible. The letter in example (6) is written by the Secretary of the British Medical Association and the letter in example (7) has three authors who all work at the London Chest Hospital. These professional affiliations of the authors let the letters appear not to be based on personal opinion but on professional expertise. The authors here write as representatives of an organization or a profession rather than as private individuals.

In contrast the authors of online comments tend to write from a more subjective viewpoint, supporting their arguments by referring to personal experiences and emotions, and highlighting how they are personally affected. In example (8) the author argues against closing public libraries by pointing out the consequences this would have for herself.

(8) "Sell out completely and turn into a Waterstones"? You really have missed the point - not everyone can afford to buy all the books they want to read. I want to read 6 books per week and still be able to afford to eat! We still need libraries. (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

Similarly, the author in example (9) argues for the need for silent libraries by recounting a personal experience.

(9) I am all for encouraging people to use public libraries. However, I was very shocked when I was revising for exams in a library last year to the sound of children screaming and cell phones ringing. Is it now unreasonable to expect to be able to work in a library!??! (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

Claims about social and political developments are also made in online comments, but they are usually not backed by citing relevant statistics. Instead, they are based on the observation and judgment of the author.

(10) You're behind the times (no pun intended), this has been going on for years, most public libraries will allow people to bring in food and drink (within reason) and I've not seen any institution keep things quiet except by not letting any of the public in! (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

(11) One of the reasons fewer people go to libraries is that the book stock has been steadily reduced due to spending cuts. And what was the money spent on? The "people's network", racks of CDs and DVDs, actual shops - everything except books. Oh, and another thing - libraries are no longer quiet. (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

The authors of the comments in (10) and (11) do not indicate any source for the claims they make, nor do they adopt a professional role. While changes in rules concerning consuming food and drink can be observed simply by visiting libraries, the information about finances in example (11) is less likely to be accessible to the general public. Adopting a professional role that entails insight in such matters would be a strategy to let the information appear less subjective. This strategy is in fact used by the author of example (12), who is backing up the claim of spending cuts in (11) by writing from the position of someone who [*has*] *worked in libraries for many years*:

(12) Having worked in libraries for many years, I would echo the comment above. Vicious, year on year cuts in book funds, almost entirely account for falling numbers - nothing else. (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

Such professional roles are however not often found in the online comments. They are mostly written from the point of view of private individuals who are personally affected by public libraries in their everyday lives. The letters to the editor, in contrast, are mostly written by authors who deal with the topic of smoking professionally and who adopt a non-private stance.

4.3. Linguistic realization: the scale of linguistic immediacy

The difference between the letters to the editor and the online comments with respect to professional or private roles of the authors is also reflected in the address forms. Typical for letters to the editor is the formulaic opening line *Sir,* by which the editor is addressed. Before this opening line, a byline introduces the author(s) by title and full name, e.g. *From Dr R.J.D. Winter and others* (*The Times*, 5/12/85), or by their office, e.g. *From the Chief Executive of the Tobacco Advisory Council* (*The Times*, 4/12/85). At the end of the letter the author's address is given:

(13) Yours faithfully,
B.C. SIMPSON, Chief Executive.
Tobacco Advisory Council,
Glen House.
Stag Place, SWl.
December 2. (*The Times*, 4/12/85)

The same formal forms are also used to refer to authors of previous letters:

(14) Sir, The Chief Executive of the Tobacco Advisory Council claims (December 4) that his industry does not want to encourage young people to start smoking. (*The Times*, 7/12/85)

In *Times Online*, forms of address usually consist of first names or full names, such as *Abdul Majeed* in (15). The location, which has to be indicated by authors when submitting comments, is sometimes added to the term of address, for instance *Rob, London, UK* in (16).

(15) Abdul Majeed - Well some of us DO actually read and use libraries to study in. We're not all dumbos who can't see their point and think playing games and talking on mobiles is a good thing. To these people: Just stay well away and use Starbucks for eating, drinking, loud talking etc etc.
Rob, London, UK (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

(16) Rob, London, UK: thank you for your point of view. My comment was in the vein of we have the Internet and don't actually NEED the libraries any longer. Having said this, I like to nostalgically nip off to a local borough library occasionally, to the reading rooms there. [Full stop to discussion]...
Abdul Majeed, Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

Not only authors of other comments are however referred to by their first name. In the following comment *Young Fiona* refers to the journalist Fiona Hamilton, who wrote the main article:

(17) Young Fiona really should get out more! So, libraries are dropping their 'hallowed rule of silence'! Give me a break. Libraries are wonderfully diverse centres of community activity. If you don't believe me, hop on a train and see what's going on in Bournemouth! (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

Informal terms of person reference are not the only aspect in which the online comments are closer to language of immediacy than the letters to the editor. The letters in *The Times* of 1985 are written in formal style, containing formal and specialized vocabulary (e.g. *rate of decline, marginal costing basis*), relatively complex syntax and non-contracted forms (*has not*, *does not*).

(18) Moreover, the rate of decline of cigarette consumption is, by and large, more significant in many of the countries where advertising has not been banned as opposed to those countries where such a ban does exist. Indeed, with one of the highest rates of decline in the world, the UK itself falls into this pattern.

[...]

Your article calls for the tobacco industry to be quickly disassembled and by implication you envisage such disassembly arising from a ban on advertising. This assertion totally ignores the current effect on the UK market of cheap unprofitable brands imported on a marginal costing basis from Europe.

[...]

Unless you were to ban smoking altogether, which even Ash (Action on Smoking and Health) does not advocate, the market would simply be supplied from Europe, observed from the dole queue by our former employees. (*The Times*, 4/12/85)

In contrast, online comments like (19) and (20) contain non-standard characteristics such as colloquialisms (e.g. *twat*), emphasis through capitalization (*ALWAYS*), contracted forms (*don't, I'm, can't*), multiple punctuation (*.?*), and non-standard orthography (*whay*, *realtive*).

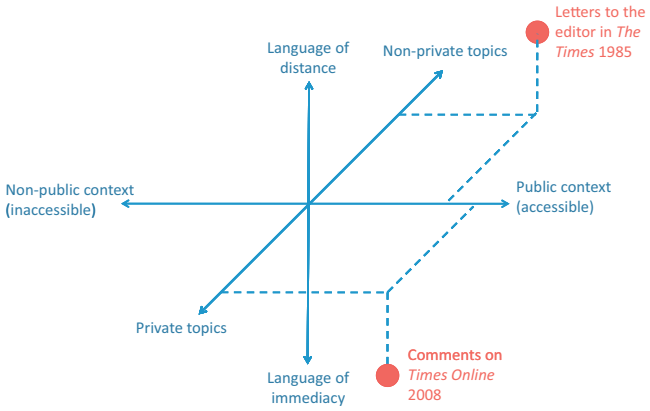

Fig. 4. From *The Times* 1985 to *Times Online* 2008.

(19) Libaries should ALWAYS be silent places. Many people use them during their studies. I don't want some inconsiderate twat talking loudly on a mobile phone when I'm trying to read or compose an essay. If some people can't be in a library without eating or talking loudly then they should stay away. (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

(20) Why not.?Every other aspect of British life has been dumbed down to the lowest common denominator, so whay not throw away the concept of a library for people to go to work, study and read in realtive quiet? (*Times Online*, 19/9/08)

One factor responsible for the difference in formality between letters to the editor and online comments is the difference in the editorial process of their publication. The letters were selected and edited by the letters' editor prior to publication, sometimes involving cuts in size (Stewart, 2005:627). Online comments, on the other hand, appear exactly as typed by their authors. The only editorial intervention consists in the deletion of comments that violate the editorial guidelines, for instance by being offensive.[7] This difference in the editorial process also accounts for the larger variability of style among the online comments. While most comments, like (20), have a lot of non-standard features and high linguistic immediacy, some, like (12) above, are written in quite formal language.

5. Conclusion

The differentiation into communicative setting, topic and linguistic realization allows us to show diverging tendencies in the data of our case study. While the accessibility of the texts remained relatively stable – we suggest that there was only a relatively small increase due to the online publication in 2008 – there were clear shifts both on the level of topics and on the level of the language in which these texts were written. Fig. 4 visualizes these shifts along the three dimensions.

On the basis this case study we cannot (and do not want to) draw any conclusions about when and why these shifts took place. Moreover, interpretations of these results need to take into account that letters to the editor and online comments differ to some extent with respect to the functions they fulfil. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that in online comments (the most common form of providing feedback to newspapers in 2008) the content is more private and the language more immediate than in letters to the editor from 1985 (which were the most common form of providing feedback then). The results of our case study are thus consistent with the view that a greater reliance on private topics and an increasing use of conceptionally oral language can be found in mass media—in this case in the audience feedback of an upper-market British newspaper over the last quarter century. Other, more extreme examples of this trend could be found by looking at some of the more down-market media in Great Britain. Investigating changes in audience feedback across media targeted at different market segments would certainly provide an interesting topic for further research.

Apart from the actual results of our case study, our main aim was to argue for a more differentiated view of public and private aspects of texts. To this end we introduced an extended version of Koch and Oesterreicher's model that differentiates consistently between the communicative setting, the content and the linguistic realization of texts. With our case study, we demonstrated the usefulness of such a distinction. Texts can combine features that do not correspond to the prototypical constellations of public–non-private–distant on the one hand and non-public–private–immediate on the other. If we want to characterize and/or compare such texts adequately, all three dimensions must be taken into account individually.

While we think that the presented model is helpful in observing and characterizing current trends in mass media communication, we also see potential for further developments. Firstly, the characteristics used to place a text in the model

[7] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/tools_and_services/services/terms_and_conditions/#unacceptablecontent (accessed August 07, 2009).

could be further specified with respect to each of the three dimensions. In our case study, we derived these characteristics from our data by looking for features that were relevant for the dimension in question. A catalogue of characteristics for each dimension would allow for a more systematic comparison of different texts and genres. Secondly, the theoretical relation between the three dimensions deserves further attention. We have already pointed out in section 2 that dependencies exist between what is considered a private topic and what is considered public space: at least to some extent, private topics are topics that are not suitable to be discussed in public settings. A similar relation applies to formal language and public setting: formal language is the language that is considered to be appropriate in certain kinds of public settings. Since the notions of public space, privacy and formality are all cultural concepts, they can furthermore change over time. Thus, if we observe trends towards private topics and informal language use in public settings, the question arises whether changes in our perception of what constitutes a private topic and what is considered formal language might be under way.

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Appendix A. Data

The Times, November 30, 1985, "Smoking and health" (letter to the editor), page 9.
The Times, December 3, 1985, "A counterblast to tobacco" (3 letters to the editor), page 15.
The Times, December 4, 1985, "Tobacco defence against critics" (letter to the editor), page 15.
The Times, December 5, 1985, "Liberty and the non-smoker" (letter to the editor), page 17.
The Times, December 7, 1985, "Smoking and health" (2 letters to the editor), page 9.
Times Online, September 19, 2008, "Public libraries open way for drinks, snacks and mobiles" (31 comments on article), http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article4783690.ece (last accessed July 1, 2009).

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