


Reconfiguration media ecology in family communication practices at the era of digital convergence

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Received 7 April 2025

Revised 27 June 2025

Accepted 18 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how the digital media ecosystem reconfigures family communication practices in the era of technological convergence and creates spaces for meaning negotiation between children and parents. Based on the Media Ecology Theory proposed by Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, media are understood not merely as technical channels, but as symbolic environments that shape patterns of interaction within households. This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation of digital interactions among five families in Bengkulu City. The findings reveal that digital media generates simultaneous, dynamic, and often ambiguous communication patterns, where family members are frequently physically present but psychologically detached (absent presence). The boundaries between private and public spaces have become increasingly blurred as personal devices penetrate intimate family settings. Meaning negotiation emerges continuously in defining rules for gadget use, maintaining emotional closeness, and preserving parental authority in an environment saturated with mediated experiences. Parents often struggle to balance control and trust, whereas children assert their autonomy in the digital sphere. These dynamics sometimes lead to tensions and misunderstandings, but also open opportunities for more dialogic and reflective engagements. This study underscores the importance of developing critical family media literacy as an adaptive strategy to mitigate the risks of dysfunctional communication and cultivate healthier, more intentional patterns of interaction. Strengthening media literacy within families can empower parents and children to navigate the complexities of technological convergence with greater awareness and mutual understanding.

Keyword: Digital Convergence; Family Communication; Media Ecology; Media Literacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today's digital transformation has radically changed almost all aspects of people's lives, including how individuals, communities, and families build relationships, exchange information, and negotiate meaning in everyday life. Digital convergence, namely, the integration of various communication platforms and technologies into one interconnected ecosystem, creates a new order in which McLuhan calls a global village, where the boundaries of communication space and time become blurred (Cooper, 2022). In Indonesia, the phenomenon of digital convergence is reflected in a significant increase in the ownership of digital devices in households. Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in 2023 show that 83% of Indonesian households now have permanent Internet access, while the We Are Social report notes that the average Indonesian spends 7 hours and 42 minutes every day accessing the Internet through various devices. In addition, approximately 96% of Indonesian Internet users access social media, most of which is done in domestic spaces, namely, at home and in family interactions (Mareschal et al., 2021). This causes families to face new challenges that have never occurred in previous eras. The family room, which was once synonymous with face-to-face interaction, is now filled with a variety of smart TV screens, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones that present simultaneous information flow. Media multitasking has become a common practice that, although considered efficient, has the potential to erode the quality of in-depth conversations between family members. Udovita (2020) states that the intensity of involvement with digital media in households can cause prolonged distraction, give rise to generational conflict, and challenge traditional parenting patterns. A study by Thoha et al. (2023) found that 62% of parents in Indonesia felt that their family interactions were disrupted by excessive cell phone use. Similar data were revealed by UNICEF, which reported that approximately 57% of children and adolescents were more comfortable communicating via instant messaging applications than talking directly to their parents (Popa, 2024). This phenomenon shows a shift in communication preferences from an intimate face-to-face model to faster, but often shallow, digital intermediary communication.

The main problem is that not all families have the same adaptive capacity to manage changes in media ecology. Some families can set proportional rules for using digital media and integrating technology as a means of strengthening communication (Siregar & Pribadi, 2025). However, many families actually experience disorientation: family members are busy with their own worlds, conversations decrease in quality, and emotional closeness is weakened. The results of research conducted by the Pew Research Center show that excessive use of digital devices in families is correlated with increased feelings of loneliness, stress, and psychological distancing among family members (MacDonald et al., 2023). In Indonesia, most discourses on digital convergence still emphasize aspects of economic productivity, access to information, and educational innovation, while the communicative dimension in the family space is relatively under-researched (Permana & Suzan, 2023). In fact, recontextualizing the role of media in the family is becoming increasingly urgent, especially when the younger generation grows up in a media ecosystem that is completely different from that of their parents' generation (Aditia & Hektanti, 2023). Many normative solutions have been proposed, such as family digital literacy campaigns, limiting screen times, and recommending gadget-free zones. However, in practice, these efforts are often temporary and not contextual to the communication habits of multicultural and highly dynamic Indonesian families (Agustina, 2024). The urgency of this research lies in empirically exploring how Indonesian families are currently reconfiguring their communication practices, namely, reorganizing the role of media, negotiating usage norms, and maintaining emotional relationships amidst the flood of information and digital stimulation.

According to communication theory, the media ecology perspective emphasizes that media is not just a tool but also an environment that shapes social perceptions and practices. This approach posits that when new media is present, it does not simply replace the old, but creates a new order (reconfiguration) that has an impact on the way humans understand and establish relationships. This shows that the reconfiguration of media ecology in the family is not just a matter of technological shift, but a change in the paradigm of everyday communication (Nimrod, 2017).

The problem of this research is generally related to how the reconfiguration of media ecology occurs in the communication practices of Indonesian families in the era of digital convergence. This study aimed

to analyze the forms of change in the structure, relations, and habits of using digital media in the household environment that directly or indirectly affect the dynamics of interpersonal communication (Thoha et al., 2023). This phenomenon is increasingly important to study because data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association in 2024 show that more than 210 million Indonesians have used the Internet, with the majority of access occurring in private spaces such as homes (Aditia, 2021). This condition gives rise to a situation in which face-to-face conversations compete with gadget distractions, social media content, and other online activities that can reduce the intensity of emotional togetherness in the family (Utami et al., 2023). On one hand, digital convergence opens up opportunities for productivity and cross-generational learning, but on the other hand, it raises the risk of communication fragmentation, decreased attachment, and the emergence of conflicts over device usage rules.

This research is expected to contribute to the development of more reflective and contextual communication adaptation strategies for educators and digital literacy practitioners in designing family based education programs and for policymakers in developing media use regulations that are more responsive to domestic social and cultural dynamics. This study seeks to present a new perspective on how digital convergence not only changes the way families obtain information and divide their time but also redefines the meaning of togetherness, intimacy, and emotional solidarity between family members. In this study, the reconfiguration of media ecology is operationalized as a process of changing media use patterns that include face-to-face interactions, simultaneous or separate use of gadgets, division of physical and virtual spaces, and negotiation of rules and norms that govern daily communication activities. This research not only has academic value in the development of family communication studies and media ecology theory but also has significant practical relevance to help Indonesian families navigate the challenges of the digital era so that they can maintain the quality of healthy, equal, and meaningful interactions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study method focused on five families in the urban area of Bengkulu City to gain a deep understanding of the dynamics of media ecology reconfiguration in everyday communication practices. This research design was chosen to allow an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences, perspectives, and patterns of interaction that emerge within the context of family life surrounded by digital devices. By concentrating on a limited number of cases, this study aimed to capture the richness and complexity of communication practices that are often overlooked in broader surveys. The selection of informants was carried out purposively by considering the criteria of families with school-age children, living together in one house, and having access to and habits of actively using digital devices such as smartphones, Internet television, and tablets. This purposive sampling strategy was intended to ensure that the families included in the study were highly relevant to the research focus and to provide comprehensive insights into how media technologies shape relationships and routines. Based on the report of the Bengkulu Province Communication, Informatics, and Statistics Service in 2024, it was recorded that around 79% of households in Bengkulu City were connected to fixed or cellular Internet, with a clear tendency to increase the use of video streaming services and social media as part of daily family activities.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with both parents and one child from each family to explore the narratives of their experiences in dividing interaction spaces, setting media usage rules, and negotiating the meaning of togetherness amid the dominance of digital devices. These interviews were designed to capture not only factual descriptions, but also the emotional and cultural significance that families attach to their communication practices. Participatory observation was also conducted to record face-to-face interactions, device usage patterns, and various forms of communication adjustments that emerged in the home environment over time. All data obtained were then analyzed thematically, following the systematic steps of categorization, reduction, and interpretation of findings based on the media ecology framework proposed by Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. This theoretical lens helps illuminate how technological environments actively reshape human perceptions and relationships. The validity of the research results was maintained through triangulation of data collection techniques, peer discussions to

minimize researcher bias, and confirmation of the interpreted findings to the informants to ensure accuracy and credibility. In this way, this study provides a nuanced picture of how families in Bengkulu City experience and manage the pervasive presence of digital media in their everyday lives.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Research Findings

This study found that the reconfiguration of media ecology in family communication practices in Bengkulu occurred in various complex forms, reflecting the process of adaptation to the era of digital convergence. In general, three main findings can be identified: (1) changes in the structure of the family communication space, (2) shifts in interpersonal interaction patterns, and (3) dynamics of negotiating media use norms.

First, changes in the structure of the communication space are evident in the way families regulate the use of digital devices at home. All informant families have more than two active digital devices (especially smartphones, Internet-based digital television, and laptops), which are spread across the living room, bedroom, and kitchen. This indicates that domestic space has now experienced an expansion of function into a media space that facilitates access to information as well as a personal entertainment tool. In the two families, television is no longer the center of collective communication because it is more often replaced by individual cellphone screens. As a result, time spent together does not immediately become a communication space but rather takes place in simultaneous digital silence.

Second, the shift in interpersonal interaction patterns is reflected in the dominance of device-based communication, such as WhatsApp messages, between family members living in the same house. Four out of the five families stated that communication about domestic matters (such as shopping, reminders of children's activities, or pick-up and drop-off schedules) is more often done via text messaging applications than in person. In addition, there is a tendency for the quality of face-to-face communication to decrease, especially at night when each member is more focused on their respective gadgets. In one family, teenagers prefer to express their feelings through text messages, because they feel that direct communication often leads to conflict or miscommunication.

Third, the dynamics of negotiation of norms and regulations for media use are not uniform among families. Four out of five families tried to make agreements about gadget usage times or limit the types of content accessed by children. However, only one family consistently applied a digital blackout at 8:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m. every day, with the results being positive in increasing the frequency of family conversations. Meanwhile, other families stated that the agreed rules are often violated, both by children and parents, for work or personal recreational reasons. In addition, most parents experience a dilemma between giving their children the freedom to access the Internet as a learning tool, and concerns about exposure to age-inappropriate content. The following is a thematic Table 1 of research findings summarized from interviews and observations of five informant families:

Table 1. Thematic Findings of Media Ecology in Family Communication

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Findings Description	Family (Code)
Media Space Structure	Living room becoming a personal space	Each member uses their own device while gathering in the living room.	K1, K2, K3, K5
	Television shifting function	Television is rarely used together, replaced by individual smartphones.	K1, K4
Interaction Patterns	Digital communication among family members	Everyday conversations are conducted via WhatsApp even though they live in the same house.	K1, K3, K4, K5
	Decreasing face-to-face interaction	Evening family time is mostly spent on gadgets.	K2, K3, K4
	Shifting emotional sharing to media	Children prefer expressing feelings via chat rather than speaking directly.	K4
Media Regulation	Efforts to establish gadget use rules	Four families tried to set usage schedules, but only one remained consistent.	K1, K2, K3, K5

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Findings Description	Family (Code)
	Inconsistent rule enforcement	Parents themselves often break the rules due to work demands.	K2, K5
	Gadget-free time practices	Only one family regularly implemented this and reported positive outcomes.	K3

Source: Processed by Researchers, 2025

It can be seen from the table that the media reconfiguration phenomenon is not only limited to the presence of digital technology in the domestic space, but also reshapes the structure of communication, distribution of attention, and enforcement of new norms in family life. Digital inequality in parent-child relations has also been identified, which has implications for shifting communication authority. Children are considered more capable of managing media, but this also creates a gap in supervision and control that often makes parents feel like they are losing control of their children’s digital spaces. These findings illustrate that the reconfiguration of media ecology is not only a technological phenomenon but also a socio-cultural transformation that directly affects emotional closeness and relational dynamics between family members. Although some families have begun to make adjustments, most are still in the trial-and-error phase and do not yet have a solid family communication strategy to respond to the rapid flow of digital convergence.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study show that the reconfiguration of media ecology in family communication practices in Bengkulu has significantly shifted the dynamics of domestic interactions. In the Media Ecology framework introduced by Marshall McLuhan, media is not just a channel for conveying messages, but also an environment that shapes human thought patterns, habits, and social relationship structures. McLuhan (1964) emphasized that the medium is the message, which means that the characteristics of the media itself are much more decisive in determining its impact than the content it carries (Vatreš, 2021). This is clearly reflected in the research findings: when personal digital media (smartphones, tablets, and laptops) dominate the family room, the way families communicate, coordinate, and build intimacy also shifts.

In the five informant families, the use of digital devices created a fragmented media environment. The presence of multiscreens makes face-to-face interactions increasingly rare, even when they are physically in the same room. This phenomenon supports McLuhan's concept of technological determinism, namely that new technology is not just a tool but also a force that redefines the way humans live. In one family, television is only turned on as background noise, while each member is immersed in their own gadgets (Fitria & Aditia, 2020). This reality reinforces McLuhan's thesis that digital media is a cool media, which requires active individual participation but also reduces collective experience (Jakovljević, 2021)

Neil Postman's perspective in his works teaching as a Subversive Activity and Amusing Ourselves to Death is also relevant to explain the consequences of this media ecology reconstruction. Postman argued that new media tends to facilitate instant entertainment and fast-paced information consumption, thus reducing the depth of conversation and critical reflection. Findings in the field show that teenagers in informant families spend more time on entertainment activities such as watching short videos, playing online games, or socializing on social media. Communication with parents also becomes shallower in the form of practical reminders (such as home schedules or schoolwork), rather than in-depth conversations about values, emotions, or aspirations (Ciażela & Treger, 2023). This is in line with Postman (1985), who criticized tele-visual and digital culture as a culture that entertains humans to death, where communication shifts to surface activities that are poor in substantive meaning.

The results of this study demonstrate how parents try to implement regulations on the use of digital devices. However, these regulations are often inconsistent because parents are trapped in digital dependence for work and entertainment (Prasanti, 2016). Postman emphasized that new media tends to dictate the rhythm of human life without being realized, so that media ecology creates new needs and

habits that are difficult to control. This finding is reinforced by the confession of informants, who said that even though they have a gadget-free hour rule, they often break it because of work notifications or anxiety if they do not check their phones. This situation reflects the total and invasive media environment.

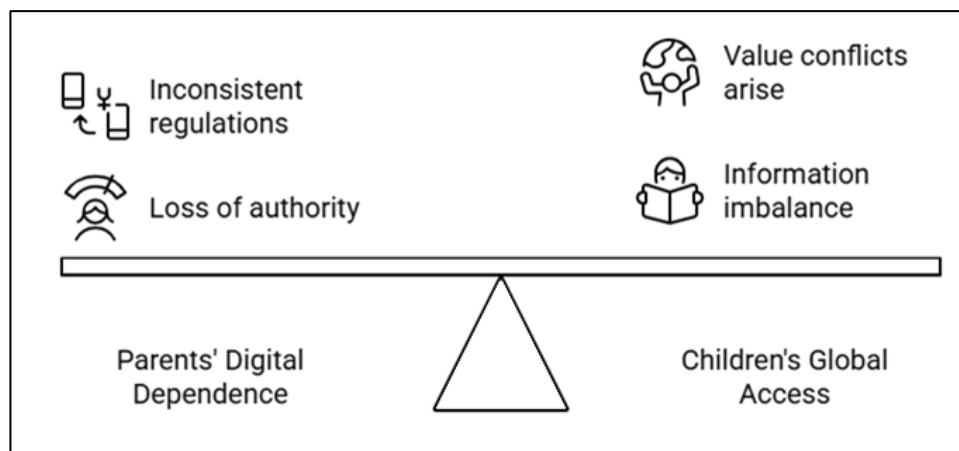


Figure 1. The Family Balancing Act: Digital Dependence vs. Global Access

Source: Processed by Researchers, 2025

McLuhan also outlined the concept of a global village, which, in the context of the informant's family, is clearly visible through massive access to information from outside the home (see Figure 1). Children easily absorb global cultural references, which often gives rise to value conflicts with their parents. In some cases, parents feel that they have lost their authority to determine which information is appropriate and which is not (Tiani et al., 2021). This problem shows that the reconfiguration of media ecology creates an imbalance in the power relations of information between generations, a dynamic McLuhan predicted as a social sensorium shift. The phenomenon of absent presence, namely physical presence without mental involvement, is also an important implication of Media Ecology theory. When each family member is busy with their gadgets, the home space is no longer a place for intimate interaction but rather just a physical parking space, while attention is completely diverted to the virtual environment. McLuhan (1964) explained that digital media blurs the boundaries of space and time, so that humans can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In this study, some parents were aware of this phenomenon but did not yet have a consistent communication strategy to overcome it (Arya et al., 2023).

In terms of consequences, the findings of this study confirm that the reconfiguration of media ecology has an impact on decreasing the frequency of high-quality face-to-face conversations. In fact, in families that have successfully implemented a digital-off schedule, children often feel bored if they do not hold their cellphones, so moments of togetherness are still overshadowed by digital anxiety. This situation supports Postman, who reminded that every communication technology is an ideology, meaning that the media is not just a device, but also brings new perspectives and behaviors that are not always in line with the values of family togetherness (Madianou & Miller, 2013).

The results of the study show that digital convergence in Bengkulu City creates a simultaneous domestic media ecology: on the one hand, facilitating practical coordination, on the other hand, eroding the depth of interpersonal interaction. As McLuhan said, every new media is both an extension and an amputation: it expands our ability to communicate but also sacrifices other dimensions of human experience. Thus, the perspective of Media Ecology Theory helps explain why family communication practices can no longer be separated from the technological infrastructure that surrounds them (Prasanti, 2016). The reconfiguration of media ecology does not happen by chance but is a logical consequence of the total and pervasive transformation of communication culture in the digital era. The findings of this study provide an important basis for formulating a more reflective media literacy strategy so that Indonesian families can be better prepared to navigate the rapid and complex changes in media ecology.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the reconfiguration of media ecology in the era of digital convergence has created significant changes in family communication practices in Bengkulu. The presence of personal digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and internet televisions forms a new pattern of interaction that is more individualistic and sporadic. The phenomenon of absent presence is one of the main consequences of family members being physically present in one space but mentally absorbed in their respective online activities. This results in a decrease in the intensity of face-to-face conversations, weakening emotional cohesion and shifting authority relations between parents and children in the process of filtering information. This finding confirms the perspective of the Media Ecology Theory put forward by Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman that media is not just a communication tool but an ecosystem that actively constructs mindsets, habits, and social values within the family.

As a recommendation, families must build a more reflective communication adaptation strategy, such as setting a gadget-free schedule, enforcing rules for using devices in shared spaces, and strengthening critical digital literacy. Education practitioners and media literacy activists are also expected to design family-based education modules that are more contextual, according to local cultural dynamics. Further research is suggested to expand the scope of the study to other areas with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as delve deeper into the psychological and emotional dimensions that emerge because of the transformation of media ecology in households. In addition, further studies can explore practical interventions that can restore the quality of interpersonal relationships, so that the meaning of family togetherness is not further eroded by the dominance of digital media.

Ethical approval

Not Applicable.

Informed consent statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy reasons.

Funding

No external funding was received for this study.

Notes on Contributors

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Rafinita Aditia is affiliated with the University of Bengkulu, specifically the Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. Her academic interests are centered on digital

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