



## Meeting at a distance: Experiences of media companies in Sweden

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### A B S T R A C T

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Solutions based on information and communication technology (ICT) have been put forward as a possible means to decrease greenhouse gases, e.g. through replacing travel. However, their success depends on how the ICT solutions are implemented and put into practice. This study sought to identify and discuss conditions for business meetings at a distance. Practices that facilitate and those that prevent meeting at a distance were examined in four Swedish media companies. Time and financial savings were identified as the main forces driving companies and individuals to consider meeting at a distance. Appropriate technology, infrastructure and confidence in using and handling the equipment were also necessary for meeting at a distance. Environmental considerations within the companies appeared to be a side-effect rather than a direct driver. Understanding such conditions is crucial in striving for change. It is suggested that companies consider the everyday practices their employees are engaged in and reflect on the broader context within which these practices take place.

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### 1. Introduction

Environmental issues in general and climate change in particular are currently on the agenda within communities and organisations. In order to reach targets on decreased levels of greenhouse gases and limit climate change, considerable efforts are needed and all sectors in society will need to consider possible changes. Solutions based on information and communication technology (ICT) have been put forward as a possible means to decrease greenhouse gases in other sectors, e.g. through dematerialisation and replacing travel (e.g. [15,17,36]). However, potential drawbacks and rebound effects have also been raised (e.g. [2,17,27]). As Berkhout and Hertin ([4], p. 916) state, “whether intelligent systems, products and services will reduce the environmental impact of the economy depends largely on how they are designed, used and supported by transport, energy and other systems”.

One important sector of society is the transport sector, which was responsible for 20% of energy-related global greenhouse gas emissions in 2004 ([19], p. 80). More or less all other sectors are in some way dependent on transport and travel. Thus, ICT solutions which may replace transport or travel may be of interest to many in their efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, as noted above, the possibility for achieving potential environmental benefits is dependent on how the ICT solutions are implemented and put into practice.

Using telecommunication technologies instead of personal travel for business meetings has become a prevalent alternative for different reasons. From time to time, the complexity of travel, the stress and strains involved, the time consumed, transportation costs, environmental concerns or, as recently, the cloud of volcanic ash hanging over parts of Europe with accompanying flight cancellations, play an important role in why people would like to or should meet at a distance. Using a telephone is one way of having a meeting at a distance. However, in this paper we focus on solutions that also provide a visual (re)presentation of participants

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and surroundings. Such technology for meeting at a distance in all its forms involves the use of audio, video and computer-networking technology. They are becoming increasingly available for people, in the sense that various applications provide communication and collaboration facilities and some of them at least are low cost (e.g. Skype is 'free of charge' for those who already have a computer and employ a network operator).

Even though business meetings at a distance have gained popularity and are now used more often, the success of such meetings is not a straight-forward matter. The aim of this paper is to identify and discuss conditions for business meetings at a distance. We take four Swedish media companies as our analytical point of departure in order to start examine practices that facilitate meeting at a distance, but also those that prevent it. We study employees' statements about meeting at a distance and how the meetings are promoted and managed within the companies. However, it is not only the activity, the technology and the physical environment that are important here, but also the social and organisational conventions that provide the 'infrastructure' through which the practice gains influence as a particular form of action. This analytical approach allowed us to explore the relationships between the meeting and the individual experiences of it, as well as (institutionalised) social conventions, values, structures and so on. By so doing, we approached the 'conditions' for meeting at a distance and the social actions that are embedded in, and reproduced through, social practices.

## 2. Background

For the past twenty years, the media industry has been undergoing some major changes due to the emergence of the digital age in society at large. Digitisation has affected the production, distribution and consumption of media, as well as the media products themselves. The development of ICT solutions, which is of course still proceeding and expected to last for many years to come, has naturally also changed the work situation for everyone employed in the media industry.

As a consequence of the digitisation of media, printed newspapers are under pressure. As readers and advertisers are largely turning to digital media, newspapers all around the world are suffering from falling circulation and declining advertising revenues. Newspapers have not yet been able to build a strong digital business, since the traditional business models of newspapers do not work very well in the digital media context. As a consequence, the competition has been difficult to meet [1].

According to media researcher Picard [26], the new media situation has been met by cutting costs and making production more efficient. However, Picard argues that the newspaper industry has been reluctant to change; little action has been taken to expand markets, reach new audiences or provide new services and products as a response to this changing media landscape.

The ownership situation of Swedish media companies has changed considerably over recent years. There are many examples of purchases and takeovers, whereby Swedish media companies are consolidated. Smaller newspaper

companies have merged into groups, or have been bought up by larger companies. These kinds of business mergers can benefit the media companies in many different ways. They can increase large-scale production and allow management and financial services to be coordinated, as well as the production of content-specific photo pools and more timeless articles, plus technical support and printing facilities. The challenge is to successfully manage the larger company over large geographical distances. Coordination and communication require new meeting and travel habits. Management teams are becoming increasingly aware of time and cost factors, and to some extent the environmental impact of travelling to and from meetings.

This brings the question of alternatives to business travel onto the company agenda. The focus in this paper is on business meetings as a way to communicate between employees within and across business corporations. Business meetings make up a recurring and essential part of the working day and may be regarded as a significant means of creating and maintaining work activities and routines in a workplace. Business meetings are usually, but not always, formal in character. They seem to be planned, organised, structured and/or regulated practices that are announced beforehand. They are activities that are carried out in companies and organisations for various reasons. At least implicitly, such meetings stress that there are issues to be discussed, information to be shared and decisions to be made. The meetings can be short or long and engage any number of people. These meetings are normally carried out in a certain meeting area, where everyone can gather and usually sit down around a table. The meeting facilities often employ special forms of fixed equipment, such as a whiteboard and/or writing paper for note-taking.

When audio and video technology is used to facilitate a business meeting at a distance, this is referred to as a virtual meeting or videoconferencing. There are various types of equipment that provide connections to enable a range of mediated communication services for people in their work and/or to enable them to be together at a distance (e.g. [5],[20]). Equipment commercially available on the market for meeting at a distance includes desktop solutions, videoconferencing facilities, and so called telepresence solutions that involve cameras and microphones placed and embedded in office environments, with special attention paid to the use of space and lighting and to meeting practices. In this paper we use the term *mediated meetings* for situations where meeting at a distance is facilitated using various technological solutions.

A range of previous studies have examined how mediated meetings are implemented and used in practice. Earlier studies of e.g. desktop videoconferencing cover measurements of task performance, user satisfaction, task completion, communication times, behaviour, quality of output and time taken to complete tasks [12], as well as the turn-taking process [35], to name but a few. Arnfalk [2] addressed the potential of virtual communication as a substitute for travel. He identified possible driving forces and barriers for virtual business meetings to replace business travel, pointing out both situational and contextual factors. It is important to identify cost-effective solutions for enabling virtual meetings. The contextual barriers found to date have

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