

Mediated modes of communication and its impact to society

Sociology, Communication



As we bask into the Information Age, human communication is ongoing and transforming to become more interactive and accessible. As we all know, communication is dynamic, ongoing, ever-changing, and continuous. Simple communication entails the message being sent and the receiver perceives and accepts the message. Communication models find their origins in Greek antiquity. Aristotle recognized the speaker, speech, and audience as communication components.

Five hundred years before Christ, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, observed that “ a man (or woman) can never step into the river twice. The man (or woman) is different and so is the river” (Gortner et al. 1997, p. 36). Change and continuity are intertwined—as men or women step into the river—in a process of actions which flow through the ages. Communication is a process and flows like a stream through time.

It is indubitable that technology has brought about gargantuan impacts to the past modes of communication, be it formal and informal. In an era of faxes, computers, and photocopying machines, communication challenges will emerge that are even more complex, demanding, and technical. Moreover, cell phones, e-mail, and telephone answering machines contribute to the narrowing of the gulf between formal and informal communication distinctions.

Anthropologists already have researched on the relationship of conventional forms of verbal interaction and those mediated by new technologies such as the Internet, satellite transmissions, and cell phones. Crystal (2001) had revealed that the Internet constituted a new frontier in human social

interaction on par with the inventions of the telephone and telegraph, and even print and broadcast technologies.

Scholars of language use, language change, and ideologies of language must surely explore and interrogate the effects of these technologies on traditional modes of communication, the impact of our new capacity to communicate instantly anywhere in the world, and the meaning of language contact as it is taking place in cyberspace. Most of these technologies, notwithstanding constant new advances in computer-mediated graphics, are text or voice based. Thus, “ if the Internet is a revolution, therefore, it is likely to be a linguistic revolution” (Crystal 2001, p. viii).

Many observers allege that the Internet is changing society. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the novelty of the new digital media, there is little agreement about what those changes are. It is believed that it is important for sociologists to address these issues for three reasons. First, the medium’s rapid growth offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for scholars to test theories of technology diffusion and media effects during the early stages of a new medium's diffusion and institutionalization.

Second, the Internet is unique because it integrates both different modalities of communication (reciprocal interaction, broadcasting, individual reference-searching, group discussion, person/machine interaction) and different kinds of content (text, video, visual images, audio) in a single medium. This versatility renders plausible claims that the technology will be implicated in many kinds of social change, perhaps more deeply than television or radio.

Finally, choices are being made--systems developed, money invested, laws passed, regulations promulgated--that will shape the system's technical and normative structure for decades to come. Many of these choices are based on behavioral assumptions about how people and the Internet interact (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001, p. 307).

As these technological innovations are revolutionizing information and entertainment delivery, these technology-mediated modes of communication have affected the transformation of people's social lives and behaviors, even political institutions and the role of citizens within them.

As people argue that the new technology of short messaging system (SMS), email, online discussions, on-demand information, and web-powered information diffusion and interest aggregation will lead to a more informed, engaged, and influential mass public. With this, will we live in a better informed and connected, more engaged and participatory society—or in a society of lonely ex-couch potatoes glued to computer screens, whose human contacts are largely impersonal and whose political beliefs are easily manipulated, relying on the icons of a wired or wireless society? Fact is that, Erbring and Lutz (2005) have indicated that when people spend more time using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment.

They cited a study that this effect is noticeable even with people using just 2-5 Internet hours per week; and it rises substantially for those spending more than 10 hours per week, of whom up to 15 percent report a decrease in social activities. Even more striking is the fact that Internet users spend

much less time talking on the phone to friends and family: the percentage reporting a decrease exceeds 25 percent—although it is unclear to what extent this represents a shift to email even in communicating with friends and family or a technical bottleneck due to a single phone line being preempted by Internet use.

Because of the accessibility of the new modes of communication, people have used these as tools to avoid confrontation that is emphasized in face-to-face communication. In fact, in UAE and in Malaysia, cell phones have been used to end marriages by SMS-ing “Talaq, Talaq, Talaq” (“Divorce, Divorce, Divorce”). But then, this is not the first time technology has been used in officially terminating a relationship. Earlier, it was telephonic, postal and telegram divorces; now there are divorce via e-mail and SMS.

Technology has changed the way people are courting, getting married and yes, also the way they are separating. “If people are meeting and dating on the Internet, why not divorces?” says Anuradha Pratap, principal of Al-Ameen Management College in Bangalore, India. “If weddings can take place using technology, why not divorce?” asked Ayesha Banu, a Bangalore resident. “There were telephone weddings nearly two decades ago. It’s only the technology that has changed, everything else has remained the same” (Kiran, 2 June 2003).

On the other hand, Halliday (1990) noted that “when new demands are made on language ... [and when] we are making language work for us in ways it never had to do before, it will have to become a different language in

order to cope" (p. 82). It is arguable that technology-based media present new demands which have the potential of promoting variations in language use. Perhaps, the demands are not novel in itself, but it is rather the blurring, the amalgamation, of previous demands which may result in linguistic variations.

Take, for instance, computer communication systems which have placed demands, often associated with spoken language, on the production of written language. This reassignment is most observable in synchronous computer-mediated communication such as MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), MUDs (Multi-User Domain), and Chat. While the language takes on a written form, it is constrained by temporal limitations which require immediate responses.

Conversely, this type of synchronous communication, which can be considered an essentially oral language (Collot & Belmore, 1996), is also constrained by norms -- including spelling and grammar norms -- most often associated with written language. For example in SMS, people usually shorten their message to hasten the process. Like sending the message "Are you going to the party tonight?" would be shortened to "R U GOING 2 THE PARTY TONYT?" Indeed, grammar and spelling would be gravely affected, just to facilitate the convenience of a faster communication process.

However, from a perspective of language change multimodal forms of communication, such as emails, text messages and chat rooms, are

essentially new forms of communication. As used here the term 'multimodal' refers to the way that texts use devices from a range of different communication systems at the same time. So, for example, you can send an email message to six of your friends simultaneously; previously you could only do this through speaking to them as a group. In other words writing takes on a characteristic which once belonged to speech only (Beard, 2004, p. 44).

Emails are usually message exchanges between a pair of named individuals communicating on a single issue, chat-groups usually involve several people: they can be anonymous or use a pseudonym; their communication can be of an indefinite length; and they can cover a wide range of topics. Crystal (2001) uses the term 'asynchronous' to describe groups where 'postings' are placed on 'boards' and 'synchronous' to describe groups who 'chat' in real time. The terms 'email' and 'text message' both suggest a written form, but the terms 'chat-room/ chat-group' suggest a form of talk; a form of talk - chat - that is traditionally seen as social rather than serious in its content.

Although the terminology that labels new communication genres draws upon the traditional binary opposites of speaking/writing (mail/ chat), it is not very helpful to see such texts as products of these opposites. Instead each of the genres has its own unique methods of communication, and then each of the texts produced within the genre has its own specific context. So, for example, the idea of turn-taking, which is crucial to many kinds of vocalized talk, is achieved in very different ways in chat-groups.

The acts of reading, thinking, replying and sending the reply, which is not necessarily received instantly, is being undertaken by each of the participants at the same time. This inevitably leads to a dislocation of the exchange in a way that does not happen with emails and text messages. Yet, participants within the process are well able to manage this complicated exercise in pragmatics.

Another aspect of pragmatics involves the fact that whereas in face-to-face group conversation your presence is still registered, even if you are silent, this is more problematic in chat-groups. As Crystal (2001) notes: “ in chatgroups silence is ambiguous: it may reflect a deliberate withholding, a temporary inattention, or a physical absence (without signing off)”.

Indeed, technology is crucial in the development of the information highway that would link every home to a fiber-optic network over which voice, data, television, and other services would be transmitted. The internet’s architecture is determined by an informal group of U. S.-based software and computer engineers. The internet’s global scope and electronic commerce’s growth make its management an international policy issue. Analysts and government believe a hands-off approach is best (Cukier 1998, p. 39-41).

People and organizations determine the course of the future, not computers. As a form of communication, the internet can be used by individuals, private corporations, and government agencies for good or bad, but it cannot influence the direction our society chooses to take. The internet only reflects the society that created it. The development and use of the telegraph and

telephone provide a definitive pattern for how the newest form of networked communication, the internet, will be used in the future (Nye, Fall 1997).

The lack of accountability and civility have increased as the anonymity in U. S. society has increased, states newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman. She cites the anonymous zones of talk radio and cyberspace among the fox holes for people who want to say anything and everything with impunity (Goodman, 5 September 1996).

Despite the downside of the information highway, internet access has made communication between local government and citizens much easier nationwide. Public records access, personnel postings, permit applications, and legislative updates are available online in dozens of cities and counties (Bowser January 1998, p. 36).

The technology of the internet may afford the masses access to much more information and many more options. So, internet technology is neither evil nor good. " Thanks to the internet and satellite TV, the world is being wired together technologically, but not socially, politically, or culturally," concluded New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman (12 May 2001). " We are now seeing and hearing one another faster and better, but with no corresponding improvement in our ability to learn from, or understand, one another. So integration, at this stage, is producing more anger than anything else."

The new modes of communication educate people faster than any previous technology the world has known. However, the internet can just as easily infiltrate the minds of millions with lies, half-truths, and hatreds. Friedman

(12 May 2001) deemed that “ the internet, at its ugliest, is just an open sewer: an electronic conduit for untreated, unfiltered information.” The internet and satellite TV may inflame emotions and cultural biases, resulting in less understanding and tolerance. Government programs are built on political consensus. Legislation is enacted for the long term. Compromises are based on education, exchanges, diplomacy, and human interaction.

However, due to the lack of face-to-face context and the lack of interactional coherence in e-mail and SMS, people need to be more explicit and concise in order to make their message as well as the purpose transparent to their audience, especially in initiated, not responsive, messages. If the message is not explicit enough, the receiver may not be able to provide an optimal response, or the message may turn into a lengthy sequenced exchange before a desired response is obtained.

Thus, language use and structure are greatly affected but the intention remains the same. With the fear of the deterioration of language through these new technologies, it is only right that people should still be educated appropriately with regards to the correct structure and use language, so that they will not be confused when they utilize the normal modes of communication. Technology should enhance how society behaves and interact and not the other way around.

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