Are we living in an age of communication media essay

We live in an age of communication. Communication is the problem and the opportunity addressed by a great deal of technology design and development. But because communication is an interpersonal and a social phenomenon, technology issues must be approached with a particular appreciation of human and social factors.

The organization of societies today requires effective global communication between diverse and far-flung social and cultural systems. Only through technical mediation are we able to maintain the flows of commerce and information required by the world-wide interdependence.

Technologies of communication become the means of production, or production format, of communication. Their use in communication is not transparent. In fact, technologies introduce new contingencies and context into communication. Analysis of communication and interaction in society today needs to account for the transformative effects of mediation.

Technologies are rational by design, and in use, they rationalize human activity. Human communication and interaction, however, are neither rational nor designed. The difference between the technical and the human shows up in technology at what we call the " interface." In our case, we will consider this not just a user interface, but a social interface. It is social because it translates communication (messages, content) while also facilitating the subtle and tacit exchange of interpersonal acknowledgments. The latter, though they don't " say" anything, reproduce our relations.

Social interface issues generally involve ambiguities of communication, intent, outcome and so on. These ambiguities result from technology's

mediation of practices in which individuals are normally able to address and resolve ambiguities as they come up. It's at the social interface where the distinction between communication's content and participants' relationships becomes an issue, because the technology that's good for transmitting content may not be good for reproducing relationships.

The implicit purpose of communication is to motivate a listener (or recipient) to do, or understand, something communicated. Thus the use of technology extends and limits the very power of communication. It extends our ability to access and connect, but limits our ability to communicate and bind. Repercussions can be seen at all levels of society, from individual and interpersonal to macro-social.

Our study of communication technologies will borrow from pragmatics, which is branch of linguistics that emphasizes the " how" of what we say (in addition to the " what"). A pragmatics of mediated interaction would thus emphasize the production and performance of mediated communication and interaction, focusing on the practices developed around connectivity technologies.

To function, technologies must map to human action just as humans must grasp and relate through technology. The greater the transparency of one domain to the other, and the greater the transitivity of actions from one through the other, the more effective their interface.

From the perspective of the network, we function as nodes through which communication flows. In short, we're transitive to the net's communication

flows, and our participation (our availability and presence in the network) is as important to it as it is to us.

All experience is situated in time and place. But communications technologies lift communication and interaction from the here and now that grounds face-to-face interaction. This dislocation of temporality from its situatedness in the world is one of the fundamental operations of mediation.

Indeed, communications technologies are as much about time and temporality as they are about distance and space. Synchronous media permit direct communication in real time. Asynchronous media permit communication only through use of a recording medium (e. g. text), and not in real time. Both intervene in the temporality of our relations.

Because communications media enable us to stretch our relationships across time and space (by framing the possibilities of our interactions), they inform and even produce our proximity to one another. These proximities involve rhythms of interaction, activity coordination, ways of communicating, and ways of offering or protecting our availability to each other. They put us into a kind of virtual immediacy with respect to our access and presence to each other. We become virtually equidistant to one another.

Proximity, commonly measured as a physical field in which persons are distributed in space, also unfolds temporally, as duration. We can think of proximity as a distribution of relations in a spatial sense, and an intensification in a temporal sense.

Unlike physical proximity, whose distances are extensive, or spatial, the distances that characterize temporal proximity are intensive. They can be described as having qualities (not quantities) of speed, duration, acceleration, rhythm, and synchronization.

To this end, a critical part of our inquiry into the impact of communication technology rests on the assumption that we, as individuals, sense and pursue some level of synchrony in our interactions with one another. We will argue that it is through a temporal synthesis, and not just through understanding made possible by language, that action binds us to one another. It is in creating and producing shared time and times that interaction is also a coordination of action. And it is in this domain, this temporal proximity if you will, that we experience the profound depth of spontaneous social experiences and the relations that emerge from them.

Our presence availability to others for interaction is informed by possibilities of communication and interaction with them. Technology becomes a means of production for interpersonal communication and interaction because it enables communication regardless of spatial (and temporal) distances. Connective technologies radically transform our presence and presence availability to others in relational and temporal terms.

Language occupies a privileged position in the co-production of intersubjective experiences. When people speak, their proximity in physical terms becomes a proximity in relational terms also. This is because speech not only serves as a means of expression (statements of fact, for example): speech produces effects that bind us.

These effects are described by sociologists and linguists as the product of a special case of language use called speech acts. Speech act theory offers descriptions of the ways in which speaking is doing and speech is action. The actions may only " occur" as mutual understanding reached by those in conversation, and produce no material consequence; or they may accompany physical activity also (such as in transactions involving material exchange, the coordination of task-based activities, and so on).

It is through linguistic exchange that people reproduce the normative basis of society. In other words, society is reproduced and maintained through speech-based performances. These performances, though colored by individual style of expression and delivery, embed the normative claims " belonging" to a society at a given time. Actors unwittingly embed these claims in their own use of language as speech.

Speech act theory further argues that these performances bind actors to one another through their mutual understanding of the claims embedded in their exchanges. To accept the premises of speech act theory, in other words, is to view society as a system of meanings that have claims upon individuals, but which is only maintained through their use of language.

It would seem that a view of communication in which the binding of actors to one another is a linguistic phenomenon, and the effect of which is to reproduce society and nothing less, would place the mediation of communication in a position of critical importance.

The consequences of mediation are many, but among them are some of direct significance for a communication-oriented view of society. First is that

speech act theory and its related theoretical perspectives tend to assume face-to-face interaction and performance. This opens up several lines of concern.

First, is the bracketing of physical co-presence, which means the elimination of access to visual and physical cues, or what are described as " facework." Mediation eliminates the physicality of interaction and thus the countless non-linguistic gestural cues we provide through facework, body language, intonation, and so on-what are also called " paralinguistic markers."

Second, is the loss of physical context. " Situated" (co-present) interactions provide actors with access to contextual cues and meanings belonging to location. Our interactions are informed by where we are (physically) and how that place is coded (culturally). By reflecting the expectations that characterize a place, we help to maintain it.

Third, is the integration of space and time. All human experience unfolds in a here and now. But the " here" that characterizes mediated interactions has neither place nor visibility. The virtuality of interaction through technology indeed creates a new kind of experience, but not as a form of " cyberspace." Rather than look for spatial dimensions in virtual interaction, we will argue that it's concepts of temporality and time that help us to understand this transformation.

The point of this digression was to show that mediation involves phenomena on several levels simultaneously. Our use of technology for communication transforms not only our interactions, but also their role in reproducing and maintaining relationships that persist through space and time. To

summarize, then, the bracketing of the physical and co-present performance of linguistically-embedded interaction by technologies of communication mediates: 1) the face work of interaction, 2) the contextuality of situation, 3) and the intrinsic relationship of action to time and place.

Our inquiry into mediation of communication will take the shape of an investigation of the transformative effects of mediation, and for several reasons. These run from the micro to the macro, or from the impact technology has on the user and his or her immediate experience (or, the user experience) of communicating through technology, or primary effects, to the macro, or what we might call the secondary effects of mediation.