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Demonstrating Loss of Control Over Technology: A Narrative Criticism

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Demonstrating Loss of Control Over Technology: A Narrative
Criticism

BY

David P. Farlow

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This study focuses on how individuals through their talk about computer mediated technology demonstrate a loss of control over that technology. Three separate computer mediated communication classes were involved in this study through the use of autoethnographies. The students in all three classes were asked at the beginning of the semester to keep field notes on their experiences with the technology. At the end of the semester the students were to summarize and report their experiences.

Because of the qualitative nature of the data, a narrative criticism of the stories students told about their experiences seemed to provide the most valuable insight. Narratives or stories provide clues to an individual's subjective interpretation of the world around them. Through stories people create and sustain their world giving the rhetorical critic a means through which they can look into an individuals perceived reality.

The results of this study reveal that people often surrender control to technology unaware of the larger social implications. They demonstrate this through the way they talk about technology and the future.

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Demonstrating Loss of Control to Technology: A Narrative**Criticism****Chapter 1****Introduction**

Solomon lamented, "There is nothing new under the sun" and it seems that Jean Baudrillard shares his nihilistic view. Baudrillard sounding much like a contemporary of Solomon captures his thoughts in the term "postmodernism" as a response to his anguish over the failure of modernity to give life meaning. This is borne of Baudrillard's postmodernist world where all art and presumably theory, politics, and individuals can do is to recombine and play with the forms already produced (Kellner, 1988). However limited in scope this social theory may be, it does resonate with a very human need to know and understand the present from a collective past (Gronbeck, 1975). Unfortunately, those who frame the possibilities for the future on achievements of the past limit the idea of an expanding evolutionary present and future. This framing the present on the past stream of consciousness colors our historical literary world to the degree of saturation. It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution with its' subsequent

economic and social crises that the preindustrial world began to think in terms of the radically "new."

Technological possibilities for humanity and the need to maintain some form of social control soon began to dominate modern thinking. The new and complex industrial processes required the development of new means of control (Teich, 1993), which has taken the form of the Computer Mediated Context. A natural evolution according to James Beniger, "Each new technological innovation extends the processes that sustains social life, thereby increasing the need for control and for improved control technology" (Teich, 1993).

The challenge of this work will be to demonstrate how the pervasive influence of a new phenomena, the computer mediated context, is serving as a means of societal control by those who control the technology. Technology for the purpose of this study is contextualized as the means to produce, store, control and disseminate information. While it can be argued that technology, by nature, is inanimate, that does not render it a neutral force. Technology is never a neutral force: it orders our behavior, redefines our values, reconstitutes our lives in ways we can't always predict sometimes with a force that feels revolutionary

(Slouka, 1995; Pavlik & Dennis, 1993). As long as men and women know how to work the technology they can define their lives in predictable ways. It is when they lose control over technology, or are not granted the rights over personal and private information that is stored in the technology, that serious consideration should be given to the consequences of the loss of those rights. History is resplendent with examples of the subversive nature absolute power has over unrestrained individuals. Kings and queens secured their kingdoms for centuries by keeping the masses ignorant through the control and exchange of information. One can only imagine what the world would be like today if despots from days past had the technological capacity to control information such as is available today. While technology and the control of information have never been synonymous the computer mediated context has inextricably wed the two.

Francis Bacon articulated this best: greater knowledge (empirical) leads to greater control (Borchert & Stewart, 1982). Technology is a science predicated upon empirical knowledge that demands continuing expansion of a base of knowledge and most people are not predisposed toward that end. The ever-widening continuum of knowledge is

increasingly being controlled by an increasingly smaller and smaller technocracy. A growing number of people are concerned that control is being given over to this "Technocracy" which according to Jacques Ellul is defined as a "regime" in which "power is exercised by technicians" (Ellul, 1968). If one accepts the foregoing premise then a larger issue remains. Technology (CMC) exists in a human context and is based upon some set of values, which must not be overlooked when it is used (Murphy, Mickanus, & Pilotta, 1986). Recently, the emergence of the Internet has complicated this issue even further. All social and geographic boundaries have been erased as information flows freely around the world. Everyone who has access to a computer and the Internet can engage in the exchange, however, access to and the control of information should not be confused. In other words, people now have access only to each other and limited access to some public records. Those who control the technology, however, have access to everyone plus any and all private information, political and religious affiliations, medical, financial or otherwise.

What is interesting is that the computer technology of today was unimagined just a few years ago. The growth of computer technology can be traced through five generations that are defined in terms of their processing and storage units.

First-generation computers (circa 1944-1959) used vacuum tubes-the same kind of tubes found in antique radios-in their processing units. Second-generation computers (1959-1964) replaced the tubes with transistors, tiny triple-decker "sandwiches" of special materials whose ability to conduct electricity varies according to the nature of the electrical current applied to it. In the third-generation computers (1964-1972), integrated circuits, which had thousands of electrical components on a single computer chip, served as the processing and memory components. Fourth-generation computers (1972 to the present) use very large scale integration, so that tens of thousands, even millions, of components can be squeezed onto a tiny chip. The computers of the fifth-generation (1979 to the present) use multiple processing units capable of working simultaneously in

parallel fashion on a single computing problem (Staubhaar & LaRose, 1996).

Today things have changed. Whereas the first generation of computers lasted some fifteen years, now the technology changes every six months. The next generation of computers envisioned will exhibit artificial intelligence that has the capacity to mimic and replicate the physiological structure of the human brain (Staubhaar & LaRose, 1996).

Keeping pace with the rise of technology has been the personal computer penetration. In 1994 about a third of all U.S. homes had personal computers. In the very near future personal computers in the home will be as common as TV's. The difference is that this virtual reality the world is logging on to has the potential for both greater good and greater evil. A major problem is that due to the vast amount of information available to the public via the computer, it is nearly impossible to determine right from wrong or good from bad. For example, an online search in the area of welfare would provide links to numerous examples of fraud, waste and misuse. However, there would also be links to the various government programs dedicated to helping families in need along with vital statistics proving the overall success of welfare programs. The public

is left trying to decide who and what to believe.

Researchers are left trying to figure out what effect is this having on society and communication.

In the communication discipline focus in the area of computer mediated communication has been to study the effects of computer mediation on communication. Some of that research will be covered here to explore the limitations of those kinds of studies and investigate the possibilities of this particular study. The computer-mediated context of communication includes text and graphics and the actual messages produced therein. While the computer is a new phenomena the tendency by researchers is to use what we know about face-to-face communication and apply that understanding to the current context. Results may indicate significant cognitive processing changes and yet, miss something bigger. For example, Stratus and McGrath's were seeking to determine if the medium used for group tasks mattered in terms of productivity. The medium matters in terms of productivity but, using the computer mediated context may be changing more than productivity levels among users (Stratus & McGrath, 1994).

Other communication researchers used various methods but each was a variation on previous communication research

findings. For example, one finding was that mediated communication reduces social cues which, "help parties regulate interaction, express information, and monitor feedback from others. A reduction in cues such as eye contact, head nods, and voice inflection creates disruptions in the flow of communication" (Argyle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968). While this may be worthy for a quantitative analysis, it does not explain why the disruptions are not discouraging communication in a mediated context. While there are several factors that contribute to the issue at hand, the accelerated rate at which CMC is reinventing itself makes it a burdensome topic to assess (Adams, 1997).

This study may be better framed in the context of Michele Jackson's approach to the subject. Jackson suggests that we must, as communication scholars, ask ourselves if computer mediated communication is producing new communicative phenomena. (Jackson, 1996). Although Jackson makes no attempt to answer this question the article makes a fine distinction between technology and context (p.230). This distinction is crucial when seeking to establish cause from effect. It would be difficult to deny the influence of the mediated context, but few agree as to which is the precursor to change.

As Guisepe & Galimberti (1998) point out, our social context is changing as traditional influences lose ground. Especially in younger people, the influence of social context on the construction of identity is beginning to wane as reference communities like the family, school, or church, which in the past anchored social contexts in shared sets of rules, gradually lose their grip. The new media may be accelerating the dissolution of traditional rule-based social contexts and that this dissolution is itself draining the media of content and meaning (Guisepe & Galimberti, 1998). How we navigate into this emergent global village depends greatly upon our understanding of the dynamic social changes ahead. "A worthwhile challenge is to find how CMC properties interact with social and cognitive factors in predictable and potentially controllable ways, leading to variable behaviors and judgments. Such research will in the long run, afford us instruction not just in choosing whether or not to use CMC but to plan and design CMC applications with social engineering factors as they might most effectively combine" (Walther, 1997).

Studies trying to establish the social and cognitive factors reveal some interesting yet puzzling results. Often

drawn from an educational setting, researcher's findings are somewhat predictable mostly because they are predicated upon what is already known about face to face communication. For example, the voluminous data on communication apprehension when applied to the mediated context yields similar results. "A study commissioned by Dell Computers concluded that 55% of Americans suffer from some degree of technophobia. Research by Rosen and Weil estimates that nearly five million college students in this country suffer from some type of technophobia" (Scott & Rickwell, 1997). What is not accounted for is the exponential growth of use among not only college students but also society in spite of the widespread apprehension. The apprehension may be minimized by novelty offering "new" communicative opportunities, the prospect of which transcends any apprehension for use. Although the reason cited by students who don't use CMC falls into the category of utility. It appears that that students who shy away from CMC view it as an inadequate form of interaction and not as a valuable learning tool (Hacker, L. & Wignall, D, 1997).

This is changing as Coombs (1993) study shows students find that CMC liberates from social constraints. "While a few participants complained that the lack of face-to-face

communication was disconcerting, more said they found it liberating. People felt they were being judged on their comments and not on physical external features. "The everyday communication barriers are avoided," commented one student at the end of the course. He added, "Whether this barrier is being hearing impaired, being Black, White, or Green, being shy or not a good speaker, or what have you, these communication gaps and many others are bridged." This insight occurred in the context of a course on African American History, and the discussion on the computer was much more open and relaxed than it was for these same students in the classroom" (Coombs, 1993). This same positive disposition toward the mediated context was found by Baker, Hale, and Gifford (1997) who found that students enrolled in courses that employed well-crafted computer mediated instructional materials generally achieved higher scores on summary examinations, learn their lessons in less time, like their classes more and develop positive attitudes toward the subject matter they are learning. An alternative explanation might consider the notion of positive user acceptance based upon familiarity from repeated use. This is suggested in studies that correlate

predictability of use with frequency of use (Perse et al., 1992).

In order to situate the focus of this study properly consideration must be given to previously mentioned current CMC research trends in the communication discipline. There appears to be no shortage of interest on the subject as is evidenced. Interestingly, the studies are limited in relation to assessing the broader issue of advancing technology and social control. Relative to this domain of inquiry few communication scholars are asking critical questions about the control of information. It is possible that we are already expressing through our discourse a loss of control over our lives to a technology that produces, controls, manages and disseminates "our" information. Consequently, this control is being shifted into fewer and fewer hands. Historically there is no precedent which can be studied to shed light on the current phenomena. While this study seeks to explore and shed light on how people are talking about technology it is only a start.

Having established several of the issues associated with CMC we can now turn to consider a more critical frame. To adequately survey the landscape and find meaning in our current situation I must turn from the objective realm of

what, to why. Here is the place to cross the stream of thought into the colloquial world of rhetorical criticism. It is in this realm that the endless lists of behaviors and statistics are given meaning and the why questions are explored.

Chapter 2

Methodology

While the mediated context lends itself to multiple interdisciplinary approaches for study, Walter Fisher's work on narrative offers an approach that works well with the socially constructed reality of the computer-mediated context. Since humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning they continually share stories about the mediated context (Fisher, 1978). Every culture perpetuates its history values, beliefs and traditions through the stories it tells. Heroes embody the desired values they hold dear and villains model the undesirable traits that exist within the world. Yet, even though the stories may be fictions in most cases, there is an element of truth that gives the story salience. In the same way that a source of an argument must be tied to some credibility, the narrative contains threads of reality the culture uses to evaluate truth. This is what Fisher meant by narrative fidelity - the ability for aspects of the story to resonate with people's lived experiences.

Narratives help people to shape their perspective of the world. One example of this is how most cultures in the world across time have some type of afterlife narrative

that gives meaning to death. As the narrative is retold the storyteller must at times make arguments through the narrative to explain current contradictions or competing worldviews on the subject of life after death.

Narratives also weave together tales (arguments) that appeal to not only the mind but the heart as well. In much the same way argument governed by stricter rules, considers the heart and mind as inseparable (Ehninger, 1968). Therefore, in order to be the most effective, narratives must appeal to both faculties. The narrative must also have a real life relation to the world whereby people can test and apply their reasons and evidences against reality.

In narrative theory, which is a theory of symbolic actions-words and or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live create and interpret them (Fisher, 1984), the stories we tell each other about the computer mediated context have gained salience rather quickly. Those who can manipulate the technology or engage in the context are conferred expert status by the uninformed and inexperienced. They are the priestly figures in fictive world sustained through narration. Appropriately fitted to the changing nature of technology, narrative would provide

the critic a lens to view the progression of change in our stories about the medium. Harrold Innis (1972) was among the first to theorize about the impact of media on human thought and expression. He noted that a change in the type of medium logically implies a differing type of critical analysis thus making it difficult for subsequent civilizations to understand each other (Haynes, 1989). Even so, this great divide which can be imposed upon co-existing subcultures deserves a closer look.

It would also be a valuable endeavor to situate talk about the computer-mediated context in the realm of "the people". In McGees' article explicating how "the people" are socially constructed he posits the concept of process, which offers an explanation for the phenomena presented in this essay. "The more important point, however, is that "the people" are more process than phenomena. That is, they are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals" (McGee, 1975). Therefore, populations become constitutive creations resplendent with their own values, beliefs, and ways of enacting life. Communication creates and sustains the predominant ideology reflecting whatever

"truths" the people have accepted. Talking about technology then becomes part of the constitutive process both shaping and reflecting lived experiences.

In consideration of the previously mentioned approaches there is still something missing that renders the subject of this essay too abstract. Traditional rhetorical criticism does not sufficiently frame the computer-mediated context for critical analysis. My feeling is that of McGee when he addressed this issue concerning fragmentation. "I think we can reconcile traditional modes of analysis with the so-called post-modern condition by understanding that our first job as professional consumers of discourse is inventing a text suitable for criticism" (McGee, 1990).

To this end I will attempt, through constituting the computer-mediated context as visual rhetoric (Charland, M. 1972; Foss, S. K. 1986; Haines, H. W. 1986), to answer the following question:

- RQ1: Do people through their talk about technology demonstrate a loss of control over technology?
- RQ2: Does the discourse change based on knowledge level?

There are some who would argue that we are simply developing a collective fantasy (Boarmann, E. G. 1969; Boarmann, E. G. 1985) about computers and that socially we are merely adapting to information technology much like we did the wheel. An important distinction to make is that the impact of the computer-mediated context is perceived by much of society, as beyond objectification, there are no agreed upon effects. The linguistically created rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) is the exigency giving rise to the socially constructed and perpetuated rhetorical vision. I will ground this research in a view that extrapolates the psychological irregularities that bear upon the rhetorical transactions, and draw heavily on a narrative analysis (Black, 1980; Foss, S. K. 1989). This essay will incorporate a diversity of perspectives and develop a theoretical framework from which to view the computer mediated context.

Three different computer mediated classes were chosen for this particular study. At the beginning of the semester each class was instructed to begin keeping field notes on their experiences. The instructors explained that each student needed to complete an autoethnography for the course. They were instructed to chronicle their progress

indicating any perceptions of the course, technology or anything else that affected them, in order to complete an autoethnography. Autoethnographies are a qualitative approach to studying an individual's lived experience over an extended period of time. The length of the courses was the same, sixteen weeks. At the end of the semester the students had to compile their field notes and write an extended paper that reflected their journeys. The only requirement was that it had to report their experience with the course and the technology.

The classes ranged from an introductory course on HiTech communication to a graduate level course dealing with advanced web and multimedia design. There were 60 students in all with 36 undergraduate students and 24 graduate students. Gender was equally distributed in the classes. Each class was also unequally divided in previous experience with the technology. Many of the students reported that this was their first class in computer mediated communication. Actually, 42 of the 60 students a full 70% of all three classes indicated in their autoethnographies that they had limited or no experience with the computer technology used in the classes.

In order to perform a comprehensive examination of the narratives within the autoethnographies there were eight distinct features identified. Setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience and theme emerged continuously in all of the autoethnographies. The justification for choosing these particular patterns was based upon repetitive expression. After identifying each of the basic features, based upon repetitive expression, the most recurring feature from the data was the causal relations. It appeared that the students were establishing cause and effect relationships between their responsibility and the technology. Several questions related to this causal relationship guided the critical analysis of the data.

Chapter 3

Results

In virtually every autoethnography used for this study there were four predominate causal relationships that emerged. Casual relationships are framed in the following pattern; technology is the cause and students' responses become the effects. No commentary is offered relative to the motive for students' discourse as such would be a stab in the dark, foolish at best. What is offered is insight into the manner in which students' discursive patterns reveal the impact of technology on their lives. Examining personal narratives, which are both generative and reflective, seems to be an effective way to capture and exploit the subtleties that might emerge in discourse. Each causal relationship will first be named then explained and demonstrated from the autoethnographies. An attempt will then be made to establish the relationship of the causal relationships to the research questions posited earlier in this study.

1) The students who expressed anxiety about the technology felt they would do poorly. Often this anxiety was translated into expressions of fear and failure. The following is a sampling of the various ways students

exhibited the first indicated causal relationship. "I was really reluctant to even take this course in the beginning because I didn't know if I could keep up with the format of this class" this student went onto explain that she felt computer illiterate. Another said, "In the beginning of the semester I have to admit that I had doubts about even finishing the course." Echoing these sentiments another student said, "My first impressions of 5630 were not positive: I was certainly scared, and I definitely wondered if I was in over my head." These students clearly indicated a fear associated with the technology used in the classes. It is interesting that they expressed a loss of control over the technology before encountering or using it.

If one were inclined toward conspiracy theories this would make perfect sense in light of the social control issue mentioned earlier. This would be the ideal scenario for those who wield control. Develop the technology to control information and design in such a way that most people have access, yet complicate it so that few can really understand it. Obviously, something less sinister is going on here. The responses differ very little from those one might hear when listening to people talk about their

first flight on an airplane or trying to program a new VCR. People generally fear that which they don't understand and subsequently, it is expressed in their talk. One major difference to consider about technology is that the implications for control are real.

The second causal relationship was 2) each believed that others in the class had a competitive advantage because of previous computer use. "Some people acted like they already knew everything there was to know about web design, while others did not even know how to turn the computer on, but I felt almost inferior and at an unfair disadvantage because of all the advanced individuals in the class" is the way this student surrendered control of personal confidence. Many other students expressed similar concerns. For example, "The use of language by the students in the class dubbed one section the "smart ones" and the other group the "dumb ones." It seems that these students were willing to accept the notion that others had an unfair advantage because of previous computer use. The end result of some of the projects created by the students proved this to be untrue. There were several students that started at ground level and at the end of the semester had surpassed

in knowledge and production many of those who were considered advanced.

Most university classes are wonderfully brocaded environments with students from various parts of the world. Few come for an education, most for a degree and still yet others who don't know why they have come. The result is classes with differing and sometimes conflicting goals. This may provide a partial explanation for some students believing that others had an advantage.

One problem with this line of reasoning is that following it to a logical conclusion renders an unsettling implication. The majority of people are content to let a few self-motivated individuals rise to the top. Even though students knew or felt that others had an advantage, no one indicated any concerns. In all likelihood, those who had no previous knowledge, yet excelled in these classes are probably those who came for an education. The connection to research is that this causal relationship is the same in English classes, History classes, and all other areas of study. What most students in these classes failed to recognize was that CMC has the capacity to affect their lives in ways that reading, writing and arithmetic never could.

3) Students felt justified to direct technology-induced frustration at the instructors or each other. In this particular relationship students were very clear about their loss of control over the technology and who was to blame. "The biggest reason I feel my knowledge was restricted was because of the people I was with in my groups." This student was thoroughly convinced that the instructor and other students were hindering his performance. He continues, "I hope my grade is not based upon popularity contests or conceded [sic] graduate students." Likewise another indicated that his ability to learn was circumvented by the, "big computer gurus" who "railroad the instructors" and the "computer geniuses" that "sidetrack the instructors."

This causal relationship is directly related to the second in that most students did not want to take responsibility for their own development or performance. It takes very little imagination to blame someone else for irresponsibility or lack of personal achievement. Amazingly, unshouldering responsibility and placing the social burden on others is becoming a disturbing trend in the United States. The autoethnographies on this point merely reflect what has become an American cultural norm;

leave the hard and complicated issues to those who have the drive. In a larger sense the development of CMC may be the response of those who are in control to meet the increasing demands of a vacillating population.

However, the most telling causal relationship relative to the guiding research question was that 4) students surrendered their personal responsibility for performance to the technology. In addition to surrendering responsibility students also developed a fatalistic vocabulary to express their relationship to the technology. Included here is an abbreviated list of that terminology, not in any particular order, as an indication of the effect technology had on student's perceptions.

Unsure, scared, nervous, nightmare, reluctant, in the dark, frustration, confused, lost, gave up, left behind, no clue, struggling, blur, unfair, despise, apprehension, panic.

In the causal relationship being explored here these words were used to demonstrate how the students perceived the technology and surrendered control to it.

When trying to describe and justify the decision to take an easier section of the grad level course one student said, " I really wanted to be in group A so I could learn

the advanced projects." He then proceeds with, "I basically convinced myself that I would probably not be able to keep up with the rest of group B and forgot the whole idea." He decided that the "advanced stuff" was beyond his ability to master so he surrendered control of his desires to his perception of the technology.

Interestingly another grad student struggling with the same decision expressed his loss of control this way. This student chose the advanced section then indicated that after doing everything possible, he "quickly began to realize that the project was slipping through my fingers faster than I could ever hope to hold onto it." Through discussion about his relationship to the technology he finally surrendered to a technology project beyond his perceived control.

There was a significant difference between the class levels in their expressions of surrender. The graduate level students framed their narratives about loss of control in such a way that it appeared that they chose to do less than each indicated they were capable. The technology was described as beyond their ability to master in the given environment and allotted time. On the undergraduate level students were more willing to expand

the realm of blame about loss of control. Most of the student's perceptions were that they had no choice and consequently performed worse than they perceived they could. Interestingly, several students took a more traditional approach and shifted blame away from the technology to more traditional excuses. For example, one student implied that the time of the course affected her performance. "I believe if we had the original computer lab time we were supposed to have I would have caught on to things faster." While another suggested that if she "would have been in a better environment for this class" she felt that her "work would have been much better." Taking a more personal competency approach this student very candidly explained that, "I just can't seem to grasp the control of this product."

A good number of other undergraduate students fell into the category of blaming the functioning capacity of the technology for their loss of control. One assignment included a multimedia aspect that convinced this student that, "I swear it do[sic] not like me, or maybe I should do the whole package of tutorials but that seems to me that I will be wasting time." In virtually the same manner two students surrendered their opportunity to finish

assignments because of technical difficulties with the technology. "The problem was that the speech server kept having problems. This caused problems to get on your (Instructor) web site and get the assignments." The other student said, "We then had test 1 which I had many problems with because every time I tried to pull it up on the server it told me it was not working so I basically gave up." These students could have simply gone to the instructor for the assignments and yet chose to surrender personal responsibility to the technology.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

In the narratives described above students demonstrated through their talk a loss of control over the technology. Most were attempting to save face and present themselves as intelligent individuals who were the victims of circumstance. Closer investigation into those claims revealed that actually those claims were stories about their interactions with the technology and subsequent loss of control. Each person established an adverse causal relationship between technology and their personal responsibility. None of the students accepted full personal responsibility for their own performance. And of those who said that they had previous experience with the computer-mediated technology none indicated how they performed in those situations. This would have provided a better understanding of how the participants interact with technology.

The implications are as complex as the subject itself. All of the autoethnographies examined in this study are the discursive expressions of people interacting with technology; most of whom did not feel or at least express any concern about the nature of technology they were

using. Concerns were directed toward the influence of other people on grades and the complexity of the technology.

There was a conspicuous silence in relation to technology as a form of social control. It is not that students were unaware of the possibility of increased social control, however, no one felt the need to address the issue.

Actually, the results of this study were more predictable than I had originally anticipated. The communicative patterns that emerged when students discussed the technology were not necessarily revealing. The greatest insight can be gained by what was not said. No one questioned the social value of having a few people with the ability to gather and control so much information. It is not quite clear at this point if anyone had even considered that issue or if they really cared. Surprisingly enough, or not, depending on one's perspective, no one asked the fundamental question of CMC technology. Is it helping us to make a better world?

These findings, while certainly not revolutionary, are certainly cause for further research in this area.

Obviously, one critical area that needs further exploration is why students are not questioning the social value of CMC

technology. Students and society in general seem to assume that they have no choice in the future of CMC. It may be too early in the history of CMC as most people are still in awe at the wonder and may not be ready for critical inquiry. This is where communication scholars can mine the fluid motivations behind the constitutive narratives people use to frame their world. The issue of unshouldering needs to be exploited as well, for if that is really what is happening then the future will certainly bring some major changes in the way we do life.

Society may be more concerned than this study allows for since the domain of inquiry was limited to three college level CMC classes. What is not taken into account is that students were instructed to write about their experience with the technology. This may account for the lack of debate on the issue of social control. However, no one mentioned in their autoethnography that the class they were in was irrelevant to life outside of the university. The assumption held by the majority of the students was that this type of class would give them an advantage in the "real world."

We live in an age of wonder and awe about technology yet; many people are not acclimated toward the progressive

nature of that technology. What can be learned about technology today will be obsolete six months from now. To a large segment of the population this means never having more than a cursory knowledge about what is going on. This is critical in light of the Information Age we live in. Since information is the new commodity and commerce, industry, and government those who control the information and information processing in essence have ultimate social control.

The relevance to this study is that this sample is somewhat representative of the educated population at large. The power brokers in commerce, industry, and government in the past have come from the ranks of our universities where all had similar opportunities to join the ranks and counted. If one wanted to become a decision-maker in the affairs of their world then they found out the course to follow and proceeded. Now the base of power is shifting toward an increasingly smaller number of those adapted to the fluid nature of technology. In the past those who were technically inclined functioned as change agents in their world. Today technology change agents have switched from being a linkage between the

Client (society) and Change Agency (those who hold control) into the dualistic role of Agency and Linkage (Rogers, 1983).

Consideration should be given to what this means for a society where people are willing to surrender their personal responsibility to computer technology. This study in no way establishes that there is empirical evidence to support this idea but, it does suggest that people have a tendency to absolve themselves of personal responsibility when confronted with technology. Given that our world is now dominated by computer technology and human nature being what it is further research is needed to determine if the Information Age will truly bring the freedom it promises. It is at this point that author Mark Slouka offers a very timely suggestion in his book War of the Worlds.

Given the enormous effect the digital revolution may come to have on our lives (the digerati, as Steve Lohr has called them, routinely liken its impact to that of the splitting of the atom, the invention of the Gutenberg Press, and the discovery of fire), there is something downright eerie about the lack of debate, the conspicuous absence of dissenting voices the silence of the critics. Congress seems uninterested;

watchdog groups sleep. Like shined deer, we seem to be wandering en masse onto the digital highway, and the only concern heard in the land, by and large, is that some of us may be left behind (Slouka, 1995).

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