Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

College of Communication Faculty Research and Publications

Communication, College of

4-2009

The Past, Present, and Future of Human Communication and Technology Research: An Introduction

Scott C. D'Urso
Marquette University, scott.durso@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/comm_fac

Part of the Communication Commons

The Past, Present, and Future of Human Communication and Technology Research: An Introduction

Scott C. D'Urso
Communication Studies, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

The study of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and new communication technologies (NCTs) is an established and growing field not only with respect to the new technologies becoming available, but also in the many ways we are adopting them for use. Historically, I have contended that this area of communication research deserves recognition as a primary area of communication studies alongside that of interpersonal, organizational, health, and rhetorical studies among others. While the CMC area is still in its infancy, its impact on a variety of areas of human existence cannot be ignored. That said, when I began to work on this special section of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (*JCMC*), it led me to more systematically consider the question of its place within the larger discipline of communication. This line of research has been gathering strength for more than 25 years and is now a strong and healthy subdiscipline in communication. This special section of *JCMC* seeks to tie together its rich past, diverse present, and an exciting future of possibilities and challenges. This takes place through a series of essays by some of the key contributors in the field today.

Most of the established areas of research in communication are centered on a solid base of theories. The CMC field is no different. From the work on social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), information (media) richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986), critical mass (Markus, 1987), social influence (Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfeld, 1990), social information processing (SIP) (Walther, 1992), social identity and deindividuation (SIDE) (Spears & Lea, 1992), adaptive structuration (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), hyperpersonal interaction (Walther, 1996), and channel expansion (Carlson & Zmud, 1999) to the mindfulness/mindlessness work of Timmerman (2002), theory development is central to CMC research. While it can be argued that some CMC theories are not exclusive to the study of CMC, the same can be said of some of the core theories of other primary areas such as interpersonal and organizational communication. What is more important is that scholars in this field of research are using these theories as the basis for research today.

CMC research continues to find its way into many top journals today (see, for example, Gong & Nass, 2007; Katz, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Stephens, 2007) within our discipline, as well as in sociology, social psychology, and business management (see, for example, D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Katz, Rice, & Aspen, 2001; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). Key contributions to this field date back over 25 years (see, for example, Barnes & Greller, 1992; Baym, 1995; Chesebro, 1985; Hunter & Allen, 1992; Jones, 1995; Korzenny, 1978; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Reese, 1988; Rice, 1980; Rice, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Steinfield, 1992). This diversity of publication outlets and the longevity of this research line are but a few of the examples of the breath and depth of CMC research. One key trait of most established fields is the existence of a flagship journal that is the home for that genre of research. In the case of CMC research, *JCMC* is considered by many to fulfill that role. Published in an online format since 1995, *JCMC* is now an official publication of the International Communication Association (ICA). Beyond journal publications, it is rather difficult these days to peruse the bookshelves in communication research and not notice the plethora of volumes dedicated to the study of CMC. The importance of the Internet in today's society has undoubtedly played a role in this publication trend; however, many of the books are scholarly and present some of today's best research in this area.

As has been seen with the number of articles and books published on this topic, the numbers of scholars who study CMC are also increasing. Though a number of the key scholars in this field are housed in other areas such as organizational and interpersonal communication, their work routinely looks at how CMC impacts communication (see Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Fulk, Flanagin, Kalman, Monge, & Ryan, 1996; Rice, 1993). One key factor in determining if CMC research should be a distinct subset of communication research can be seen at annual conferences such as the National Communication Association (NCA) and ICA. Here, graduate students who are preparing to enter the job market are seeing more and more openings for faculty positions with CMC as a potential area of specialization. This trend does not appear to be going away anytime soon.

Both NCA and ICA have prominent divisions in their respective organizations concerned with understanding CMC. In ICA, the Communication and Technology Division is now the largest in the entire association. In NCA, the Human Communication and Technology Division has a sustained membership of over 500. Looking back at the past several NCA conference programs, one cannot help but notice the presence of this division through the sponsorship of numerous panels and papers. As the recent Cochair for this division, I felt it was time that we made our presence more prominent within NCA. In 2007, we invited a number of prominent scholars to participate in a unique double-length panel discussion. Each of the 10 panelists, featured in the special section, presented and discussed their thoughts on the past, present and future of research in CMC with the audience. The success of the panel, and the interest generated by the panel, led to this special section.

Having reconsidered my original thoughts on identifying CMC research as a primary area of communication research, I have come to the conclusion that it may have become a moot point. CMC scholars are uniquely positioned to study the vast impact that communication technologies have had and are having on our society. Looking back at the past volumes of *JCMC*, the diversity of topics covered includes: interpersonal, medical,

psychological, organizational, political, behavioral, and management studies. This diversity of research across disciplines places the CMC field in a unique position to be at the heart of many disciplinary endeavors in communication. However, is it a distinct and separate field of communication research? Yes, but without its cross-disciplinary approach, its overall impact on communication research may be seen as implausible.

To highlight the varied aspects of CMC research, this special section presents the thoughts of some of the prominent scholars in today's field of CMC. Rice (this issue) begins with what is most likely unique common experience for many as we struggle with our day-to-day interactions with technology. The particular story that Rice relates to us focuses on the embeddedness of CMC in our lives today and the challenges we face in understanding them in a larger context. These experiences and our understanding of their importance to our research are of particular interest to Baym (this issue) who notes that our interactions with technology are seen as a welcome trend. However, we must remain cautious as to what and how we research CMC, both now and in the future. Parks (this issue) offers that a microlevel approach to studying CMC may be problematic as compared to a broader approach to the technologies and their usage over time. To illustrate this point, Jackson's (this issue) discussion of the blending of technologies and concepts through "mashups" drives home the need for a broader approach to how we not only use, but research CMC.

One of the fastest growing areas of CMC research, social networking, represents what Barnes (this issue) considers another aspect of the convergence of CMC and human interaction. This falls in line with Contractor's (this issue) call for understanding the motivations behind why we seek these networked connections through mediated means. The development of future theory and research in this area will have the potential for far reaching implications across the CMC discipline.

From a theory standpoint, Walther (this issue) wonders whether our fields' development suffers from efforts at theoretical consolidation, rather than diversification of explanations and their boundary conditions that are critical in CMC research. Scott (this issue) provides potential directions for research and theory development, but does so with caution, because as he explains, "we can't keep up" with the technological innovations, and it may not be in our best interest to do so. Poole (this issue) sees consolidation of our efforts as a potential route through a combined process of data collection and sharing similar to how other disciplines operate. However we choose to proceed, it is clear, as Fulk and Gould (this issue) note, that we face many challenges ahead, but that the potential to really enhance the field of CMC research lies in our ability to meet these challenges.

I hope you enjoy what we have assembled here in this special section. There are many areas of research, theory development, and new communication technologies for us to ponder now and in the future. We find ourselves in an exciting period in CMC research history and the future looks very promising.

References

Barnes, S., & Greller, L. M. (1994). Computer-mediated communication in the organization. *Communication Education*, 43, 129–142.

Baym, N. K. (1999). *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Carlson, J. R., & Zmud, R. W. (1999). Channel expansion theory and the experimental nature of media richness perceptions. *Academy of Management Journal*, 42, 153–170.

Chesebro, J. W. (1985). Computer-mediated interpersonal communication. In B. D. Ruben (Ed.), *Information and behavior* (Vol. 1, pp. 202–222). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Contractor, N. S., & Eisenberg, E. M. (1990). Communication networks and new media in organizations. In J. Fulk & C. W. Steinfield (Eds.) *Organizations and Communication Technology* (pp. 145–174). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

DeSanctis, G., & Poole, M. S. (1994). Capturing the complexity in advanced technology use: Adaptive structuration theory. *Organization Science*, 5, 121–147.

Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1984). Information richness: A new approach to managerial behavior and organization design. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior* (Vol. 6, pp. 191–233). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness, and structural determinants. *Management Science*, 32, 554–571.

D'Urso, S. C., & Rains, S. A. (2008). Examining the scope of channel expansion: A test of channel expansion theory with new and traditional communication media. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21, 486–507.

Fulk, J., Flanagin, A. J., Kalman, M. E., Monge, P. R., & Ryan, T. (1996). Connective and communal public goods in interactive communication systems. *Communication Theory*, 6, 60–87.

Fulk, J., Schmitz, J., & Steinfield, C. W. (1990). A social influence model of technology use. In J. Fulk & C. Steinfield (Eds.), *Organization and communication technology* (pp. 117–140). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gong, L. & Nass, C. (2007). When a talking-face computer agent is half-human and half-humanoid: Human identity and consistency preference. *Human Communication Research*, 33, 163–193.

Hunter, J., & Allen, M. (1992). Adaptation to electronic mail. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 20, 254–274.

Jones, S. G. (1995). Understanding community in the information age. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 10–35). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Katz, J. E. (2007). Mobile media and communication: Some important questions. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 389–394.

Katz, J. E., Rice, R. E., & Aspden, P. (2001). The Internet, 1995-2000: Access, civic involvement, and social interaction. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45, 405–419.

Korzenny, F. (1978). A theory of electronic propinquity: Mediated communication in organizations. *Communication Research*, 5, 3–23.

Markus, M. L. (1987). Toward a ''critical mass'' theory of interactive media: Universal access, interdependence and diffusion. *Communication Research*, 14, 491–511.

Parks, M. R., Floyd, K. (1996). Making friends in cyberspace. *Journal of Communication*, 46, 80–97.

Ramirez, A. & Wang, Z. (2008). When online meets offline: An expectancy violations theory perspective on modality switching. *Journal of Communication*, 58, 20–39.

Reese, S. D. (1988). New communication technologies and the information worker: The influence of occupation. *Journal of Communication*, 38, 59–70.

Rice, R. E. (1980). The impacts of computer-mediated organizational and interpersonal communication. In M. Williams (Ed.), *Annual review of information science and technology*, 15 (pp. 221–249). White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications.

Rice, R. E. & Associates. (1984). *The new media: Communication, research and technology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Rice, R. E. (1993). Media appropriateness: Using social presence theory to compare traditional and new organizational media. *Human Communication Research*, 19, 451–484.

Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunication*. London: John Wiley.

Spears, R, & Lea, M. (1992). Social influence and the influence of the ''social'' in computer-mediated communication. In M. Lea (Ed.), *Contexts of computer-mediated communication* (pp. 30–65). London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.

Sproull, L., & Kiesler, S. (1986). Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science*, 32, 1492–1512.

Steinfield, C. (1992). Computer-mediated communications in organizational settings: Emerging conceptual frameworks and directions for research. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 5, 348–365.

Stephens, K. K. (2007). The successive use of information and communication technologies at work. *Communication Theory*, 17, 486–507.

Timmerman, C. E. (2002). The moderating effect of mindlessness/mindfulness upon media richness and social influence explanations of organizational media use. *Communication Monographs*, 69, 111–131.

Walther, J. B. (1992). Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction: A relational perspective. *Communication Research*, 19, 52–90.

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23, 1–43.

Walther, J. B., Loh, T., Granka, L. (2005). Let me count the ways: The interchange of verbal and nonverbal cues in computer-mediated and face-to-face affinity. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 24, 36–65.