Special Section

A Call for Grounding in the Face of Blurred Boundaries

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Scholars of human communication and technology have a past far deeper than many of its contemporary practitioners realize. In recent years, the origins of what we do under this moniker have often been located around the mid-1970s when Short, Williams, and Christie (1978) proposed Social Presence Theory. Far deeper origins are to be found, however, when one realizes that technology need not mean computing nor be digital. We have other precedents, and other technologies. Human communication and technology begins with the invention of writing. It includes pigeon training, ink, woodblocks, 16th-century books, and 17th- and 18th-century pamphlets. It includes photography, audio recording, radio waves, moving pictures, the telegraph, television, and countless other technologies, more of which have been forgotten than remembered. There are long traditions of scholarship into these other once-new technologies.

These media, and the scholarly traditions surrounding their study, are particularly forgotten in the conduct of Internet Research, a domain too often plagued by the notion that everything is new. Much is indeed new, but our focus on ''new media'' should not blind us to which things we ascribe to particular technologies are better attributed to novelty and the ways in which cultures project their concerns onto technology (see, for instance, Sturken, Thomas & Ball-Rokeach, 2004). One of our tasks is to distinguish what is new from what is recycled. Most communication technologies throughout history have raised issues about the quality of interaction, the nature of community, the status of relationships, the authenticity of identity, the safety of children, and the limits of trust and privacy. One research priority for our future is thus to recognize our past. We need to link our theory, framing, research inquiries, and findings to the history on which the production, reception, adaption, and everyday use of technologies rests. Chasing the next innovation is futile. Unless it is grounded in theory and history much wider than the present moment, it will be outdated by its publication date.

We must acknowledge the "everyday" nature of much human communication and technology, as has become the (welcome) trend in the last few years (see Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Within a continued focus on the mundane, we should examine how people simultaneously integrate multiple media into their daily communicative experience. In treating the internet and related technologies as new, we have tended to view them as isolated phenomena. Though the term "cyberspace" seems at last to have fallen from use, some still imagine what happens online as a world apart from everyday life, as though what happens in one online environment stays within its own borders. If today's new media tell us anything, they tell us that boundaries are made to be transcended.

Online realms are no longer contained within their own boundaries (if they ever were). What appear to be single online groups often turn out to be multimodal. Group members connect with one another in multiple online spots, using multiple media—social network sites for making their identity and social connections visible, YouTube for video sharing, Flickr for sharing pictures, blogs for instantaneous updates, web sites for amassing collective intelligence, and so on. Our many studies of single web boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, social network sites, and so on have given us a strong understanding of much that happens within these contexts, but we know next to nothing about how individuals and groups link these contexts to one another as they traverse the internet and meet the same individuals across multiple domains.

Most people connected online are also connected offline. Online and offline are not different entities to be contrasted. What happens via new technology is completely interwoven with what happens face-to-face and via other media—the telephone, the television, films, music, radio, print. Even behaviors that only appear online are put there by embodied people acting in geographic locations embedded in face-to-face social relationships and multimedia environments that shape the meaning and consequences of those online practices.

Our interactions with one another are increasingly multimodal. We conduct our relationships face-to-face, over the phone, and online through modes as diverse as e-mail, instant messaging, social network friending, personal messages, comments, shared participation in discussion forums and online games, and the sharing of digital photos, music, and videos. Research is increasingly demonstrating that the closer the relationship, the more modes people use to communicate with one another (e.g. Haythornthwaite, 2005). Furthermore, these media are becoming one another, so that people are increasingly accessing the internet via mobile phones and using computers to conduct telephone calls. We cannot bank our research future on the technological forms. Instead we need to interrogate the underlying dynamics through which technology use is patterned across media, relationships, and communicative purposes and with what effects for how we understand and conduct our relations, our communities, and ourselves.

Multimodality also cuts across once-familiar boundaries separating mass from interpersonal communication, as well as within mass communication media

themselves. It also heightens the importance of visual communication and the demand for better methods to handle nonverbal data. I might watch some episodes of a television show on my iPod and others on a television screen with friends or family beside me. I might catch missed episodes on YouTube, perhaps using an iPhone. I might read about it in a magazine, discuss it in an online forum, blog about it and define myself in part by listing it as a favorite on my social network profiles. The show's producers, writers, actors and their interns may read the online discourse and feed it back into the show itself. They may accept my friend request on MySpace. In no time there's likely to be a movie, a book, a billboard, a t-shirt, and, of course, plentiful fan-fiction, YouTube mashups and, increasingly, official spin-off books and stories.

Scholars of communication technology need to begin attending critically to questions of ownership, a topic we have generally avoided. While once we socialized online through public sites such as newsgroups, increasingly people are conducting their online social activities within proprietary systems such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, and massively multiplayer games in which the users have few rights and limited, if any, ownership of their contributions. The explicit desire of many Web 2.0 entrepreneurs to appropriate our personal relationships in order to deliver more personalized advertising raises ethical questions we should be prepared to address, as does the reliance of these sites on users' unpaid labor to generate their content.

Finally, we need to think about how to transcend academic boundaries, while recognizing what we have to offer that is distinctive. There is little that we study under ''human communication and technology'' that is not also being studied by those in Sociology, Women's Studies, Political Science, English, Law, Business, Psychology, Linguistics, and many other fields in this and many other nations. We need to draw on that work. We need to speak to scholars in other traditions. We must avoid insularity.

At the same time, we need a heightened self-awareness about *communication*, and what it means to study technology from where we stand rather than where others stand. David Nye (e.g. Nye, 1997), an American Studies professor, argued that the narratives 19th-century Americans told about electricity and railroads were a means of constructing what it meant to be American. We should consider how the narratives we tell about technology through our research construct our own identities as communication scholars. Who do we wish to be, and how can we tell stories that help us attain our potential?

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