Chapter 65
The Irrevocable Alteration of Communication:
A Glimpse Into the Societal Impact of Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

In our digital society, the ability to communicate has irrevocably changed. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a glimpse into the impact of digital media on society, specifically digital communication. This glimpse is framed in terms of four characteristics of digital communication: product/ion, semiotic, public, and transitory. Issues are examined that relate to the democratization and monopolization of communication, who has access, the persistent Spiral of Silence, privacy, cyber bullying, identity theft, the ethereal being captured, as well as education and new literacies. Methodological gaps are noted in the research corpus and suggestions are proposed regarding the need for timeliness, support for a comprehensive span of research paradigms, and representation of a full range of populations. Finally, implications and recommendations are explored for civic engagement, commerce, education, and policy.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is core to human existence. Throughout time and civilizations, humans consistently created varied forms of communication. Ancient civilizations created cave drawings, petroglyphs, pictograms, cuneiform, hieroglyphs, and alphabets. More recently, civilizations created newspapers, magazines, telephones, and radio. The ability to share ideas, emotions, desires, and plans, to mention a few reasons we communicate, is the essence of the human experience. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the societal impact of digital media on communication. We view society, digital media, and communication as dynamic entities that are inextricably intertwined and continually impact one another. Therefore, we examine both the impact of society and digital media on communication as well as the impact of digital communication on society. To manage this broad and varied topic our discussion is framed in terms of four characteristics of digital communication: product/ion, semiotic, public, and transitory (Baker, 2001). We define and illuminate each characteristic by exploring research related to exemplars. Issues emerge regarding the democratization and monopolization of communication, access to digital communication, persistent Spiral of Silence, online ethics and safety, ethereal captured while privacy is compromised, and education. Methodological gaps are evident in the extant research corpus. Implications are discussed and recommendations are made for local and global civic engagement, commerce, education and policy. We acknowledge that other frameworks, constructs, and exemplars can be used to understand digital communication. Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive or conclusive discussion of digital communication but to provide fodder for grappling with this timely and emerging topic.

IMPACT OF DIGITAL MEDIA ON COMMUNICATION

Production Nature of Digital Communication

Production is defined as "the process of making something" while product is defined as "something that is the result of a process" ("Production", n.d., para. 1; "Product", n.d., para. 1). By definition, written communication culminates as a product. Up through the first millennium mankind created varied written products including pictographs, hieroglyphs, letters, and scrolls. In 1999, the Biography channel broadcasted a countdown of the most influential people of the second millennium. This countdown included such notables as Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. Among these notables, they concluded the most influential person of the second millennium was Gutenberg. Arguably, one reason Gutenberg was given this distinction is that the printing press made it easier to transform communication into products that, in turn, could be widely disseminated. Communication has always been shaped by the technology at hand (Hartman, Morsink, & Zheng, 2010; Leu, 2006; Leu & Kinzer, 2000). With the advent of digital media, it is argued that we are witnessing a comparably significant, and likely more significant, even unprecedented development in the history of communication (D. Hartman, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

In her analysis of the ontology of literacy, Baker (2010a, 2013b) argued that the ability to transform communication into products is significant because products can travel through time and space. Written communication can defy the laws of physics. Authors and readers can become time travelers who explore historical times and geographical locations that are beyond their physical limitations. Because Socrates' words were written down we can read his thoughts--even though we live in a different time and place.

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