Chapter XXVIII
Communicating Electronically When Too Far Away to Visit

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication is the number one use of home computers (the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001). Despite the growing literature, there is still debate about the social and psychological effects of CMC use, especially regarding its impact on interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, I discuss the use of CMCs for maintenance of long-distance interpersonal relationships and for exchange of social support when individuals have limited availability for personal face-to-face contact. A summary of recent research examining the prevalence of CMC use by people on the go or in transitions is presented, followed by a discussion of the effects of this communication medium on their daily functioning. Then, specific features of online communications that make them favorable over other mediums for interpersonal contact with both nearby and distant social network members are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in the information technologies place computers among frequently used communication tools, making them an almost inseparable part of our social lives. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is broadly defined as text, audio, and video exchanges that occur between two or more people with the aid of a computer software and a computer interface, including but not limited to private e-mail exchange, private chat rooms, news-groups, and the World Wide Web (Goldman, 1999).

CMC is used for a variety of purposes; ranging from exchange of information, to entertainment, shopping or simply for communication. Various large-scale studies have identified "interpersonal communication" as the number one use of home computers (e.g., Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Kraut et al., 1998; the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001). Utilization of technology as a communication tool and its social and psychological effects have been subject to numerous studies by researchers from different disciplines, but mostly from communication, psychology, and sociology. For instance, communication re-

searchers examine the changes in the content and habit of communication as well as the resulting change on communication networks (e.g., Eastin & LaRose, 2005; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Walther, 1996). Psychologists, taking individual as the unit of analysis, investigate the impact of CMC on individuals' behaviors, mental life, or social functioning (e.g., Kraut et al, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Sociologists, on the other hand, approach the issue from a broader perspective and study topics such as digital divide, emergence of online communities, or impact of CMC use on social capital (e.g., Baym, 1995; Hampton & Wellman, 2001). As evident, CMC is being studied at multiple levels, mostly by a combination of these perspectives.

Despite the growing literature, however, there is still debate about the role of CMC in the everyday functioning of individuals. Some researchers acknowledge the potential of CMC as a simple form of communication, but highlight its downsides (e.g., Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002; Mesch & Talmud, 2006). For instance, they argue that social and contextual cues (e.g., smiling or frowning) may be detached from the communication in online environments and hamper the construction of meaning. Advocators of this idea also pose that communication can be best expressed and experienced through face-to-face contact. They (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001) further suggest that if online communications grow at the expense of such interpersonal exchanges, exclusive reliance on CMC may draw people into isolation and depression. Researchers at the other end of this debate approach online communications as a new means for social interaction. They support the use of CMCs to supplement social ties established through in-person contact and also to facilitate the formation of new friendships (e.g., Garrett, 2000; Kraut et al., 1998; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Zhao, 2006).

One of the reasons for the lack of consensus on the social and psychological effects of CMC use may be related to the relatively inconsistent incorporation of computers in the social life. Different generations and people in different parts of the world have undertaken this technology differently. On the one hand there are older generations who had survived the introduction of phones, fax machines, television, and even cell phones in their lives, now struggling to adapt to the changes in their already established habits of socializing brought by "this new medium." On the other hand, there are new generations who are born into the world of personal computers, growing up with this technology, where CMC is just an "another communication medium," a routine part of their everyday life and social interaction rituals. Hence, problems do arise when individuals with different levels of CMC experience interact.

Despite all controversies, it is a reality that computers have long been integrated into our lives. Being an inherently social medium, they are heavily used globally for communication with no intentions of disappearing. I believe it is time for researchers to give up contrasting technology supported communications with other communication mediums, focus on the opportunities afforded by CMC and identify ways to use this technology for the betterment of our daily lives.

This chapter approaches the use of information technologies from a social psychological perspective, pondering the use of computers as an ordinary means of communication—for socializing—especially in situations where people have scarce opportunity for continuous personal contact.

BACKGROUND

People are constantly on the move in today's world for various reasons, but mostly for education and business. Technology grants an immense opportunity for people on the go to keep in contact with both local and non-local social networks. How do people use CMCs when they do not have frequent

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