

Chapter LVII

IM's Growth, Benefits, and Impact on Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces synchronous, one-on-one, computer mediated communication. A discussion then is presented on the growth of typewritten, synchronous communication, beginning with the TeleTypewriter/Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TTY/TDD), and how instant messaging (IM) can benefit those who are deaf, and also others who wish to communicate rapidly without the use of a telephone or face-to-face (f2f) communication. Besides discussing benefits of synchronous, text-based, one-on-one communication, this chapter will also address the downfall to the written communication caused by the overuse of abbreviations and emoticons that is coming into regular use outside of the IM environment. After the author examines the pros and cons of CMC via IM, implications of the growth of CMC via IM are considered.

INTRODUCTION

Instant messenger (IM) is having a strong implication on communication, particularly for those with hearing or speaking hardships. The traditional method of communication for the deaf or hard of hearing, when not face-to-face, has been the TTY/TDD (TeleTypewriter/Telecommunications Device for the Deaf). This is very cumbersome when not communicating with another person holding the same technology on the other end. The user of a relay operator, who reads off the TTY screen from one member of the telephone

conversation and types the response from the other member, would make a telephone conversation take much longer, and limit what could be said as this person has to translate everything (Naturale, 2003). With the advent of the IM, such as AOL's, MSN's, Yahoo!'s, IRC, and others, there is no need for specific, often costly, technology to be had by the parties on both ends. All that is needed is a computer with an Internet connection.

The use of IM has also brought about much more use of shorthand by the general public, used to make a conversation go faster. Some of this has come from the TTY usage (Chapanis, 1976,

cited in Chesebro & Bonsall, 1989). This has also changed the language used to communicate. An English-speaker can still have many problems understanding the IM language (Reid, 1994). LOL, TTYL, ROTFL are all regularly used acronyms these days, but to the uninitiated, these simply look like gibberish. While speed of communication is welcomed, and anything to make the typing approach the speed of verbal communication is fine, the problem in communication can occur in two instances: (1) when communicating with someone who does not know these terms, and (2) when these terms cross over into traditional communication such as a typewritten letter, an educational discussion board, or a professional piece of writing (Farmer, 2005).

This chapter begins with a brief background of synchronous, one-on-one computer mediated communication (CMC) particularly instant messenger (IM), and the TTY/TDD (TeleTypewriter/Telecommunications Device for the Deaf). The following two sections summarize constraints of synchronous, one-on-one CMC and its influence on the written language. After examining the pros and cons of CMC via IM, implications of the growth of CMC via IM are considered. The chapter closes with suggestions for future research.

BACKGROUND

CMC, or computer mediated communication, can be considered to have multiple predecessors. Depending on whom you ask, the development of CMC can be traced as a method of communication that is both synchronous (live, such as IM, TALK, or the telephone) and asynchronous (delayed, such as e-mail or a postal letter), or separately (Baron, 2005b). This chapter will focus on the synchronous, textual (typed), one-on-one CMC of instant messaging (IM) and the use of CMC.

IM can trace its roots, in part, to the TTY/TDD ((TeleTypewriter/Telecommunications Device for

the Deaf) (Condon & Cech, 1996), which is “a small apparatus connected to the phone to type a message” to someone who has a similar device at his or her location (Peters & Bell, 2006, p. 18). The TTY/TDD can be used by the Deaf/hard of hearing population to communicate via telephone in a synchronous, but not face-to-face, manner; that is, time and place dependent, but not space dependent (Rantanen, 2005). The communicators need to be at a designated place at the same time (i.e., the telephone number or IM identity/“screen name” being contacted or “called”) but not in the same physical place (face-to-face) in order to communicate.

TALK and the TTY/TDD both have a downside in that the communication is half duplex, able to go in only one direction at a time (Choi, Krause, & Capitan, 2005; Henderson, Grinter, & Starner 2005; Mather, 2002). Therefore, these were basically one-way communications, just as the written postal letter or any other asynchronous communication. One participant in the communication would have to finish typing, or communicating, before the other could begin.

One way to deal with this is to write and transmit in short spurts, in order to allow the other communicator to know what is going on, and to provide chances for interruption. The TTY/TDD users use “GA,” standing for “Go Ahead,” to indicate the end of a thought even when the two parties are typing in short spurts, as the TTY/TDD displays typing of the sender immediately to the receiver with no indication of when the sender is complete. TALK users would just hit the Enter or Return key with “...” at the end of a transmission to indicate the thought was not yet done as the receiver does not see any of the message until the text is transmitted by the sender. Even on IM, though the technology enables long statements to be written before transmission, the users cannot sustain a long thought without interruption and without indication of continuation to maintain interest and attention of the recipient (Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Thus, IM, TALK, and the TTY/TDD

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