Chapter X
Communicating in the Information Society:
New Tools for New Practices

Lorenzo Cantoni
University of Lugano, Switzerland

Stefano Tardini
University of Lugano, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The present chapter provides a conceptual framework for the newest digital communication tools and for the practices they encourage, stressing the communication opportunities they offer and the limitations they impose. In this chapter, Internet-based communication technologies are regarded as the most recent step in the development of communication technologies. This approach helps have a broad perspective on the changes information and communication technologies (ICT) are bringing along in the social practices of so called knowledge society. As a matter of fact, these changes need to be considered within an "ecological" approach, that is, an approach that provides a very wide overview on the whole context (both in synchronic terms and in diachronic ones) where ICT are spreading. In the second part of the chapter, the authors present two examples of relevant social practices that are challenged by the most recent ICT, namely journalism (news market) and Internet search engines.

INTRODUCTION

New digital communication tools (information and communication technologies, or ICT) rapidly spreading worldwide have a deep impact on the way we interact and communicate, both in everyday life and in our professional activities; they are changing our social life and our social practices. For instance, the way we can access, edit and share documents (movies, songs, pictures, images, texts or any other kind of documents) has changed, as well as the way we relate to government, access health, banking, and other public

services, the way we work, play, learn, buy and sell, search information, meet (un)known people, and so on (Cantoni & Tardini, 2006).

The rapid growth of these new technologies has raised the issue of *digital literacy*, creating a divide between those who can (are able/have access to) manage them and those who cannot (are not able/do not have access to), as well as between those who are *digital natives* and those who have "migrated" into digital technologies (*digital immigrants*). The term *digital divide* refers to "the inequalities that exist in Internet access based on income, age, education, race/ethnicity, and … between rural and metropolitan areas, through such factors as pricing and infrastructure" (Hill, 2004, p. 27).

However, a first important clarification is needed here: it is not the first time new communication technologies have arisen and caused changes in a society, nor will it be the last. Suffice it to think of the enormous changes brought along by the invention of writing and the alphabet, which made it possible also for people who are both spatially and temporally separated to communicate (Danesi, 2006); again, the invention and the diffusion of letterpress print gave rise to the first assembly line, embedding "the word itself deeply in the manufacturing process and [making] it into a kind of commodity" (Ong, 2002, p. 118).

Generally speaking, every "technology of the word" has always brought along larger or smaller, positive or negative changes in the contexts where it was adopted (McLuhan, 2001), always raising the issues of literacy and access to information.

In a sense, every new communication technology spreading in a given society has always configured social class of "scribes," that is, of those people who are able to use that given technology within that society. After being managed only by social elite of the scribes, some technologies are then "socialized," that is, they get to be mastered by most of the society. It is the case, for instance, of reading and writing, which remained a long while after it was invented only

a matter for scribes: those who needed a written text had necessarily to turn to them. For instance, Charlemagne (747-814) could be the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire even though he was hardly able to write (hence the legend that he could not write at all) and learned to read only in his adulthood; nowadays illiterate people are in fact almost excluded from social life. Not all communication technologies reach the stage of socialized literacy: for example, the use of the telegraph has always remained in the hands of some operators who had the knowledge of how to send and receive telegrams. Furthermore, some technologies get to be socialized only with regard to the fruition of the message, while its production remains a matter for experts. In the Western society, for instance, TV and radio are nowadays completely socialized in the sense that everybody is able to use TV sets and radios in order to receive the programs they broadcast; but when it comes to the production of TV and radio messages, only skilled operators can do that (although this state of affairs is being challenged by digital audio and video editing).

Something similar is happening to digital information and communication technologies (ICT), which are becoming more and more a necessary tool in order to be fully introduced into the information society ("a society in which low-cost information and ICT are in general use") or "knowledge society"—where "knowledge" stresses "the fact that the most valuable asset is investment in intangible, human, and social capital and that the key factors are knowledge and creativity" (europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/knowledge_society/index_en.htm). In other terms, digital literacy is more and more a requirement in the knowledge society, at least in terms of digital fruition: being able to access digital information is something that cannot be anymore referred to "digital scribes," but is becoming more and more a personal requirement.

The comparison with the model of linguistic change can help explain how a technology is ac-

Related Content

Automatic Screening of Diabetic Maculopathy Using Image Processing: A Survey
Shweta Reddy (2019). *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction (pp. 30-37).*
www.irma-international.org/article/automatic-screening-of-diabetic-maculopathy-using-image-processing/234452

Digitalization in Management: The Case of the Metaverse
Fetullah Battaland Halil H. Öz (2023). *Handbook of Research on Digitalization Solutions for Social and Economic Needs (pp. 40-44).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/digitalization-in-management/319596

Is AI Augmenting or Substituting Humans?: An Eye-Tracking Study of Visual Attention Toward Health Application
Piotr Gaczek, Grzegorz Leszczyskiand Marek Zieliski (2022). *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction (pp. 1-14).*
www.irma-international.org/article/is-ai-augmenting-or-substituting-humans/293193

Deep Learning for Information Extraction From Digital Documents: An Innovative Approach to Automatic Parsing and Rich Text Extraction From PDF Files
Yavuz Kömeçolu, Serdar Akyol, Fethi Suand Baak Buluz Kömeçolu (2022). *Machine Learning for Societal Improvement, Modernization, and Progress (pp. 180-199).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/deep-learning-for-information-extraction-from-digital-documents/309761

Gender Wage Differentials in Information Systems: 1991 – 2008 A Quantitative Analysis
George Nezlekand Gerald DeHondt (2011). *International Journal of Social and Organizational Dynamics in IT (pp. 13-29).*
www.irma-international.org/article/gender-wage-differentials-information-systems/50532