Communication technologies: The ugly, the bad, and the good

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Introduction

Humans are a social species that have evolved over millions of years in small, interdependent groups that have relied almost exclusively on face-to-face interpersonal communication for survival as well as social, reproductive, and cultural success. Although Gutenberg's printing press radically changed how information was recorded and disseminated, it was not until the mid-19th century until inventions like the telegraph (circa 1844) and the telephone (in 1876) allowed for information to travel great distances in a much shorter time. Over the 175 years since, technology has increased in accessibility and specificity at a rate never seen or even anticipated before. Though it has not been a century since television technology was envisioned, we are light years beyond in our advancements in communication technology (e.g., Moore’s Law).

Communication technology has become more compact, accessible, and intimate. Communication technology, including mobile phones, social media, and the variety of peripheral applications have become entangled in our workplace, educational, familial, and intimate human relationships. Technology has often been blamed for the fall of civilization, no matter its form. The very discipline of communication was, in part, rooted in the concerns of the effects of the newest technology, film, on the most vulnerable, children (Jowett, Jarvie, Fuller, & Fuller, 1996). Next, concerns of television, then video games, the Internet, and now social media and mobile technologies (Turkle, 2017) have fueled research agendas and layman panic. Stopping short of technological determinism, in this piece, we consider the impact, the ugly, the bad, and the good, of digital communication technology on human communication.
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**Technological Affordances**

Before a conversation is had about the effects of technology on interpersonal relationships, a brief review of current affordances is necessary. Technology is considered to have affordances when the "physical attributes of the thing to be acted upon are compatible with those of the actor, that information about those attributes is available in a form compatible with a perceptual system, and (implicitly) that these attributes and the action they make possible are relevant to a culture and a perceiver" (Gaver, 1991, p. 18). A pencil affords its user the ability to write, but can also afford its user to point to objects while gesticulating, or even keeping one’s hair in place. Communication technologies are often described in terms of these affordances, or at a minimum the perception of affordances - how they allow users to interact with the tool, the environment, and others.

The social nature of most current communication technologies is due to their affordances, namely seven (Baym, 2015): social interactivity, temporal structures, storage, replicability, reach, mobility, and digital inclusion. Of concern in this piece is the social interactivity afforded by computer-mediated technology. Communication technologies that afford a user to involve him or herself in social networks and social information have the potential, then, to impact the social relationships of that user. Electronic mail (e-mail) for example, has impacted our relationships with our workplace, with those in the workplace, those we serve or teach, and even our relationship with the technology itself. Our phones have become part of our physical being, the text is read by the receiver usually in our own voice - known as solipsistic introjection (Suler, 2004) - and we are expected to interact with senders nearly immediately, lest that reciprocity be
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broken. Even higher education has been expected to be socially interactive with potential, current, and past students on social media. A perusal of platforms in use at Wittenberg University show admissions, athletics (the department and teams), academic and student support departments, and individual faculty are active on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and even Snapchat. But are we truly interacting socially, or are we interacting with a machine interacting with others?

**The Ugly: Disinhibition**

Separating personal identity from communication allows people to communicate online in ways they would not do in person by removing some of the restraints present in face-to-face interaction. The prophylactic effects of invisibility and asynchronous communication allow for indirect communication strategies that embolden the sender of a message to say things without an avenue for feedback from the receiver of the message (i.e., without consequences), leading negative communication to become more prevalent, while also occupying a larger platform.

The nature of online communication leads to a disinhibition of usual social, moral, and personal norms. It can be thought of “as the person shifting, while online,” away from their true self while “inhibiting guilt, anxiety, and related affects” most predominantly those towards others (Suler, 2004, p. 325). Users do not see the other person with whom they are communicating, whether they are anonymous or known, deindividuating that individual. It is not a *person* per se they are communicating with or to, but rather a mediated version of that person. The separation of personal identity from communication allows for people to communicate online in ways they would not do in person by removing some of the restraints present in face-to-face interaction. The
asynchronous nature of online communication can inhibit immediate feedback, and the most important component of interpersonal communication - non-verbal feedback. One can become braver, more aggressive in their communication without seeing in real time how these words have landed with the receiver.

The most extreme and toxic disinhibition online is in the form of hate or dangerous speech. First and foremost, hate speech can inspire, facilitate, create an agreeable environment towards violence against the group to which someone may belong (Benesch, 2014). It also has a chilling effect on open, democratic, inclusive public debate, silencing marginalized and minority population through fear and intimidation. Counterspeech to hateful and dangerous speech is far and few between (Wright, Ruths, Dillon, Saleem, & Benesch, 2017). Cyberbystander behavior towards less toxic, but still negative online communication like cyberbullying, flaming, trolling, mobbing, and even doxxing are obstructed due to the same disinhibiting effects. A series of studies have shown cyberbystanders often believe there are more people viewing their online activities than in reality, leading to a Bystander Effect online, perpetuating the problem of the toxic speech (Dillon, 2016).

The very nature of online communication technology creates a deindividuated environment, removing synchronous reception and feedback of interpersonal communication, even in spaces where the users have made it their own (e.g., Facebook). It takes great energy, time, and effort to re-establish the minimum components of humanness online, and as cognitive misers, we are wont to do so. Disinhibition is the antithesis of building empathy. In order to build empathy toward one another, one must be able to take on that individual’s perspective, place themselves in
that person’s proverbial shoes. If communication technologies disinhibit users by their very affordances and use, logically one can conclude it may inhibit the formation of empathy. If empathy is stunted, or prevented entirely, close and intimate relationships can be negatively affected in their inception, growth, and even dissolution.

**The Bad: The Dark Side of Digital Media and Interpersonal Relationships**

One phenomenon that has been forever altered by digital communication technologies has to do with how romantic relationships are formed, how they are maintained, and how they dissolve. Indeed, an entire special issue of the Journal of Social Psychology from last year focused on several implications the use of digital communication technologies can have on individuals’ relationships, from cell phone-induced ostracism to rejection sensitivity in online dating. And there is good reason to be concerned.

Some of the preeminent models of relationship formation have their basic assumptions eroded in the face of digital technology. Traditional, face-to-face stage models of relational development, maintenance, and decline hinge upon the process of self-disclosure. According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), self-disclosure is the vehicle through which personal relationships unfold, and through which trust develops. In dyadic relationships, people disclose small and innocuous pieces of information about themselves over time. A breadth of topics is explored in the early phases of relationships; information which increases certainty about the other and serves as a basis for comparison and compatibility with the self. As that information is favorably received, the sender continues to disclose more personal, in-depth information upon which there is a greater likelihood of being judged.
Social media have been a game-changer in the way self-disclosure unfolds. Early research (e.g., Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002) on relational development using traditional types of computer-mediated communication (e.g., text-based chat, email) suggested that information is “sipped” and that those interacting in computer-mediated environments learn information more slowly over time than they would in face-to-face contexts (Walther, 1996). Social networking sites (SNSs), however, have changed the flow of information such that information can be “chugged” as opposed to sipped. Having access to someone’s Facebook page, for example, allows immediate access to a breadth of information about that individual including things like education, religious and political affiliations, interests, activities, group memberships, friends, and a host of photographs. This information maps components of one’s identity and social connections for the receiver. The breadth and depth of information available on SNSs affords the user the ability to learn quite a bit about another person without actually having to interact with that person, which violates the norms of the appropriate rate of disclosure early in a relationship (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). Self-disclosure occurs more quickly online, which may have deleterious consequences on the development of trust, which takes time in relationships.

Looking at a potential partners information online to learn more about them as you’re getting to know them is one thing, taking that surveillance to the next level and monitoring a romantic partner while you’re in a relationship is another. Those high in relational uncertainty are more likely to use social medial like Facebook to try to obtain information about their partner. When viewed through the lens of attachment theory, we
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also see differences among who is likely to use interpersonal electronic surveillance of a romantic partner and who is not. Preoccupied individuals are characterized by high concern for the other and low concern for the self. They want close, intimate relationships with their partner, but fear their partner does not value them as much as they value the partner. Preoccupied individuals tend to elevate the partner because they feel that they are inferior or not worthy of the partner. Due to this insecurity, preoccupieds then attempt to control the relationship because they are anxious that the partner may reject them. Preoccupieds tend to be high in anxiety but low in avoidance. Thus, they may cling to their partners. They are also more likely to use social media as a means to reduce their anxiety through the perception of access to personal information about their partner online (Fox & Warber, 2014). Ultimately, this suggests that varying personality characteristics drive how one capitalizes on specific affordances of a particular medium.

Social networking websites such as Facebook contribute to and provide a forum for discursive struggles in romantic relationships between integration-separation, expression-privacy, and stability-change dialectics. Though romantic partners are able to connect and integrate social networks on social media, it can be difficult to maintain privacy and independence. As such, social media itself can serve as a catalyst for conflict in romantic relationships. A bind occurs when social media is such an integral part of their lives, but also a significant source of relational stress. In fact, people overwhelming describe Facebook as having negative effect on romantic relationships including things like triggering jealousy, network interference, and partner surveillance (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014).
Relational abuse is another relational phenomena where we see digital media influences. Just as dating partners are susceptible to various forms of abuse in in-person interactions, those patterns also can translate to online interactions. Digital dating abuse is an emerging form of relational abuse that can negatively impact the targets of the abuse. A recent study grounded in co-cultural theory found that the women who were interviewed regarding their experiences with digital dating abuse largely enacted maladaptive coping strategies, including social isolation and censorship as attempts to appease the abuser (Weathers, Canzona & Fisher, 2019). When there are abuse issues in the relationship, use of digital and social media unfortunately can become another context for that abuse, so that even physical distance from the abuser does not offer a reprieve.

**The Good: Technology Doesn’t Destroy Society and Relationships, People Do**

The good news is that, while digital communication technologies have the potential to be used in damaging ways, we ultimately have the ability to decide how we will use them. As research continues to reveal the potential negative effects, many of which are rooted in problematic offline tendencies and behaviors, it also is helping us understand how to combat and avoid them, while also helping us take advantage of the positive effects our use of such technologies can have.

As noted earlier, disinhibition can be a barrier to empathy, which requires an ability to take an individual’s perspective. However, those same social media platforms that provide a platform for hate can also be used to help foster empathy. As just one example, in selectively exposing ourselves to stories about people who are different from us and the challenges they face, we may come to a better cognitive and affective
understanding of their experiences and perspectives, both essential dimensions of empathy. We know that narrative can be powerful in changing people’s perceptions, and Facebook accounts like Humans of Minneapolis or Twitter hashtags such as #MeToo can give voice to the marginalized and help others come to understand their situation. We can choose to expose ourselves (and our students) to this kind of content as a means of encouraging the ability to take another’s perspective and rehumanizing them.

In terms of the role of digital communication technologies play in the development of personal and romantic relationships, there also is good news: dating apps are not destroying the courtship process. While there are plenty of horror stories about ghosting, unwanted photos of private parts, and people not turning out to be who they claimed, early research suggests dating apps work, and an increased understanding of how to use them more effectively will help them work even more effectively. For example, a Pew Research Center survey from 2016 found that 59% of Americans think dating apps are a good way to meet someone. And last year, the most recent iteration of the Singles in America survey, conducted annually by the Match Group and Kinsey Institute, found that 40% of respondents said they’d met someone online in the last year and had a relationship with that person. In contrast, just 24% said they’d met their significant other through a friend rather than online. And it makes sense: Steve Duck’s Attraction Filter Theory suggests that there is a limited pool of possible partners that we encounter in our lives by virtue of proximity and interactions, and there are several filters based on various cues (preinteraction, interaction, and cognitive) that help determine and explain the few relationships that may ultimately
Communication Technologies develop (Duck, 1973). This means that we were traditionally limited to the people with whom we came into contact as we went about our daily lives. But not being limited to that small pool can greatly increase the chance of meeting someone who is at least potentially compatible. A recent study on social integration found that online dating inspired more diverse dating patterns and higher rates of marital satisfaction within the first year of marriage for couples who met online, compared to those who did not (Ortega & Hergovich, 2017).

While all dating app users are susceptible to the paradox of choice, some apps are starting to limit the number of matches provided in an effort to combat the seemingly endless swipable pool of options. Other apps have moved away from the “resume-style” approach in which users get matches based on how many boxes a potential partner checks – noting that what we think we want is not always what is actually best for us – and instead started focusing on shared interests that may actually provide a better basis for an enjoyable and compatible relationship. Studies are also showing the lasting potential of relationships initiated online. For example, one study found that people who met online were slightly more likely to stay married and have a successful relationship than couples who met in person (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013).

And lastly, while there are ways we can use digital technologies to create added strains on the relationships we do have, we also can be more intentional about maximizing their potential to enrich our relational lives in ways that were not possible before. Valuable relationship maintenance behaviors such as positivity, openness, and
assurances (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2001) can be extended into mediated contexts to provide continued connection, thereby strengthening the relationship.

Positives too can be noted for many of the interpersonal phenomena that occur online. For instance, introverts report finding social media easier to engage because the asynchronous medium allows for deeper processing of information, and allows one to craft an appropriate message without the pressure of needing to respond immediately and in person. Online communities also allow us to find similar others. For example, social media such as Facebook provides access to in-group members where those individuals might be more difficult to find and connect with in person. Additionally, dating apps such as Match.com or Tinder can lead us to find partners who share similar interests and other bases of compatibility in a way that allows them to filter out undesirable partners without causing direct harm or hard feelings when rejecting them, as much of this is done without the target’s direct knowledge. Rejection overall tends to be easier to take and process when it occurs in mediated environments.

Conclusions

Current communication technologies appear to have a stronghold on our attention and lives, creeping into nearly every corner of our waking, and sometimes sleeping, moments. It is easy to consider technology, and its effects on humans and our relationships, as nothing but negative. Some users may exploit the affordances available from new media in order to marginalize, hate, attack, or threaten others. These toxic forms of communication are very real threats to others’ safety, and in recent history, the health of strong democracies. The deindividuated spaces in the darkest corners of the Internet illustrate how ugly the human psyche can be. As mentioned here,
however, the opportunities to present oneself to others in order to build (or dissolve) relationships, or to empathize with others, is also possible.

As Suler (2004) states, “The self does not exist separate from the environment in which that self is expressed” (p. 325). We present components of our self online, depending on the platform’s affordances (visual vs. text, ethereal vs. permanent), the purpose (communication with close or distant ties), and the audience (that of LinkedIn vs. SnapChat). Our mediated self might be the final instance where the sum of the parts is indeed, greater than its whole.

For all the hand-wringing about digital technologies destroying our interpersonal skills, there is evidence that they can be used effectively and constructively in the context of our relationships.
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