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HUMAN COMMUNICATION & TECHNOLOGY

On the need for spaces for discourse in human communication technology

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Little more than a decade ago, scholarly forays into social, mobile, and participatory media were met with cynicism by the academic community in the discipline of communication. On a paper submitted to a top-tier national communication journal, one anonymous reviewer commented that "While this study is methodologically sound, I would hate to see a journal of this quality publish anything that implied Twitter could benefit the classroom or society in general." To be fair, the study in question was a quantitative, descriptive research study that demonstrated correlation, not causation. Nevertheless, the centrality of social media to the study was too strong for the reviewer to ignore. The article (McArthur & Bostedo-Conway, 2012) later found a home in an interdisciplinary journal and remains one among a cadre of early published works on the impacts of social media in the classroom.

That review was career changing for me. First, it crystallized my interest in investing in the study of that fascinating intersection between human communication and emerging digital technologies. And second, it gave me pause about the relative availability of publication outlets for this genre research within the discipline of communication. Since that time, I've often wondered whether we as communication scholars are frightened that digital technologies might prove our expertise wrong. One day, perhaps, a new media tool might be invented that would overturn a theory that we hold dear. Or, maybe, the growing fear of the academic enterprise will become realized when idle banter of social media takes the place of deep thinking. What I discovered was that I need not spend my efforts concerned about finding a specific place that didn't yet exist in academic discourse. Rather, I needed to be contributing to that very discourse in a community of communication scholars.

Over the last decade or so, my colleagues and peers in human communication and technology lamented the need to move outside of the communication discipline (or at least toward its periphery) to publish research on social, mobile, and participatory media. We discussed which communication journals were open to articles that feature digital technology or social media or mobile devices, which book publishers offered contracts in these areas, and how to navigate the circuitous path of publication in interdisciplinary arenas. Meanwhile, at our national conferences, passionate affinity groups (see Gee & Hayes, 2010) surrounding

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digital technologies began to form. They took on mediated, subversive forms like tweet-ups, tribes, and social gatherings and they coalesced in the formally-recognized formats of both existing and new divisions and interest groups. Divisions like the National Communication Association's Human Communication & Technology Division that featured technology as a central feature were expanding and cementing their positions as rigorous and popular avenues for collaboration. And, interestingly, just as Gee and Hayes (2010) described, membership in these affinity groups bridged the typical divides of the professoriate and the communication field, connecting media researchers with rhetorical scholars, combining seasoned professors and researchers with eager graduate students, and attracting performative presenters, strategic communicators, and technical specialists – all of whom found digital technologies to be a growing facet of their work in communication studies.

One simple but illustrative example that captures the spirit of this decade of change can be found in a brief history of social media use at the National Communication Association conference. In 2009, Twitter was gaining widespread popularity just as the National Communication Association annual convention was about to be held in Chicago. A few weeks ahead of the conference, a small but boisterous group of regular attendees who were also early adopters of Twitter and other social media platforms adopted an unofficial conference hashtag – #NCA09 –to create a conference tweet-up to connect in-person those three dozen attendees who employed it. But NCA's first viral Twitter moment erupted at the conference the morning after the first-time attendee welcome session. A new attendee in the audience asked the panelists if the conference had a Twitter hashtag. In response, one of the panelists suggested that no one should be tweeting during conference sessions. Attendee Barbara Nixon live-blogged about the controversy in an article entitled, "First Do No Tweeting" (2009). The vibrant conversation that followed on Twitter about the snafu prompted NCA's leadership to issue a response on its Twitter page during the conference, using the unofficial conference hashtag: "Tweet restrictions during sessions are decided by presenters, not NCA. We do not have any policies against tweeting during sessions #nca09" (@natcomm, 2009, 11/13).

In 2010, at the conference in San Francisco, the association released its choice for conference hashtag: #NCA2010. Around 200 attendees used the official hashtag, writing over 800 tweets over the course of the weekend. The hashtag was met with opposition on Twitter by a few conference-goers who favored #NCA10 over #NCA2010. They argued that the "20" in the middle of the hashtag took away two precious characters for intellectual debate (At the time, Twitter rules dictated that tweets could not be longer than 140 characters, including spaces and punctuation).

The hashtag adopted for 2011 – #NCA11 – apparently satisfied the association's Twitter following and was used thousands of times over the course of the conference weekend, and the conversation has continued since. At the 2012 conference, Twitter aggregators and ecosystems collected and sorted tweets. By the 2015 conference, data scrapers and analytics were employed to study the nodes and clusters present in the Twitter conversation, and leaderboards chronicled the types and nature of conversations occurring in real time. And by 2019, users were

debating Twitter's future as a tool of connection. In one short decade, the debate around Twitter's efficacy rose, plateaued, morphed, and shifted.

As a sub-discipline of communication, our research in human communication and technology has done the same thing demonstrated by this brief history of Twitter use at NCA. With each new digital technology, researchers move through similar cycles (see Turkle, 2010). First, a debate pitting luddites against early adopters erupts as scholars argue whether the new-technology-du-jour is worthy of academic study. Next, students and scholars feel constrained by the idea that early adopters might know more than the rest of us. Then, the collective we gradually accepts the existence of the new technology and brings it into conversation. Finally, presentations and publications begin to explore the new technology by investing in the quantitative and qualitative methods that have grounded our study from the beginning of our field.

But what would happen if we let go of these steps? What might it look like for us to end our questioning of technology's worth and instead question what it has to teach us? How might we stop wondering how technology might threaten our expertise and instead start relying on our expertise in communication to interrogate it? These questions reflect our need to stop questioning whether a digital technology should be *worthy* of use, or study, or publication. Instead, let us continue to ask what the field of communication might offer through the study of communication patterns, practices, and processes that occur through these technologies (for examples, see Farman, 2011; McArthur, 2016; McEwan, 2017; Papacharissi, 2010; Wright & Webb, 2010). Excellent work in this genre questions how we consistently use communication theories and models to look broadly and specifically at new, emerging, evolving, and even defunct technologies. And it explores what insights these technologies have to offer for the enhancement and articulation of the communication patterns, practices, and processes that we model and teach every day.

These conversations have made their way into the forefront of academic conversation over this last decade. During that time, the barriers to publication waned, relatively speaking, and growing numbers of conference presentations featured emerging technologies. The intersection of human communication and digital technology is now a vibrant research area, replete with scholars from across the communication field. It has emerged as an area primed for collaborations with researchers and scholars with expertise in every facet of our discipline, including researchers in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intercultural communication to public relations, advocacy, and strategic communication, and spanning contexts from rhetorical, civic, and political communication to health, sport, and mass communication.

The communication discipline is uniquely suited to become a central hub for the study of societal impacts of technology because it has always been, even if our discipline has been reticent to accept it. Changes in technology change human communication. Fifty years ago, on the cover of *The Medium is the MASSAGE* (1967), Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore reminded us that "all media work us over completely." But our role as communication scholars is not to let social, mobile, and participatory media "work us over," but rather to engage in the conversation about the mechanisms whereby these media impact communication within and among individuals, groups, and greater society.

With the rapid growth and proliferation of social, mobile, and participatory media, the field of communication is ready for an additional, central journal that grounds conversations in the study of human communication and the impacts of digital technologies upon it. Journals like the well-established *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, the relative newcomer *Social Media + Society*, and the forthcoming *Human-Machine Communication* are situating specific aspects of these conversations in the communication discipline. But, many journals in this area foreground the technology piece of this conversation, privileging technology and using communication (or other related disciplines) as an adjacent consideration. The current journal's place in that conversation is clearly defined and adds a much-needed outlet for research that privileges the study of human communication as a foundational and central focus, and seeks out the best research where the study of communication and digital technology intersect.

The ten years described in this brief history of social media adoption by communication scholars is only a glimpse into one story among many in a broader narrative describing the need for productive and vibrant scholarship in human communication and technology, grounded in the discipline of communication. My hope is that this journal will add to that narrative through the addition of a new, centralized space that offers itself a gathering site for this work and a rigorous conduit for excellent communication scholarship.

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