Putting Communication First: Reccomendations for Studying Human Communication and Technology

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A new scholarly journal provides an opportunity to set a broad research agenda and encourage scholars to look at problems in new ways. What opportunity does the introduction of *Human Communication and Technology* offer? And, what will set it apart from other journals that focus on technology and communication?

Several journals focus on communication and technology such as *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, *New Media and Society*, *Social Media and Society*, and *Mobile Media and Communication*. Each of these titles begins with a word about technology. They emphasize technology first, which reflects a tendency across disciplines to focus too narrowly on new technology rather than considering how technology fits within the broader literature of communication theory. Overly focusing on the specifics of any given platform or application may produce in results with a limited shelf-life. Theories and empirical data lose value over time when their focus is an outdated technology (e.g., Myspace, BBS, AIM). Parks (2009) notes that "results that are here today can easily be gone tomorrow . . . [and] focusing on the newest applications can easily lead us to invest time and energy in applications with very limited prospects" (p. 726).

Alternatively, the title of this new journal, *Human Communication and Technology, puts communication first*. The point here is not about word order, per se. Rather, it is about keeping our research firmly grounded in the study of communication. Putting communication first means approaching questions about new technology through the lens of traditional communication theories and fundamental communication concepts. Next, it means considering how new technologies challenge traditionally dichotomous concepts of media and interpersonal communication. Finally, putting communication first means viewing technology-mediated communication as a ubiquitous feature of most personal relationships. In the pages below I explain what it means to put communication first and elaborate on why it can help guide researchers submitting their work to *Human Communication and Technology*.

What It Means to Put Communication First

Focusing on Fundamental Principles of Communication Theory

Putting communication first means using established communication theories to study new technologies. To increase the longevity of scholarly work, Parks pro-

poses, "sustaining and growing CMC research will require that we move beyond current [technology] fashions" and become much more serious about describing our phenomena of interest, situating those phenomena within the broader context of communication theory, and tracking CMC-related phenomena over time. (Parks, 2009, p. 727). Whether people are communicating in person or via technology-mediation, basic communicative goals remain relatively consistent. Regardless of technology, people pursue instrumental, emotional, and social goals (Caughlin, 2010). They engage in message exchanges involving persuasion, impression formation, social support, relationship management, self-presentation, and uncertainty reduction. These basic communicative goals and behaviors are useful conceptual starting points for understanding social behavior with new technologies and building a literature that remains relevant as technologies come and go.

For example, Caughlin, Basinger, and Sharabi (2017) employed earlier research on communication goals to explain how couples use technology during relationship conflict. Although the study of technology use in relational conflict is relatively new, Caughlin et al (2017) use the multiple goals perspective (Caughlin, 2010) to hypothesize that relational partners use technology-mediated communication in purposeful ways. The important question about technology here is whether and how people use technology-mediated communication to pursue multiple goals during relational conflict.

Similarly, Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal perspective is an example of how to study technology by focusing on fundamentals of communication theory. The hyperpersonal model is over 20 years old and was created to describe an online environment that no longer exists. Yet, it remains one of the most important and most useful conceptual perspectives for understanding technology-mediated communication. The reason the theory remains relevant is that it focuses on three basic communication processes: message production, message reception, and message exchange. This conceptual approach is not tied to any technology, platform, or app. Whether describing a BBS from 1996, Second Life, America Online Instant Messenger, Myspace or TikTok, the hyperpersonal perspective provides a way to examine how the unique affordances of different technologies contribute to, and alter, the basic building blocks of communication. Moving forward, the hyperpersonal perspective will continue to be an important resource for scholars studying new technologies.

Mass media research also provides stable conceptual ground for studying communication and new technology. Regardless of the specific media technologies a researcher examines, the study is more likely to remain relevant over time when it is rooted in conceptual foundations. Scholars use the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1983) to understand how new technologies are adopted and how their effects and use change over time (e.g., English, 2016, Liang & Kee, 2018). Meraz (2009) used the agenda-setting perspective (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) to study social media. The uses and gratifications perspective (Katz et al., 1973; Rosengren, 1975) helps researchers understand peoples' motives and goals across changing communication technologies (e.g., LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated how the elaboration-likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) can explain persuasion in social media (Nekmat, Gower, & Zhou, 2015). Messing and Westwood (2014) drew upon the theory of selective exposure (Zillman & Bryant,

1985) to explain political news consumption on social media. Each example here illustrates how fundamentals of communication theory can be used as theoretical starting points for studying new technologies. Since technologies change and new ones constantly emerge, research rooted in communication fundamentals is more likely to remain relevant over time.

Moving Beyond the Interpersonal - Media Dichotomy

Putting communication first means using a conceptual vocabulary that transcends the old disciplinary dichotomy between interpersonal and media research. Social media is a perfect example of technology that employs elements of both interpersonal and mass media communication. As personal relationships become more mediated, and as media becomes more social, researchers need a theoretical lexicon that spans the divide. This is no easy task -- for almost two decades, communication scholars have struggled with the growing ambiguity about how new technology fits into the traditional mass-interpersonal dichotomy (Caplan, 2001; O'Sullivan, 1999, 2005; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018; Walther, Carr, & Choi, 2010; Walther & Valkenburg, 2017).

Walther (2017) proposes researchers employ *metaconstructs* to transcend the old interpersonal-media dichotomy. Metaconstructs, are "cross-situational properties and processes that are likely to affect any instance of communication" (Walther, 2017, p. 560). Metaconstructs include *audience*, *channels, cues, temporality, interactivity*, and *message persistence*. We can study any communicative situation or new communication technology by considering these metaconstructs. Walther argues focusing on metaconstructs encourages researchers to "ask what and how important conceptual factors that originated within traditional mass/interpersonal domains exert influence in episodes that involve the convergence of mass and interpersonal" (2017, p. 562).

For example, focusing on *message persistence* can help us theoretically distinguish between in-person communication and any type of media phenomenon. For example, social media ads and personal text messages remain persistent over time while the spoken word and nonverbal cues are gone as soon as they are produced. Message persistence also gives us a theoretical way to distinguish cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Cyberbullies' abuse may remain persistently online whereas in-person bullying stops when the interaction ends.

In another example, the *audience* metaconstruct provides a conceptual tool for describing message recipients. Considering audience characteristics can help researchers understand any new communication technology and distinguish them from others. For example, one way to distinguish cyberstalking and cyberbullying is to consider the audience. Although both behaviors may be forms of technology harassment, the audiences are very different. The cyberbully performs for an audience of peers or on-lookers. Yet, the cyberstalker's behavior is intended for an audience of one, the victim. This small example illustrates how questions about audience and other metaconstructs can inform and guide research on new communication technology.

Technology is an integral part of relational communication

Putting communication first also means recognizing technology-mediated communication is a basic feature of today's interpersonal relationships. Future communication research needs to conceptualize technology-mediated interaction as a common way relational partners communicate, rather than as a special case. Parks (2017) argues, nearly all our relationships are now *mixed-media relationships*, involving both in-person and technology-mediated messaging. Increasingly, Ledbetter notes, "people live relentlessly multimodal lives." (2014, p. 456).

Media multiplexity theory is one example of an approach that views technology use as a given in close relationships. Haythornwaite's (2005) multiplexity approach was among the first to emphasize the importance of examining how relational partners communicate across different channels and technologies. The theory argues that people use multiple channels to communicate in relationships and that they use the greatest number of mediated channels in their closest personal relationships (Haythornwaite, 2005; Ledbetter, 2015).

In a similar example, the Communicative Interdependence perspective and research on modality switching asserts that in relationships, partners in-person communication is related to their technology-mediated communication (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Ramirez & Summer, 2018; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Moreover, these approaches also emphasize the importance of considering how connections across modes and how mode switching interferes with or facilitates relational quality. Here, the pattern of communication *is the message*. As Ledbetter explains, "the diversity of communication media employed in interpersonal relationships renders the association between medium and message one of considerable theoretical and practical exigency" (p. 457). Choosing to move a conversation from texting to talking in person *is* itself a *relationship message* that conveys information about intimacy, power, and relational quality (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967).

In sum, *Human Communication and Technology*, offers an outlet for researchers to employ communication theory to the study of technology and the many roles it plays in our lives. The argument presented above proposes that submissions to the journal consider how basic communication theory and concepts can help illuminate our understanding of new technology. Researchers should endeavor to develop models and approaches that are grounded in the basics of communication and such as the hyperpersonal approach, media multiplexity theory, and the communicative interdependence research. Similarly, recent perspectives such as Walther's metaconstructs and Parks' mixed-media relationships illustrate how detailed models of interpersonal and media communication can be integrated to systematically investigate new communication technologies.

We cannot imagine all the technologies that the future will bring. However, the basic theories of communication can help us predict people will use new communication technologies to establish and maintain personal relationships. It is likely that media sources will continue to frame messages and set agendas. We can hypothesize that new technology adoption will follow principles described by diffusion of innovations research. Scholars can also be certain that new communication technologies' effects will change over time as they are more widely adopted.

Regardless of the new technologies that await us, we can begin research on them by considering the metaconstructs outlined by Walther (2017). As we move toward the future, it is important to focus not only on what is new, but also what is relatively stable. By putting communication first, *Human Communication and Technology* represents an opportunity for communication scholars to place communication theory at the forefront of research on new technologies.

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