The Implications of the Internet for Human Communication

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Abstract

This article analyzes the positive and negative implications that the Internet holds for human communication. As such, it begins with a description of its effects on the amount and quality of human interaction. The main idea is that the Internet can diminish the quality of interaction in physical environments because individuals who rely mainly on the Internet to interact with others will tend to engage less in normal face-to-face conversation or be less competent in doing so. The amount of human interaction caused by the Internet depends on every individual online user (i.e., it might be higher online than offline, or vice versa). Another important section in this paper is the implication the Internet holds for the meaning of "community." In short, a virtual community, just like a community in a physical environment, looks like a gathering of people where there is significant social interaction, as well as reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication.

Keywords: Human interaction, communities, diversity, homogeneity.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the positive and negative implications that the Internet holds for human communication. As such, it begins with a description of its effects on the amount and quality of human interaction. The main idea is that the Internet can diminish the quality of interaction in physical environments because individuals who rely mainly on the Internet to interact with others will tend to engage less in normal face-to-face conversation (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002) or be less competent in doing so. The amount of human interaction caused by the Internet depends on each individual online user (i.e., it might be higher online than offline, or vice versa). Another important section in this paper is the implication the Internet holds for the meaning of "community." In short, a virtual community, just like a community in a physical environment, looks like a gathering of people where there is significant social interaction, as well as reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication. Yet, for scholars like Neil Postman (1993), integrating life into virtual communities is problematic because online users never find elements of accountability and mutual obligation as in the real world. Of equal relevance in this section is the extent to which relationships on the Internet are real. In some cases, they are more real than in real life because users, knowing that they can remain anonymous, will engage in more self-disclosure and, therefore, develop stronger – and more real – relationships. In other cases,

cyberspace is an opportunity for practicing the art of deception by faking an identity, swapping gender, etc.

In the next section, dealing with the implications that the Internet holds for the diversity and homogeneity of people, this paper particularly brings fresh insights to the field of intercultural communication. As very few analyses have been done on the contribution of the Internet to increased diversity and homogeneity of humans (and viewpoints), the authors develops the important point that the Internet offers greater diversity for intercultural communication. Also crucial is the emphasis on the homogeneity resulting from the Internet. For example, the Internet enables groups such as Jews to remain very homogeneous. This helps them preserve their cultures, traditions, and languages. Finally, this paper ends with the implications that the Internet holds for social networks. As such, (1) social networks are not fixed because the Internet enables "malleability" of relationships among users; (2) social networks on the Internet emerge mostly through email; and (3) social networks in cyberspace increase a sense of trust.

Amount and Quality of Human Interaction

The Internet, also called the "virtual world," or "cyberspace" (first popularized by William Gibson's classic *Neuromancer* in 1984), is both an environment and a complex system that is created and architected for the act of signification to take place (Matusitz, 2005). The Internet is a combination of textual interactions and virtual worlds that enable global communication among humans (Wellman & Hampton, 1999). Among the many ways of communication that cyberspace offers, Multi-User Domains (MUDs), emails, chat lines, and virtual reality simulations are notorious examples. Yet, one of the main concerns for the past ten years has been that the Internet has fundamentally influenced social interactions among humans, to such a point that, for some of them, the "technoculture" (that is, the set of computer-mediated relationships among individuals) is the only culture that they know and identify with. Humans, by nature, grow through social interaction. By definition, social interaction takes place "in a social setting" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 134). The implications of accessing the Internet for the amount and quality of human interaction, however, can be profound. In fact, not only can the opportunities for human interaction on the Internet develop a sense of immersion and social engagement far different from whatever sensory or motor realism can provide (Schiano, 1999), but, also, our collective behavior has changed as a result of instant or anonymous interaction as it is in cyberspace.

This, in effect, can diminish the *quality* of human interaction in normal, physical settings. People who are shy, reserved, or unwilling to engage in face-to-face conversation will naturally find the Internet very useful in conquering geographical and psychological barriers in order to communicate with others. For them, it is like a new strategy to break the ice with strangers. This reflects the notion that it is not possible to "detect" nonverbal cues online. So, individuals who are intimidated by others' various expressions are now more able to tread less cautiously. Nevertheless, the more they rely on the Internet to interact with others, the less they engage in normal face-to-face conversation with people or the less competent they become at communicating with others, which has a negative impact on the quality of human interaction (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). By extension, for scholars like Sherry Turkle (1995), cyberspace has radically changed human interaction because translating life expectations to *life*

on the screen (which is actually the title of her book) is not very feasible. For instance, in the physical world, the public space has boundaries; people are used to a certain level of privacy and control over their interactions because the average face-to-face interaction remains in the context where it was presented. Yet, any individual who has access to the Internet has the opportunity to speak their mind without caring too much for the rules of "social etiquette" in real life situations. Because some people do not like to conform to the "rules of social life" (i.e., to be polite, not to be rude, to say "thank you," etc.), they will try to find a chat room online, knowing that interpersonal etiquette does not apply on the Internet.

Regarding the *amount* of human interaction resulting from the Internet, there are two trains of thought on that issue: on the one hand, some believe that the Internet does cause a reduction of the amount of human interaction (i.e., Aragon, 2003; Leh, 2001); on the other hand, some believe it does not (i.e., Walther, 1996, 1997). The reason it is hard to say whether the Internet increases or decreases the number of interactions among individuals lies in the fact that it all depends on the user. Some users will spend the whole day in front of the screen and make tons of friends in the "digital" realm (and, in the process, they will have less friends in the "physical" realm). Other users will devote only ten minutes of their time to chat online and spend the rest of their free time socializing with, say, their fraternity brothers or go to a bar, to the gym, etc. Studies have shown that frequent email users have more ties than those who just communicate via the cell phone or telephone (Xiong & Brittain, 1999). In other words, the number of interactions that avid email users have is higher online than in real life situations.

Meaning of Community

The word "community" implies that a group of people share the same environment and that all individual subjects in that environment have something in common. A community on the Internet is called a "virtual community," a word coined by Howard Rheingold (1994) when he wrote a book of the same title. A virtual community is formed by Internet users at their own choice and there are several positive implications.

The Positive Implications

First, although there has been much debate about the implications of the Internet for the meaning of "community," it can be argued that many features of communities in the real world are also present in the digital realm. For example, a virtual community can be considered a "real" gathering of people where they communicate, like in a physical environment, create webs of personal relationships, and strengthen weak ties over time, even if everything occurs in cyberspace. In fact, a virtual community can be a great opportunity for social interaction that enables both reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication (Slevin, 2002). Such interactive communication is a necessary factor for a series of online messages to make obvious the existence of a virtual community. Internet users join such communities to socialize, in the same way that they would go to a cocktail party in order to meet people, flirt, tell stories, and share interests with one another. A virtual community even allows their users to "lurk" without "participating" (Lindlof & Schatzer, 1998). Virtual communities revolve around bulletin boards, electronic mailing lists, chat rooms, Usenet, MUDs, IRCs (Internet Relay Chats), etc. According

to Rheingold (1994), a virtual community emerges from the Internet when there are a sufficient number of people who carry on public discussions, with adequate human feelings, to connect in an online "space." So, a virtual community is more than just an array of computer-mediated communication messages; it is a sociological phenomenon.

Another positive implication is that members of virtual communities can actually benefit from an improvement of their own psychological well-being. Even society at large can be improved. By sharing a set of similar interests (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998), such as fandom for a musical group or shared beliefs and principles like sexual orientation (Jones, 1997), members of virtual communities have many opportunities for enhanced and interactive communication that is less possible in immediate physical environments (McQuail, 2000). Virtual communities can be as enjoyable as real communities. Both can have the same features, including social interaction, common goals, a sense of identity and belonging, norms and rules (whether written or unwritten), with possibilities for exclusion or rejection of community members. In addition, in cyberspace there are also rites, practices, and forms of expression (McQuail, 2000).

A third positive implication is that a virtual community has the additional advantage of being extremely open and possible, while real communities are often hard to enter. The main reason is that membership in a virtual community is essentially anonymous, and participation and interaction in on-line discussion is not mandatory (and can also be anonymous). This is oftentimes part of the attraction (McQuail, 2000).

The Negative Implications

The implications that the Internet holds for the meaning of community can also be negative. For example, for Rheingold (1994), a virtual community is a hyper-realistic illusion where Internet users seek "refuge from the destruction of human communities" (p. 15). Likewise, for a scholar like Neil Postman (1993), the adoption of a virtual community is detrimental because it lacks the important element of accountability and mutual obligation present in real-world communities. Weinreich (1997) corroborates this argument by saying that virtual communities will never resemble physical communities because a physical community is a collective of kinship networks with a common geographic territory, a common history, and a shared system of values, usually embedded in a common religion. Another negative implication is that some features of online interaction would never exist in the real world. As described in the next section, on the Internet any user can deceive anybody else without being detected. One can easily swap gender, race, and age in order to reach goals that would not be reachable in normal life. Interactions on the Internet can reach a state of bogusness that is not comparable with the fakeness that humans encounter in real-life situations. Consequently, one might reasonably argue that the meaning of the word "community" on the Internet is nonsensical. By the same token, although the Internet has some features that are not conceivable in the real world, the opposite also happens. Real-life communities possess features that can never be present in virtual communities (i.e., touching, smell, taste, hearing, etc).

However, just because the two communities do not share exactly the same features, or just because a user swaps gender or does not share someone's religions and values, does not mean that the user does not care for that particular someone. It is quite the contrary. The Internet gives

individuals the opportunity to know other individuals for who they are and not for what faith they believe in, what they look like, or how they dress. These are a few examples among many, but the more relevant question that is raised is the following: how do we integrate our human experiences in online communities? To best answer this question, let us analyze the extent to which relationships enacted through the Internet are real.

To What Extent Are Relationships Enacted through the Internet "Real"?

We have just seen that real communities possess some features that can never be present in virtual communities. Nevertheless, online users can do many things people do in the real world. In some ways, some of the people one "meets" on the Internet are even more real than the people one passes on the street. One reason is that the Internet provides an unlimited storage of information (a.k.a., the "infosphere") available to any user. Online users can create Web sites that describe their own biographies, interests, and goals. Those sites are also opportunities for visitors to discuss topics of mutual interest. Because users already have specific knowledge about a person they have just "met," it is easy for them to start a meaningful relationship. Sometimes, it is done very quickly, even if that person is still a stranger. Attempting to develop a close relationship in a real-life situation very fast would be a little riskier. After all, everybody knows the saying, "Don't talk to strangers."

Another reason is that the Internet presents people with an opportunity to form relationships with each other anonymously, without disclosing their real identities. Most chat-room and IRC users maintain their relationships by using screen names. In many cases, they cannot identify each other's names, ages, addresses, phone numbers, marital statuses, etc. Being anonymous enables users to discuss sensitive issues that they would avoid in the real world and, from there, build more genuine relationships. This is not to say, however, that all Internet users choose to remain anonymous. In fact, users who can divulge their true or inner self to others on the Internet usually do it better than in face-to-face situations. Consequently, they are more willing to develop close relationships in cyberspace and they tend to incorporate those relationships into their "real" lives (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). What cyberspace really does is encourage online users to be themselves and express what is on their minds. This, in turn, makes relationships online more real than they actually are offline. In cyberspace, they are free to tell their earnest secrets and to connect at a depth that friends rarely do face to face. Plus, as mentioned earlier, the fact that the Internet enables so much anonymity appeases the fear of individuals who want to engage in self-disclosure during online interactions, because they can share their inner beliefs and emotional reactions with less apprehension or concern about disapproval and sanction (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

Another reason that explains why some relationships on the Internet are more real lies in the fact that, online, "gating features" to the establishment of any close relationship are usually absent (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Put it another way, because there is no physical encounter, there is less apprehension surrounding negative signs that transpire during first interactions. Therefore, there are less barriers to authentic communication. The words "barriers" and "apprehension" are exactly what the authors mean by "gating features;" these refer to perceptible features like "awkward" physical appearance (i.e., a feeling of being ugly-looking), visible stigmas such as stuttering (McKenna & Bargh, 1999), or discernible shyness and social anxiety.

Because there is no visible social anxiety, shyness, or stuttering in online relationships, users have the freedom to "liberate" themselves and carry more meaningful conversations (rather than insignificant discourses that we often hear offline). Real human relationships on the Internet can develop and last for a long time. As one can see, the Internet solves many of the problems that prevent true relationships from linking people to one another in real-life situations.

However, not all relationships on the Internet are real. There are many virtual communities where users will never be able to find out who is who in front of the computer screen. A certain number of people who interact with others in cyberspace are "performers," deliberately altering their identities (Matusitz, 2005). On the Internet, no one knows if the user is a senior citizen, a serial killer, or a computer-whiz kid in a college dorm room. Rheingold (1994) contends that online identities are not always genuine or revealed. We saw earlier that the Internet allows much freedom. Part of this freedom, though, is not only the benefit from having a "wide" and "spacious" environment (i.e., no constraints of space, time, and distance, as we will see later), but also the freedom of self-invention, such as intentional gender swapping (Turkle, 1995). It might be the case that the relationship one thinks has with a member of the other gender is actually a same-sex relationship. The "other" is just joking around, killing time, but certainly not pursuing a real relationship. Furthermore, new media offer an array of stars and icons from which online users can borrow bits and pieces of public personas in order to interact in cyberspace (Matusitz, 2005). The goal for some web users is to create an imaginary or borrowed self, with a fake ethnicity, religion, family background, civil status, historical affiliation, or lifestyle. To re-imagine oneself through what Turkle (1995) calls "reconstruction of self" seems like an empowering concept.

Truly, relationships on the Internet can be both real and fake, depending on the intention of the online user. On the one hand, anonymity and the "freedom" of cyberspace allow individuals to go more in-depth with other online users (i.e., more self-disclosure, etc.). On the other hand, users can also abuse this anonymity and freedom by engaging in profound acts of deception. What comes next is an explanation of the implications that the Internet has for the diversity and homogeneity of people.

Diversity and Homogeneity of People

McQuail (2000) wrote, "You do not need to be rich and powerful to have a presence on the World Wide Web" (p. 139). The Internet is just a chance for everyone, regardless of gender, age, race, religion, or political affiliation, to express a great deal of expression, information, and diversity. Put it another way, in the digital realm, there are no limitations as to how one can be or with whom one can communicate. The Internet, for many, is considered a second self, where users can take on any identity they want, whether real or fake. The ultimate implication of this is that the Internet allows for an immense opportunity for diversity by facilitating the development of greater acceptance of others. This, in turn, allows for a diversity of individuals to meet and blend together with less risk of "clashing" against each other (a phenomenon that would very likely happen in the "real" world today; the news constantly talks about clashes of cultures, races, sexes, religions, etc.). The risk is less important on the Internet in that no physical harm can be directly inflicted during a clash.

In line with these contentions, Gibson (1984) argues that cyberspace is a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation" (p. 51). For him, it is an unlimited and "unthinkable complexity" (p. 51), with clusters and constellations of data. Because cyberspace does not have the limitations that are present in the real world (i.e., constraints of space, time, and distance), there are many opportunities for developing a vast array of connections with groups that would unlikely be reached in the physical realm. For instance, users in Oklahoma can easily connect with users in Northern China, and create and strengthen ties with them by sharing ideas, developing exchange programs, etc. This also demonstrates that the Internet offers direct communication among people and among people*s*, making them aware of cultural differences. They are more in direct contact among each other (thanks to e-mail and other Internet-based communication tools) than they were in the past (Sefton-Green, 1998). Ultimately, both the expansion and enrichment of the amount of diversity through the Internet offer great promise for intercultural communication.

On the other side of the coin, one might argue that the Internet holds a significant implication not only for the diversity but also for the homogeneity of groups of people. In this context, what the Internet does is open channels of communication between many small groups that share the same history, cultures, beliefs, and/or language around the world. For example, the Internet has greatly contributed to the intensification of the "worldwide Jewish connection." Jews have been spread out around the world for centuries, what we call "the Diaspora." While some Jewish populations went to Brazil, others when to places like the United States, Turkey, etc. The good thing is that the Internet has enabled them to create programs and organizations that allow them to remain very homogenous. One such organization is *Hillel*, the foundation for Jewish campus life. Although Jews have somewhat managed to remain together even before the advent of the Internet, Jewish leaders have taken significant advantage of the digital realm to promote *Hillel* worldwide in order to strengthen the bonds of "Jewishdom" among Jewish college students. All this boils down to saying that the Internet can be an effective tool for homogeneity for those groups that immigrated to other countries and that feel isolated. Now, they can benefit from the Internet for worldwide communication (by keeping their language and culture thanks to cyberspace). Truly, the Internet is a way by which people can expose themselves to the world... and to themselves. It facilitates the survival of small cultures.

Of equal relevance is the power that the Internet holds for the diversity of viewpoints. In the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan (1962) suggested the idea of a "global village" when he analyzed the media. His "global village" was the notion that humans would be joined together around the Earth through electronic communication. Today, the "global village" can also be used as a metaphor to describe the Internet as a tool for globalizing communication by allowing users worldwide to connect with each other. The major implication is that the Internet provides immediate access for all who want to express themselves and an excellent opportunity for shared dialogue and exchange of viewpoints. As McQuail (2000) puts it, the Internet contributes to a more equal and liberated society.

In the same perspective, for most users, the Internet remains the best "diversity-oriented" electronic medium existing today. The Internet, as opposed to media such as cinema, television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, is highly accessible; almost anybody can post information, pictures, texts, and express their viewpoints without seeing them distorted. Any user can create a

Web site. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, promoting freedom of speech and expression, is more applicable in the context of the Internet than other media. Political voices even encourage us to turn the digital highway into a sphere of action and freedom. Put simply, the Internet is a valuable vehicle for creating awareness of our own viewpoints, but also others' viewpoints. More knowledge of others' opinions makes users more aware of the others themselves. Beyond doubt, the Internet encourages diversity. It is an excellent occasion for understanding many different cultural ideas and beliefs, a chance for carrying out social protest, and a great prospect for letting dissenting voices speak out.

The last section of this paper describes how the Internet highly contributes to the formation of social networks. Social networks are the ultimate tool for individuals to communicate among each other. A brief definition of social networks is provided, which lays the ground for the explanation of three major implications that the Internet holds for them [social networks].

Social Networks

A social network refers to a group of objects, entities, or people, and the relationships between these objects, entities, or people (Lipnack & Stamps, 1986; Scott, 1991; Scott, 2000; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social networks are group support systems. They are supportive in that they "are created through coordinated activities and relationships that permeate organizational boundaries" (Stohl, 1995, p. 23). Social networks in cyberspace exemplify the success of globalization of communication. There are three implications that the Internet holds for social networks: (1) social networks are not fixed because the Internet enables "malleability" of relationships among users; (2) social networks on the Internet emerge mostly through email; and (3) social networks in cyberspace increase a sense of trust.

The first implication that the Internet holds for social networks is that they [social networks] in cyberspace are not fixed; they are very malleable (Buchanan, 2002). This is due to the fact that social networks on the Internet are built upon a new type of organizational structure: a structure that is horizontal, flat, and contingent upon flexible communication relationships. The principle here is that interconnections through the Internet are made in an "all-channel" manner (Bavelas, 1950; Leavitt, 1951), which means that potential linkages can be established very quickly anywhere and at any time, regardless of space, distance, and time. The Internet makes senseless the distance and the time – between subjects – that is necessary to be defined as space. The Internet, then, composed of information rather than matter, allows networks to spring up like mushrooms after the rain. It also allows networks to disappear like cats in the dark. By creating a virtual space and fostering, in the minds of online users, new conceptions of space, by making any physics of spatiality inexistent, the Internet does not only extend geometry; the Net, as Mitchell (1995) suggests, also negates geometry; it is fundamentally and profoundly antispatial. It is nothing like the Piazza Navona or Copley Square. You cannot say where it is or describe its memorable shape and proportions or tell a stranger how to get there. But you can find things in it without knowing where they are. The Net is ambient-nowhere in particular and everywhere at once (p. 8).

The second implication is that social networks on the Internet emerge mostly through email. In fact, scholars have demonstrated that email offers great insight into a person's social network

(Garton, et al., 1999; Rice, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Wellman & Hampton, 1999). Since the advent of the Internet, email has been its most popular use. When online, individuals regularly communicate with each other through email messages (PEW Foundation, 2001). Via email, individuals can remain in contact with loved ones, colleagues, digital strangers, etc. These interactions reveal attributes about individuals, including their social networks. Indeed, there are some email accounts that allow users to list "friends of friends" so that they, too, can be contacts in a social network. The rule is that as long as the contacts are not friends with known spammers, then it is "ok" to receive emails from them. This also implies that the more friends, the bigger the social network in cyberspace. Social networks can have sub-networks, like hybrids; they can be a combination of networks within networks, with numerous nodes linked in various ways. By the same token, for email groups, the social network perspective can be used to examine the specific kinds of exchanges that define the groups. It has been reported that online groups may be based on socioeconomic characteristics that also guarantee access to information (Furlong, 1989).

The third implication is that social networks in cyberspace increase a sense of trust. The need for trust in social networks becomes more evident as users spend a lot of time online and increasingly use the Internet for doing commerce, communicating, and socializing. If information is passed to an individual with minimal ties, it is unlikely that the information will spread far. For this reason, one's social network is a considered factor when valuable private information is being shared (Krackhardt, 1999). So, trust plays a significant role in social networks, which means that connections are important. In order to create connections, an initial group of Web site founders sends out messages selecting members of their own social networks to join their Web sites. This is a sign of trust right there. New members, in turn, attempt to increase the total number of members and links in the social network. Web sites can provide incentives such as automatic address book updates, profiles, and other forms of online social connections.

Discussion

What this paper has demonstrated is that the Internet represents a profound cultural revolution in global communication, one that has radically changed our lives. The Internet not only expands our understanding of human interaction, our meaning of the word "community," and our social networks; it also expands our horizons, minds, and capabilities to organize new ways to incorporate our offline experiences into cyberspace. The implications that the Internet holds for human communication are huge; and everything is just a mouse-click away. No wonder why the Internet is the world's fastest-growing communication medium.

As we have seen, although the Internet can diminish the quality of human interaction in normal, physical settings, it can also contribute to an improvement of the psychological well-being of online users. This is possible in a virtual community, whether it is a chat room, a MUD, or an IRC. A virtual community, just like a real-world community, looks like a "real" gathering of people where there is significant social interaction, as well as reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication. Both types of communities can be driven by goals, norms, and rules common to the members. More importantly, relationships can even be more "real" online than offline. One reason, the author suggested, is that the Internet allows individuals to develop relationships with others anonymously, without disclosing their real identities (i.e., name, age, gender, etc.).

Another reason is that "gating features" to the establishment of any close relationship are usually absent. After all, in cyberspace, there are no barriers such as stuttering or social anxiety.

Furthermore, the Internet immensely contributes to increased diversity and homogeneity of people and viewpoints. In fact, for some, the Internet is the only "diversity-oriented" electronic medium existing today because it is a valuable vehicle for creating awareness of our own viewpoints, but also others' viewpoints. On the one hand, the Internet offers greater diversity, to such a point that people who are from different cultures are more in direct contact among each other than they were before the advent of the Internet. On the other hand, the Internet also enables groups to remain more homogeneous. An internetted world can also make all isolated groups remain together to preserve their cultures, traditions, and languages. Future communication scholars should do more work on the impact of the Internet on intercultural communication. Of equal importance in this paper is the last section, on social networks. The Internet's ability to make things float in an organizational structure that is horizontal, flat, consisting of flexible communication relationships is just magical. It not only negates the concepts of space, distance, and time that are so essential in the real world, but it also allows online users to remain in contact with loved ones, colleagues, and even strangers through a great digital invention: email. Email communication discloses attributes about individuals, including their social networks. Social networks increase a sense of trust as well because they allow valuable private information to be shared.

Nevertheless, despite everything mentioned above, the author made the point that the implications of the Internet for human communication can also be negative. For example, studies have shown that the more humans rely on the Internet to communicate among each other, the less they engage in face-to-face conversation or the less competent they become at communicating with others, which can negatively impact the quality of human interaction (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Another problem of integrating life into virtual communities is the regular absence of important elements of accountability and mutual obligation present in real-world communities (Postman, 1993). And, of course, not all relationships on the Internet are real. One can easily lie, pretend to be a star, or even engage in a same-sex relationship by swapping gender. In many cases, there is no way to detect who is actually typing messages on the computer keyboard.

Undoubtedly, the Internet is a powerful medium for communication. It may actually be rather upsetting to those who are used to the long-established methods of communication. In fact, it is even fair to say that digital technologies, initially designed to facilitate the communication of information among humans, are becoming communication themselves, rather than machines or computation devices. So, McLuhan (1964) was right when he said that the medium was the message. No matter what, the future of the Internet and global online communication will continue to lift the world for generations to come. But let us not be pessimistic: as the Internet becomes more important, we can still remain very humanistic.

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