Preface

Welcome to the Information Age, an age of instant access to the most diverse and arcane knowledge at almost no cost, and where electronic signals are starting to replace in value the bulky manufacture goods that used to define the wealth of nations, companies, and individuals. And this is just the beginning.


Roughly two decades ago, concepts such as communication and community were thought of in terms of physical space. Within this paradigm, the individuals with whom one regularly interacted were persons who were physically “close,” and distance-based relationships often suffered from delays related to regular post mail and the costs of long-distance phone calls. Moreover, the community to which one belonged was also closely linked to real-world proximity. That is, one’s friends often lived in the same town or region, and social interactions – particularly frank and deep conversations – were almost exclusively done face to face.

Today, however, advances in technology and with computers have started paradigmatic shifts in communication norms. These shifts have, in turn, markedly affected human communication at almost every level. Technological advances certainly facilitate the speed of communication, making distance between communicators almost inconsequential. Moreover, the kinds of materials individuals can exchange via computer networks has evolved from simple, typed text to a range of real-time and time-delayed audio and video files. The effects of computers on communication, however, go far beyond factors of speed and ease of communication. Indeed, computer mediated communication (CMC) has changed the ways in which people socialize, conduct business, use language, and even form their own identities. Now, the community to which one belongs is often more a matter of participating in chat sites dedicated to similar interests vs. the walking or the driving distance between community members. As Stephen Doheny-Farina (1996) explains, CMC offers us, “the opportunity to construct utopian collectives—or communities of interest, education, tastes, beliefs, and skills. In cyberspace, we can remake the world out of an unsettled landscape” (p. 16).

Broadly defined, computer mediated communication can be described as any form of information humans present or exchange by means of a computer. This information can be imparted to oneself, to another person or group of people, or even to an imaginary audience. Likewise, CMC can be a one-to-many or one-to-one transaction, a synchronous (real time) or asynchronous (time delayed) process and involve modes of interaction as diverse as typed text, spoken discussions, or visual/video messages.

The types of software affecting CMC are numerous and increasing every day. E-mail, text messaging, video and audio players, social networking web sites, wikis, syndicated feeds, bulletin boards, and blogs are just some of the software enabling people to communicate.

Consider the examples of programs and software, and combine them with the number of hardware devices and networking available, and the ways in which people employ CMC multiply exponentially. Free wireless connections are commonly found in hotels, coffee shops, college campuses, downtown areas
of cities, and bars. iPhones™ and Blackberries enable users to connect to e-mail, blogs and other CMC devices from almost anywhere. Cell phones can access the Internet, and advances in wearable computing are beginning to blur the line between reality and science fiction. Furthermore, the speed with which such technologies emerge and evolve—and the effects such changes can have on social practices—can leave one’s head spinning. As Mark Stefik (1999) explains, “in ‘Internet time,’ what seems like years of change can happen in only a few months” (p. xi).

This degree of connectivity has altered almost every form of human interaction. Romances can blossom online, and such relationships can lead to life partnering in which the loved ones might meet for the first time on their wedding day. Likewise, CMC has transformed the classroom from a physical place to a state of mind—a virtual place in which the mutual interests of the participants create learning communities that span the globe. The office has similarly melted into a merger of CMC and face-to-face interaction and created work relationships in which employees might never set foot in a corporate facility.

Moreover, these developments have made us all increasingly global citizens. Half a century ago, the prospects of meeting persons from other cultures was reserved for the few who were fortunate enough to travel abroad. By contrast, the first decade of this new century sees individuals from different nations coming together online to do everything from exchange ideas to work on projects to engage in video gaming. Thus, the CMC paradigm is not a phenomenon that is limited to one culture, region, or linguistic group. And as Internet communication technologies become cheaper and more varied in form (e.g., cell phones with Internet capabilities), the number of interlinked online global citizens will surely grow.

Like all new developments, such societal changes bring with them new benefits and new limitations, and we have only recently begun to come to grips with the impact online media can have on our lives. For this reason, the topic of CMC is and must remain one of continual exploration, examination, and discussion. Only through the continual exchange of ideas and opinions on CMC can any of us begin to grasp the richness cyberspace has to offer and the implications it can have for our real world existence. This edited collection is a step toward continuing the exchange of such ideas.

The sheer size of the CMC landscape is impossible to address within the pages of a single publishing project—and perhaps within the text of an entire series of books. This handbook however, presents 69 chapters that can provide readers with an introduction or a foundation to a number of key factors related to the CMC paradigm. The chapters contained in this handbook represent the ideas, insights, and opinions of some 90 authors from numerous institutions—both public and private—and almost a dozen nations. While such a treatment is by no means comprehensive, it does bring together a relatively large range of materials that examine different facets and features of the same topic. As a result, this handbook has information that would be of value to academics, researchers, industry representatives, educators, and lay persons alike. Thus, while this edited collection might not be a truly comprehensive or a definitive source, it is a far-reaching one that can be used to establish a foundation of knowledge across a wide range of readers.

With any reference work, the idea of creating categories for organizing information can be problematic. In many cases, an entry might fit well into a range of topical categories. In other cases, an item might not seem to fit well in any category or not be related to any other entry in a collection. While there is no perfect solution to this situation, the editors of this collection have divided the contents of this volume into five sections that we feel represent major categories of interest for the widest audience of readers interested in CMC issues.

The handbook’s first major section, “CMC Approaches to Education and Instruction,” examines how educational and training practices have changed and might continue to change in response to advances in online media. The chapters in this section examine everything from the potential uses of CMC in higher educational contexts to how developers and designers can best prepare users for participation in CMC environments and the use of computer networks in everything from library instruction to midwifery.

The second section, “Credibility and Identity in Cyberspace,” examines how the plasticity and the open access nature of virtual worlds and online media are changing the ways in which we view both what
is considered “credible” information and how we think about the identities of both ourselves and others. The chapters in this section cover topics such as the shifting nature of credibility in CMC environments and the use of CMC in both creating identities and deceiving others. As a result, the chapters in this section provide readers with a new way to consider what is “real” and how aspects of virtual and real worlds combine to affect our perceptions of who we are and how we relate to the world around us.

“CMC, Community, and Information Exchange,” the Handbook’s third section, provides different perspectives on how different technologies and social practices related to CMC affect the way humans exchange ideas and opinions as both individuals and as parts of greater online communities. These chapters explore topics such as information dissemination via online publishing, the nature of what it means to belong to a community, and how online media are affecting both our uses and thoughts on language and on sharing ideas and materials.

The authors in the handbook’s fourth section, “Tools and Technologies Related to CMC,” present ideas and opinions on the uses and implications of different kinds of online media. These treatments cover more conventional modes of online communication, such as email, relatively new methods of discourse such as podcasting and blogs, and the implications of emerging technologies like optical transport networks and Web 2.0. By combining these perspectives of technologies into this section, the editors hope to provide readers with a foundation for thinking about online media—and the prospects it has for advancing human interaction—in new ways.

The handbook’s final section extends this idea of interactions from the local to the global. Entitled “Cultural and Linguistic Issues in CMC,” the entries in this concluding section explore how the quick and easy international access provided by CMC is changing not only the ways in which we think about language and culture, but also how we view ourselves as members of a greater global community. The related chapters examine issues such as the rise of global culture as facilitated by CMC, the use of online media to teach individuals about the language and culture of different groups, and how media involved in international online environments is affecting the language we use for such exchanges.

Though this five-part format, the editors have tried to organize information into units that can help readers better understand the effects CMC is having on different aspects of our lives. The editors also hope that the chapters in this collection will spark reader interest in a range of topics and thus prompt readers to go out and participate in and contribute to the growing base of knowledge and opinions related to CMC. Thus, this book is an initial step in understating CMC, but one that is designed to encourage and empower readers to take the next step that can help us all better understand the evolving relationship between humans and computers.

REFERENCES


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