

## Preface

### **CONSIDERING COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES**

#### **The Global Nature of Cyberspace**

At present, almost 2 billion people have access to the Internet (Adair, 2010; Internet usage statistics, 2010). Moreover, with each passing day, the number of individuals gaining online access seems to increase almost exponentially. While the majority of the planet's Internet users do reside in industrialized nations, online access in the developing world has risen rapidly in recent years (Whitney, 2009; High speed Internet access, 2010). The number of citizens with online access in China, for example, has grown from 22.5 million persons to almost 420 million individuals in the last decade (Internet usage in Asia, 2010). And as technologies such as mobile phones increasingly permit inexpensive and easy online access, the number of Internet users worldwide will only continue to expand (Mobile marvels, 2009). These factors beg the question "How is the increasingly international and intercultural nature of the Internet affecting the ways in which individuals act and interact online?"

Answering this question is no easy task, for doing so involves addressing a broad range of factors including culture, language, technology, law, and economics – to name but a few. The complex nature of the question, however, does not mean it should not be asked, nor does it mean that initial initiatives cannot be undertaken to address it. Rather, through a series of small yet focused steps, individuals can begin to unravel the complexities of computer-mediated communication across cultures. The key to taking these first steps is participation and collaboration: By working together across national, cultural, and linguistic lines, individuals can collectively participate in international projects that begin to reflect the scope and scale of online interactions in the modern global age.

#### **The Collaborative Process**

This collection represents an international collaborative approach to examining online interactions from different national and cultural perspectives. To explore the topic of computer-mediated communication in global contexts, the editors have assembled the work of over 40 authors from academia, education, and industry. These individuals represent different perspectives related to understanding the continually changing nature of today's global Internet. They also represent perspectives from 15 nations and from different fields of study, educational traditions, and industry sectors. The result is a volume of 28

chapters that focus on a range of aspects affecting how individuals present ideas, exchange information, and discuss topics in international cyberspace.

The development of these chapters, moreover, represents an exercise in international collaboration via online media. For example, several entries are co-authored pieces written by authors who were living in different nations and interacting via Web-based technologies to produce their chapters. The process of developing each chapter, moreover, relied heavily on collaboration involving computer-mediated communication. To begin, all of the initial manuscripts submitted for this collection were read and assessed by reviewers from over a dozen nations. These reviewers provided authors with suggestions and comments for how to develop and organize their chapters within the context of the overall collection. This entire process was driven by online media that were used to share materials, ideas, and opinions across a globally distributed pool of individuals. Finally, the collection's editors used a range of online media – involving both more conventional technologies (e.g., email and Web pages) and newer social media (e.g., Skype and Facebook) to collaborate with authors in the final stages of manuscript development.

Interestingly, all of these interactions transcended time and space – the traditional barriers to collaboration and communication. More importantly, these interactions also involved aspects of culture and language – the newly emerging barriers affecting collaboration in today's online world. Thus, the development of this edited collection represents many of the ideas explored by the contributing authors.

## THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS COLLECTION

The primary objective of this text is to provide readers with introductory information, initial insights, and different perspectives on linguistic, cultural, technological, legal, and other factors that affect international online exchanges. The idea is to impart a foundational understanding of computer-mediated communication across cultures. Readers can then use this understanding to make more effective decisions about the applications and the design of online media used in global contexts. Prospective readers might include

- Executives, managers, and other decision makers who need to make informed choices about how their organizations can use online media to address growing global markets
- Marketers, service providers, and support personnel who increasingly use online media to communicate with international clients about products or services
- Researchers (both academic and corporate) studying international or cross-cultural discourse in online environments
- Educators who increasingly find their online courses comprised of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Educational administrators who seek to manage the increasing number of international students participating in online programs and who seek to expand their online programs to attract more prospective students located in other nations
- Administrators of international non-profit agencies that increasingly use online media to disseminate information to different nations or to interact with workers and service providers in different nations
- Individuals interested in learning more about this topic area in general

What is important is readers view the overall collection and the individual essays it contains as a foundation for guiding future activities. In this way, this collection should be considered a kind of collab-

orative text – one that encourages readers to learn more about the topics covered in the various chapters and to use that knowledge to continue the ongoing conversation around such topics.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS COLLECTION

To help readers examine these issues and achieve these objectives, the editors have organized the collection into three relatively broad sections. Each section is dedicated to a general theme related to computer-mediated communication across cultures. The chapters in each section then provide different information, ideas, and perspectives associated with that general theme. The organization of the chapters into these three thematic sections does not, however, mean the ideas presented in a chapter only apply to one specific thematic focus. Rather, the purpose of this organization is to help readers better understand the wealth of perspectives and the breadth of topics that can converge around certain contexts created by global cyberspace.

In essence, online media are technologies centered on relationships (Gasner, 1999; Kalawsky, Bee, & Nee, 1999; Olaniran, 2007). That is, these technologies focus on presenting information to others (e.g., Websites), interacting with others (e.g., email), or both (e.g., Facebook). Thus, a study of online media is, in essence, a study of the changing nature of relationships facilitated through such media (St. Amant, 2002b).

The book's first section, "The Changing Nature of Relationships," provides an introduction to cultural, linguistic, technical, and legal factors that can affect how individuals use online media to engage with the greater global community. The entries in this section explore how online media shape the ways in which individuals in different parts of the globe create and maintain relationships. These entries also examine how cultural perspectives on what relationships are and how relationships are created and maintained affects uses of Web-based technologies. Finally, these entries present new perspectives on the notion of community – particularly what constitutes a community and how do individuals become part of different communities created through international online interactions.

Online media also present interesting contexts associated with the notion of representation. That is, the plasticity of online media can allow the users of such media to present themselves in a variety of ways when interacting with others (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993; Turkle, 1995). As a result, online media make it very easy for the lines of truth and fiction to become blurred (St. Amant, 2002b).

The ease with which individuals can access and can use such technologies, however, can allow smaller cultural and linguistic groups to participate on the global stage. Such participation, moreover, would not generally have been possible in the pre-Internet age (Danet & Herring, 2007; Erikson, 2007). Thus, online media can facilitate the representation of different cultural groups in the greater international online discussion of issues. Addressing both aspects of representation requires an understanding of factors affecting one's ability to participate in global online exchanges. The book's second section, "The Emerging Trends in Representation," explores these aspects of presentation and participation in global cyberspace.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and intriguing prospects of global cyberspace involves education. The increasing use of online media in different educational contexts means it is now easier than ever before to have students in different nations collaborate in the same online class (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008; Starke-Meyerring, 2008; Flammia, Cleary, & Slattery, 2010). Such international collaborative experiences can help students develop the foundational knowledge and skills needed to interact more effectively in international online exchanges (St. Amant, 2002a; St. Amant, 2005).

Effectively taking advantages of this situation is no easy feat. Rather, the more guidance, insights, and cases educators have for addressing such new pedagogical situations, the more effectively they can take advantage of them. The entries in the book's third and final section, entitled "The New Context for Education," provide readers such ideas and information. The chapters here do so by focusing on available technologies, approaches to using such technologies, and the prospective students interacting in such contexts. The entries in this section thus provide readers with practices and perspectives that can facilitate the globalization of online or hybrid classes.

## CONCLUSION

Computer-mediated communication across cultures is an inherently complex and nuanced thing. Such aspects should not, however, dissuade individuals from examining interactions in global cyberspace. In fact, an understanding of such interaction can be essential to effective participation in today's global society. By gaining a broad, foundational understanding of factors affecting international online exchanges, individuals can make better and more-informed decisions about how and when to participate in the greater global online community.

The entries in this collection can provide readers with the foundation needed to understand some of the aspects affecting computer-mediated communication across cultures. The collection, however, should not be seen as a comprehensive reference on the topic. Rather, readers should view this collection as a mechanism they can use to make effective and informed decisions related to using online media international contexts. Readers are therefore encouraged to further explore the ideas and perspectives examined in this collection. They are also encouraged to apply the concepts and test the theories, for only through such active collaboration with ideas can we further our understanding of this topic.

*Kirk St.Amant*  
*East Carolina University, USA*

## REFERENCES

- Adair, D. (2010, October 19). Internet users to surpass 2 billion. *Indie Pro Pub*. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from <http://indiepropub.com/internet-users-to-surpass-2-billion/311248/>
- Danet, B., & Herring, S. (2007). Multilingualism on the Internet. In Hellinger, M., & Pauwels, A. (Eds.), *Handbook of language and communication: Diversity and change* (pp. 554–585). New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Erikson, T. H. (2007). Nationalism and the Internet. *Nations and Nationalism*, 13(1), 1–17. doi:10.1111/j.1469-8129.2007.00273.x
- Flammia, M., Cleary, Y., & Slattery, D. M. (2010). Leadership roles, socioemotional communication strategies, and technology use of Irish and US students in virtual teams. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 53, 89–101. doi:10.1109/TPC.2010.2046088

- Gasner, A. (1999). Globalization: The changing face of the workforce. *Business Today*, 36(3), 43–44.
- High speed Internet access in Africa takes off. (2010, June 21). *Stratsis Incite*. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from <http://stratsisincite.wordpress.com/2010/06/21/high-speed-internet-access-in-africa-takes-off/>
- Hiltz, S. R., & Turoff, M. (1993). *The network nation: Human communication via computer*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Internet usage in Asia. (2010). *Internet World Stats*. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>
- Internet usage statistics: The Internet big picture. (2010). *Internet World Stats*. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>
- Kalawsky, R. S., Bee, S. T., & Nee, S. P. (1999). Human factors evaluation techniques to aid understanding of virtual interfaces. *BT Technology Journal*, 17, 128–241. doi:10.1023/A:1009687227736
- Mobile marvels. (2009, September 24). *The Economist*. Retrieved November 25, 2010, from <http://www.economist.com/node/14483896>
- Olaniran, B. A. (2007). Challenges to implementing e-learning and lesser developed countries. In A. L. Edmundson (Ed.), *Globalized e-learning cultural challenges* (pp. 18–34). Hershey, PA: Idea Group, Inc.
- St.Amant, K. (2005). An online approach to teaching international outsourcing in technical communication classes. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 35, 191–201. doi:10.2190/H7MP-GJJH-1MHG-KPH6
- St.Amant, K. (2002a). Integrating intercultural online learning experiences into the computer classroom. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 11, 289–315. doi:10.1207/s15427625tcq1103\_4
- St.Amant, K. (2002b). When cultures and computers collide. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 16, 196–214. doi:10.1177/1050651902016002003
- Starke-Meyerring, D., & Wilson, M. (2008). Globally networked learning environments: Shaping visionary futures. In Starke-Meyerring, D., & Wilson, M. (Eds.), *Designing global learning environments: Visionary partnerships, policies, and pedagogies* (pp. 218–230). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Starke-Meyerring, D. (2008). Genre, knowledge and digital code in Web-based communities: An integrated theoretical framework for shaping digital discursive spaces. *International Journal of Web-based Communities*, 4, 398–417. doi:10.1504/IJWBC.2008.019547
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Whitney, L. (2009, June 16). Global broadband access on the rise. *cnet News*. Retrieved September 8, 2010, from [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1035\\_3-10265421-94.html](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1035_3-10265421-94.html)