CONFERENCE REPORT

Exploring the Confluence of Communication and Technology at the 2013 Eastern Communication Association Convention, April 24-28, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

The oldest professional communication organization in the United States, the Eastern Communication Association (ECA) brings together faculty, students, and communication practitioners to share knowledge, teaching practices, and the latest research within an array of communication-related areas of inquiry. With the grand theme of *Confluence*, the four-day convention included panels, workshops, and sessions that offered "ideas from various perspectives of communicator, message, channel, and context to better understand how humans create meaning and relationships" (ECA, 2013). As a whole, ECA participants investigated a wide range of issues related to technology's impact on society, which were expressed throughout such divisions as Political, Interpersonal, Health, and Cultural Studies. A call for understanding the potentials and perils of communicating in a digital world came to the forefront of the convention discussions. As a presenter and attendee, the author shares her observations and reflects on current research themes, challenges, and areas of concern brought about at the conference.

A FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH

The relationship between communication and technology was an area of interest for many ECA divisions. With a mission to foster the exploration and dissemination of information and communication technologies that are transforming human experience, the Communication and Technology interest group sponsored panels

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centered on the changes in technology enabled public and private discourse, interactive technologies, online identities, and e-learning (ECA, 2013). Communication and Technology interest group chair, Peter W. Galarneau, Jr., of West Virginia Wesleyan College, pointed in an interview at increased attention to social implications of the latest Internet-based technologies (personal communication, April 25, 2013). According to Galarneau, communication and technology interest group members are scrutinizing the significance of social technologies as a major "conduit for relationships." The widespread adoption of social networking sites ignited discussions of "perceived threats" such as privacy and self-disclosure concerns. Galarneau explained that issues related to disclosure are not new to communication scholars; however, the tools and platforms used to communicate have changed and allowed for a greater number of people to be engaged within shared, public networks.

Technology-Mediated Political Communication

An information-rich media environment has transformed socio-political behavior, which became one of the central themes related to technology-mediated political communication. Results of several studies confirmed that political communication is undergoing distinct changes with communication messages moving into the hands of users who can rapidly mobilize with others, editorialize news items, and fundraise remotely. New media have enabled individuals to communicate political dissent and rally for change using shared images, text, and video. Anwer (2013) referred to the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, and the 2008 Obama presidential campaign as examples of the altering of political discourse due to increased user-generated content. Other scholars addressed the use of technology-mediated communication in political campaigning. For instance, Sawyer (2013) considered language, technology, and persuasion in her study of cell phone usage to engage others in political discourse. Similarly, Eisenhart (2013) analyzed email as a method of connecting with voters. In investigating the role of participatory technologies and the changes in political participation, Simone (2013) asked: "Are Social Networking Sites Building Bridges to Nowhere?" Researchers looked both optimistically and cautiously at the effectiveness of digital activism efforts.

Interpersonal Relationships and Social Networking Sites

The convergence of technology, language, and social processes was another communication phenomenon examined throughout the 2013 ECA convention. Citizen journalism is becoming increasingly common, while a new agenda-setting role has formed with the self as a "window of society" (Bowman & Westerman, 2013). Yet, analysis suggested that too much self-disclosure of private information on social networks may create negative impressions of the sender. Distinct language patterns and norms ("lol," "u," overuse of exclamation marks, etc.) have emerged in technology-mediated communications such as email that are now being used by different age cohorts in a variety of social settings (Jewett, 2013; Payne, Holding, Abel, Crowe, & Smith, 2013). Researchers emphasized, however, that such language fragmentations, or language variants, may lead to false impressions and disjointed message meaning in the process of communication.

From the advent of social media, social networking sites have been an area of special interest for scholars, and papers abounded that focused on interpersonal relationships and impression formation as a result of Facebook usage (Gerding & Trask, 2013; Langstedt, 2013; Stewart, Goodboy, & Dainton, 2013). In one such study, self-disclosure or increases in the level of Facebook activity were said to lead to lower satisfaction in romantic relationships (Dainton & Berkoski, 2013). The

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influence of online social networks in altering relationships, identities, roles, gratification, interpersonal disclosure, and message perception was another topic of discussion. Langstedt (2013) revealed the roles of message source or receiver in predicting certain social network site gratifications. McMahan et al. (2013) explored the development of identities and relationship maintenance within social networking sites. As a whole, the diverse analyses raised questions as to how Facebook activity may impact the quality of relationships offline.

Health Communication and Online Support Communities

Examinations of blogs, discussion boards, and online support communities were of particular interest to those within the Health Communication interest group. Given that people frequently participate in social networking sites and online forums to gain social support and health information, researchers addressed issues at the intersection of health, personal safety, and technology. Rivera (2013) shared findings related to the influence of Facebook groups on teen driving behaviors. In the panel *Women and Health: Messaging Women's Health through Nontraditional Venues of Social Support*, Clemons (2013) considered the use of social media to communicate health and wellness messages among African American women. Other papers developed the taxonomies of reasons for using online health communities and the types of feedback users received after extensive content analyses of self-help Internet discussion groups and blogs (Amsbary & Powell, 2013; Zaitchik, 2013). In online support communities, members are offered prescriptive responses, validation, and esteem. Differing processes for social interaction are encouraged within online support groups when compared to traditional settings. According to one study, while therapists in traditional settings typically guide people away from offering advice, members of online support groups often dispense advice to their peers (Asbury & Powell, 2013). Shame, guilt, and isolation are reasons that users turn to online support communities. However, the difficulties in knowing whether online support communities are truly effective and what are potential pitfalls should also be acknowledged.

Cultural Norms, Values, and Attitudes towards Technology

Against the backdrop of an increasingly digital society, participants focused on the different cultural dimensions, value orientations, and attitudes towards technology implementation in various settings. For example, Malin's (2013) paper, "Bats with iPads: Media Physicalism and the Promise and Peril of New Technology," argued: Rhetoric continues to play a role in technology. The analysis of "media physicalism" revealed how media depictions of technology manifest ideas about identity, class, and cultural power. According to Malin, Western stereotypes shape technology usage and the cultural and gendered beliefs that are often associated with the promotion of technological products.

Additionally, studies addressed how the public makes meaning and interacts with cultural objects. Gaming technology, smart phone apps, and touchscreen installations can be combined to create interactive experiences for visitors throughout a museum and remote experiences for those who cannot visit. Using a phenomenological approach, "Enhancing Museum Experiences through Technology: The Louvre's Implementation of the Nintendo 3DS" (Wheeler, 20013) uncovered a disconnect between the public's need for entertainment and the historian's desire to hold museum works as "sacred" and untouched by technological gadgetry. The discussion centered on the ways in which mobile and social technologies are forcing museum curators and visitors to rethink the vision of cultural heritage and museum space.

Hackley and Leidman (2013) examined attitudes towards implementing technology into traditional environments like religious

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educational institutions. As a pilot study, they introduced the e-learning tool, Moodle, to Sunday and Hebrew schoolteachers at a Jewish congregation. Although the teachers agreed to participate in the study, they were hesitant to fully incorporate a new instructional tool due to beliefs that it would depreciate the personal and spiritual connection associated with religious studies. Thus, Hackley and Leidman concluded that theological values might play a considerable role in the adoption of interactive learning tools.

Complexities of Public and Private Online Spaces

Other scholarship grappled with the expectations, challenges, and pitfalls of broadcasting information about identity, relationships, and activities within social platforms. For instance, Carlson (2013) addressed online privacy and self-disclosure on photo sharing social networks. Although individuals are becoming more involved in activities such as texting, emailing, and blogging, Binnie (2013) asked whether these communication practices are truly strengthening human connections or dividing them. In the paper titled "Ethical Concerns for Social Media: Private Issues in Public Spaces," Alemika (2013) felt that the increase in networked communication technologies has enacted a public expectation of access to an individual's location, status, and history. Goldman et al. (2013) studied how Facebook users share messages simultaneously in mass and interpersonal communication channels—a practice that fosters discourse about privacy and message intensity in public and private spaces. Applying communication privacy management theory to observe message appropriateness on Facebook, their study proposed that individuals have control over the message channel, privacy level, and context within social networking sites and this ability leads users to judge levels of perceived appropriateness. Research on public and private spaces illuminated questions about the integrity of relationships and the right to privacy.

Challenges of Communicating in a Digital Age

Throughout the convention, participants investigated not only the advantages but also the negative aspects of technology—particularly the consequences of interacting and maintaining relationships within technology-mediated formats, anonymous online outlets, and SMS text messaging devices. Specifically, they discussed the harmful, deceitful, or emotionally abusive communication exchanges which are enabled through technology-driven interpersonal communication. An entire panel was devoted to examining how students experience cyberbullying and the role of such communication traits as cognitive flexibility (Ball, Carton, & Quirk, 2013; Johnson, Lancaster, Spellman, & Tyler, 2013). There was some apprehension about the difficulties in addressing the "growing dark sides" of computing, including cybercrimes, online hate speech, and system attacks (Anwer, 2013). Although transparency in location and activity is often considered a positive side of emerging technologies, participants delved into the deceptive aspects of mediated social interactions. Wise (2013) studied deception and texting behavior using interpersonal deception theory. The challenges of interpreting emotions via text messaging were additionally expressed by authors who investigated the different characteristics of nonverbal communication such as response latency or the use of emoticons (Dussan, Foster, Cupp, Kurdelchuk, Pritts, & Kulik, 2013; Payne, Holding, Abel, Crowe, & Smith, 2013; Stonko, Pennington, Kisner, Fleming, Taschereau, & Raffa, 2013). New communication technologies and platforms are pushing nations to reevaluate, address, and frame legal and social issues (Jones, 2013). Bodnar (2013) took a retrospective look at privacy, wiretapping, and GPS tracking as it relates to the Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Anwer's (2013) historical examination of regulation and accountability challenges in cyberspace delineated a "wild,

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unfettered" landscape and questioned how anyone could govern a borderless cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, the body of research shared at the 2013 ECA convention reflects notable societal changes, including: transformed socio-political behavior, complexities of public and private online spaces, new language norms, and challenges of communicating in a digital age. A number of participants analyzed immersive social and learning experiences and questioned whether online platforms offer beneficial opportunities or undermine the human ability to appreciate cultural content. While users are increasingly becoming voracious consumers of digital media, scholars contemplate the role of various institutions in promoting and implementing technology. Given that private and public identity is often intertwined within online spaces, the consequences of online self-disclosure are continually explored. Yet, despite a general consensus that social technologies have become a source of positive connections and engagement, research shows that in some cases Internet-based communication may lead to negative outcomes. Collectively, conference participants demonstrate how the veil associated with social implications of digitization and technology-mediated communication can be successfully removed through interdisciplinary efforts and subsequent deliberation. With technology headed in seemingly limitless directions, a variety of inquiries reveal the importance of studying the particularities of an emerging Internet-based culture and new patterns of technology adoption. In addition, the convention theme has aptly described the state of communication practices as confluence of interpersonal and mass communication practices, public and private life, and online and offline behavior are becoming even more blended. Last but not least, the conference offered many professional development and networking opportunities through short courses, graduate and undergraduate poster sessions, and social events.

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