Chapter 3

Textual Expectations, (Dis)Embodiment, and Social Presence in CMC

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ABSTRACT

This chapter adds depth to current theoretical approaches to the idea of social presence in computer-mediated communication by integrating ideas from deconstructionism, subaltern studies, phenomenological/dialogic approaches, and media ecology with current CMC perspectives on the (dis)embodied nature of CMC communication. The relation of the physical to online social environments naturally raises the question of the ways these environments inherit heteroglossic social expectations from other communication/media genres, especially from written media and from face-to-face conversational interactions. Ultimately, these inheritances, together with their ethical considerations, show that a variety of perspectives, even those that seem to be conflicting, simply serve to illuminate various aspects of the CMC environment and the ethical ramifications thereof.

INTRODUCTION

Many social scientific researchers studying computer-mediated communication (CMC) become quickly aware that the idea of bodily absence, or that of the connection of CMC to the lived-body, becomes a particularly important topic to unpack, yet few have deeply addressed this subject. Much social scientific thought regarding online interaction in computer-mediated communication approaches this question from one of two seemingly competing theoretical perspectives. The first school of thought moves under the assumptions of social presence theory (Mehrabian, 1969; Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976), specifically theorizing that communication through disembodied media will produce less intimacy between those communicating due to a lack of nonverbal cues. The second school most generally approaches it using Walther’s hyperpersonal perspective, which states that the primarily text based environment of the internet and its concomitant lack of non verbal
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cues increases both the speed and opportunities for people to foster interpersonal relationships. (Walther, 1996).

Many social scientific researchers have approached these and related concepts empirically using quantitative methods (Birnie & Horvath, 2002; Cho, Trier, & E. Kim, 2005; Hian, Chuan, Trevor, & Detenber, 2004; Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005; H. Kim, G. J. Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Min, 2007; Nowak, Watt, & Walther, 2005; Sohn & Lee, 2005; Watts, 2007). We do not seek to challenge or replicate that or related work, but rather to draw on critical, philosophical, and media ecology theories to deepen the understanding of various aspects of both of these approaches, particularly their axiological dimensions. The purpose of this chapter is not to take sides among the two approaches just listed, but rather to show their complementarity. This complementarity, we argue, makes sense in light of CMC’s cultural/social status at the intersection of (face-to-face) conversation and textual/written communication, whose cultural expectations clash depending on how people approach this hybrid space. In approaching this hybrid media space, we propose to present a deeper approach by way of explicating the way the lived-body is reconfigured through the online environment, which in turn inherits a variety of expectations from the way the lived-body interacts within/through both written media and face-to-face social environments. As explicitly articulated first by Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1969), the term lived-body refers to the ways in which as bodies we are always more than objectively or subjectively given. Rather, through our sensory capacities we make room for more than the here and now. In this way, our bodies are temporal and spatial clearings through which world (in the Heideggerian sense), objects, and others come into being (Anton, 2001). In other words, in our view of the body subjects and objects are not separate entities but rather are mutually arising correlates of one another.

The seeming conflict between the two perspectives noted above raises questions of whether the disembodied nature of CMC creates a space of exclusion, allowing for miscommunication and lack of depth, or a positive space, inviting engagement and feelings of intimacy. Dreyfus (2001) serves as an exemplar of the first approach as he argues that a lack of both psychological and physical presence contributes to depression and loneliness, saying that

This surprising discovery shows that the Internet user’s disembodiment has profound and unexpected effects. Presumably, it affects people in ways that are different from the way most tools do because it can become the main way its users relate to the rest of the world. (2001, pp. 3-4)

This idea resonates with McLuhan’s quip that the medium is the massage, which means that we shape our mediums and they in turn work over and shape us (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Those espousing this perspective might point out the potential anxiety that arises from lack of bodily cues in the online environment and the feeling of vulnerability that might attend online social situations as a result. One example might be that of a blogger who releases regular blog postings and knows people are reading them by viewing the blog’s stats, but, since it is not a face-to-face situation in which he or she could read visitors’ non-verbal cues, rarely gets comments in response and wonders what people think. Facebook has recently responded to this phenomenon by not only allowing people to comment on nearly everything posted by their friends, but also to click a link to show that they “like” something one of their friends has posted.

In contrast, Wellman states that the space has its “affordances” that can be positive or negative, arguing that online environments can be used to form or maintain either weak or strong ties among individuals (Wellman, 2001). An example of this perspective would point out that while the
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