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## The Loss of Culture: The Changing Role of Communication

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# The Loss of Culture: The Changing Role of Communication

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Although, tradition serves as a core common ground for a culture's identity, today, technology has been instrumental in breaking down cultural tradition into specialized areas within the communication discipline. When examining various contexts of media and technology, we see the role of tradition begin to fragment. However, this same media and technology also presents future possibilities of coherence and continuity for the discipline of communication. Through examining differing contexts of technology's affect on tradition in culture, we can explore tradition(s) lost and found; traditions that may limit, integrate, or even establish a new found structure to help promote the common ground of tradition in the communication discipline.

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**T**he Canadian communication theorist, Harold Innis (1964) introduced the concept of time and space-based modes of communication, positing that "time-based modes contribute more elements that are essential to cultural identity than those based on space." This paper examines different types of contemporary communication including, blogging and social networking and explores how they limit or contribute to cultural identity. This paper also explores how these technologies can be applied to university programming to promote a less fragmented communication discipline that contributes more wholly to cultural identity.

Innis' central focus is the social history of communication media. In his book, *The Bias of Communication* he claims that the relative stability of cultures depends on the balance and proportion of their media. He suggests that to further understand this, one should ask the following questions; "How do specific communication technologies operate? What assumptions do they take from and contribute to society? What forms of power do they encourage?"

As we take Innis' questions and apply them to today's communication media we must look at how the social and technical have come together in today's society and explore the intersection of technical and social practices to see how this intersection has impacted cultural identity. Although Innis considered time-based modes of communication more stable and humanistic, this paper will demonstrate how, despite the space-based nature of communication media like the Internet, it can be just as stable and humanistic as more traditional modes. Examples will be

shown that suggest that the only loss of culture resulting from the digital age is the loss of culture as we knew it.

### **Communicating in the Digital Age**

The Internet age is still only in its infancy and how our culture will adapt to being socialized in an online world is still only speculative. Getting to the core however, of this technologically-mediated communication mode and understanding the distinct interplay between social practices and technology is the key to understanding the impact it will have on cultural identity.

First, let's take a step back to understand the web and how it operates. Web 2.0, the second generation of web-based tools, represents a huge shift in the development and deployment of information. Essentially this means that technology is now able to push information out faster than ever before and content is constantly changing. For business this has been seen as positive. At first businesses were uncomfortable with certain elements of the 2.0 culture such as social networking and blogging. Unsure of the viability of relinquishing so much power to its customers, many businesses shied away from it. Today social network sites like Facebook™ and My Space™ and micro-blogging sites like Twitter™, have themselves become big businesses and, through them, other businesses are finding more intelligent ways to interact with audiences. Social networking sites are enabling people to come together to communicate in one big worldwide conversation. Recognizing the power of this one public voice, businesses are starting to recognize how essential it is to be part of the conversation. By engaging customers online, businesses get instant access to communities, instant feedback, and influence people.

In addition to the business implications, the Internet has also significantly impacted the way humans socialize and understand the notions of private and public space.

The way the world perceives private and public today has changed radically as a result of the Internet. These changes have been seen as both negative and positive. Some argue that these changes have had a detrimental impact on society but many of the changes have in fact created a more personal and engaging social style. Initially, many media theorists described the digital world as alienating and isolating, and highlighted only the negative implications ignoring many of the positive changes. One such theorist, Cass Sunstein (2002), a law professor from Harvard Law school, in his book, *Republic.com 2.0*, argues that information access gives us ways to avoid information we don't want, searching out only information with which we agree, thereby avoiding public discourse and limiting a healthy exchange of ideas. Journalist Nicholas Carr (2008), in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, states that the Net, with its constant stream of information seems to be chipping away the capacity for concentration and contemplation and says that his mind now expects to take in information in swiftly moving particles. Once a

scuba diver in the sea of words, he now “zip[s] along the surface like a guy on a jet ski.”

### **The Humanizing Characteristics of Digital Technology**

Today the positive implications associated with the Web 2.0 revolution are beginning to be realized. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed out in the 1960s that media are not just passive channels of information; they also shape the process of thought. The Internet based interactive mode of communication is certainly shaping the way people think today. While there is no doubt about technology’s positive impact on society historically, from the influence of papyrus to the Guttenberg press, the impact of today’s technology and its potential for positive change are slow to be realized. However, with digital media we begin to see an emergence of a process of thought built on interaction and dialogue and a system that has altered how individuals understand the concepts of public and private. New communication tools, grown out of a digital online communication system that includes such methods as blogging and social networking, are currently impacting society’s public and private worlds. These tools are having a significant impact on both the way people are interacting and on the way they perceive the notion of public and private space.

### **Fostering Interaction and Dialogue**

When we look at blogging for example, we see a tool that specifically motivates its participants through a desire for dialogue and engagement. Although many filters do exist, as Sunstein and others suggest, people tend to abandon their filters when blogging and responding to blogs, in an effort to make life more interesting. Opposite to Sunstein’s theory of selecting only information that is in accordance with one’s own views, we find people actually seeking out contrary views in pursuit of lively exchanges and interactions. For if everyone agreed, what would people have to talk about online?

Social networking, as well, with its unique emphasis on interactivity, offers infinite opportunity to connect with people and develop relationships. There is a strong emphasis on friends. In fact, the word is often used as a verb, as in to friend someone. Even the meaning of the word has changed. When someone has friended someone online, it means they have invited him or her to enter their sphere of communication, not necessarily to become a special confidant. This allows people to come together and develop new and larger social circles without necessarily sharing too much of themselves. In this way social networking has been influential in broadening the meaning of friendship. While some people engage in online communication to speak to people they already know, there are others who come together online because of similar interests. Take for example, a website called meetup.com, where people with shared interests, from Mozart to ballroom dancing, plan meetings and form clubs. Initially, socializing on the Internet started as a friendship-based environment, a place to go to chat with

people you know, but now it includes interest-driven environments as well, where people seek out people with shared interests.

### **The Changing Concepts of Public and Private**

The collaboration of environments that has come about as a result of social networking sites has also changed the traditional notion of public and private. Now as a result of networking sites participants are reconfiguring their ideas about public spaces to include a public space built on both friendship and shared interests. While this concept existed before, social networking has made it possible to enlarge the sphere of a public space by including virtual spaces as well as physical ones. danah boyd, a Fellow at the Harvard Berkman Center for Internet and Society, has conducted extensive research on teenagers and what they do with websites like MySpace™ and Facebook™. boyd (2008) contends that, for teenagers, being on social network sites forms the basis of their identity and without being present on them they feel they do not exist. She says that these sites provide teenagers with an opportunity to escape social isolationism and live out online what they would have done in actual physical public spaces. In this way it is no different then socializing at the mall or the schoolyard as in earlier eras.

Today many teens are not permitted to go out alone because of the many more dangers that exist in today's society and often live far away from each other so they rarely have the time to get together. The Internet becomes their primary social outlet. In this way social network sites have become the new public space. But with a new concept of public space comes a new set of distinct characteristics that help define it. boyd describes these characteristics as: Persistence, Scalability, Replicability and Searchability. She describes persistence as the idea that things stay forever online so that when people presents themselves in a certain way at a certain point in time, that that representation will be permanently accessible. She defines scalability as the concept of a larger size audience and the notion of an invisible awareness, the idea that you don't know who you are talking to and therefore, how to talk to them. She states that replicability is the ability to copy and change things so that what you have said can be altered by others and finally searchability she describes as the idea that everything can be searched and therefore everything is visible.

With a public space defined by these parameters, and the rules that come with it, we see public and private converging in new ways. Although understanding and abiding by these unspoken rules make it more difficult to protect one's space, young people today understand these unspoken components of communicating online and approach it accordingly. Being aware of them is key to ensuring that the newly converged private and public space is not violated.

Similarly, blogging has also changed the way we view and experience privacy. Although there is a sense that blogs have somehow invaded our private space, in actuality we share as much, or as little, as we choose. Regular updates that people share publicly with friends on blogs and on sites like Twitter™ and Flickr™ are

ways of maintaining social contact. Many opponents of microblogging sites such as Twitter™ argue that caring about the minutia of other people's lives is absurd, wasteful and a violation of an individual's private space. But as we continue to explore the impact of this media, we begin to see the emergence of a new kind of privacy, a privacy that provides an antidote for the loneliness often associated with our fast-paced society. Communications consultant Leisa Reichelt (2007) says the regular updates that people share with friends and followers on microblog sites add up to what she refers to as "ambient intimacy." She describes ambient intimacy as being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that one wouldn't ordinarily have access to because of the restrictions of time and space. This allows us to feel closer to people we care about but in whose lives we are not able to participate as closely as we would like. In a sense, ambient intimacy is a way of making people feel less alone.

### **Shifting the Balance of Power**

Today's technology with its speed of deployment and self-selecting characteristics, has changed the balance and proportion of the media and in so doing has impacted culture as Innis suggests. However, what these technologies have contributed to society may be far more stabilizing and empowering than theorists originally thought. Digital technologies have shifted the balance of power to the many and in so doing has helped create a more encompassing community that communicates more frequently and encourages dialogue.

### **Education in the Digital Age**

Recognizing that there is a new way of communicating that is substantially impacting our culture and empowering our students to be active participants in the dialogue, how can educators take this knowledge and incorporate it into university programming? Although digital tools are not replacing books, writing, and the need for face-to-face interaction, they are taking their place alongside the traditional methods of education. As young people continue to develop socially in an online world, educators will need to approach them differently in order to reach them. The net effect of these technologies is that learning needs to be more participatory, more self-directed, and more collaborative. Today's generation of students live in a media-rich world and, as such, need content that reflects their every day existence. Media outlets such as NBC News and the *New York Times* have created archival databases that help teach courses from politics and history to arts, culture and science. Students today need more engaging up-to-the-minute content. They need to be able to ask questions and design and build materials themselves through classroom blogs, podcasts and video streaming. Such changes may be driven by technology and its impact; however, these changes demand the response of educators and a shift in the way they are reaching out to students.

Although it may seem at times that technology has created overwhelming challenges and, in some ways, has blurred the lines between public and private, there are other results of digital media that have impacted our culture in positive

ways. Unquestionably, the online world has changed our culture and brought about new ways to navigate socially. However, these technological shifts have, in many ways, generated a level of discourse and intimacy that adds to—not takes away from—our cultural identity.

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