

THE IMPACT OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND CHANNELS
ON HISTORICALLY BASIC CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This article describes how new communication technologies and channels of communication are impacting historically basic channels of communication. This impact is described as being an incremental and evolutionary process rather than a blunt transition. A main theme stressed is that historically basic channels of communication, strongly grounded in our five senses, are affected through reduced use. But, even though these historically basic channels of communication are used less, the patterns of their usage are still ingrained in us from years of evolutionary development. The new communication technologies and resulting new channels of communication pose a challenge because of their constant change, redefinition and varied application. The posited outlook for the future is that we will continue to evolve with the new communication technologies but still be grounded in more historic basic channels of communication due to thousands of years of emphasis.

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The continual progression of changes in how we interact as a result of new communication technologies that have evolved during the past one thousand years, and especially the past 100 years, have affected how we relate with one another and know ourselves as a society. Such communicative developments have included written forms of communication, the printing press, telegraph, radio, film, musical recordings, telephone, television, computers, phone message machines, beepers, cell phones, e-mail, internet and other modes of communication.

The new communication technologies have extended our communicative grasp. However, in the process of extending our grasp, we may have overreached our natural bounds and created a void in the process. From the beginning of humanity until about 1,000 years ago, human beings interacted via very basic forms of interpersonal communication. These forms of communication were basic in that they were grounded in the five senses, but complex in that they drew from our five senses in various kinds of combinations that created unique pathways for meaning to travel through. For example, meanings of some types of messages were grounded in the verbal/hearing but were enhanced significantly via touch and sight/visual. Other pathways stressed sight/visual primarily with little from other channels. Still others might've drawn from degrees of smell. The role of context helped dictate the pathways to be used in a certain circumstance.

As an illustration, consider the process of food acquisition. Today we merely do a trip to a grocery store to obtain what we need to eat. A thousand years ago this would have

been a much more complex task. It would have required hunting as a skill and degrees of skill with food preparation. Hunting was much more a survival skill rather than a recreational phenomenon that it is today.

Walking through a forest, searching for animals with others from your group, would draw from the senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste in unique manners dependent on specific contextual variables. One would use these senses in situation specific ways to watch for animals and fellow hunters, listen for nature's sounds that might indicate animal behaviors, smelling for residue left by various creatures, touching physical components of the forest to feel for clues of recent animal movements, and tasting various types of plant life that might support animals being hunted. Thus, each of these senses would be extended in acute ways and they'd also be blended with other senses to enhance the perceptual grasp of the individual. Over time, these sensory pathways and blending of perceptual routings would create unique networks that would become part of our communicative infrastructure.

Throughout the evolution of humanity these pathways became very ingrained in us to the point of becoming second nature and instinctive. That we have had so much progression regarding new modes of communication has not eradicated these older, more primitive, pathways. The pathways are still there. Similarly, that we've learned to create and wear winter coats and hats has not resulted in our bodies shedding body and head hair. Such hair used to serve a function of warmth but now that function has been reduced to decoration.

For example, one of the contributions of civilization evolution over the past 1000 years has been the emphasis on governmental provision for safety and security of

citizens. A widespread societal safety net is a relatively new phenomenon. Before this emphasis existed, individuals had developed "fight or flight" instincts whereby they were constantly monitoring their environment for threats to physical well being. These instincts were very much grounded in communicative signals transmitted through the senses. Threatening situations were recognized, interpreted and responded to in a timely manner. I have had times in my life where, without warning, I've quickly become concerned for my physical safety. It could be an unfamiliar sound in the dark, a feeling of being observed by someone else, seeing my physical environment in some sort of disarray that implied intrusion or other scenarios whereby I instinctively stopped and assessed my environment. The necessity of having such sensory capabilities has lessened over time, with the evolution of police forces and other safety variables, but these sensory networks still exist in our communicative mainframe. They just aren't used as often.

Usage of these primitive interactive pathways created limbs of communication much the same way our bodies developed specific types of physical appendages (arms, legs, fingers, thumbs, etc.) via appendage evolution. It is daunting to consider the thousands of years it took to develop our instinctive nature with communication processes and how quickly we have practically abandoned many of these fundamental modes. Similarly, we give very little thought to protecting ourselves from animals and don't worry much about food, clothing and shelter needs.

As new modes for conveying meaning are invented, more pathways are created within our frames of reference and new limbs of communication evolve. Throughout the history of humanity there had been limited change in human interaction processes until the printed word evolved, following the drawing of pictures and images. The printed word

was the basis for radical transformation in that knowledge could be recorded and built upon rather than being dependent on the oral tradition. The chronology of the printed word, leading to the printing press, leading to the telegraph, leading to the telephone, leading to radio, leading to television, and now leading to the internet has added new pathways of communication. Human beings have grown new limbs of communication to function in this expanding communicative environment.

We've grown new limbs of communication much like we acquire new skills as we grow from childhood to adulthood. Regarding transportation, for example, I have progressed from crawling to walking to a tricycle to roller skates to a wagon to a snow sled to bike to skate board to ice skates to motorbike to car. As I've progressed through this route, and adapted to each successive means of transportation, I've never forgot my instincts with roller skates (even after years of neglect).

Similarly, as a child growing up in Columbus, Ohio in the 1960's, my concept of "distant travel" began to experience extension. My first "big trip" I remember was to Buckeye Lake (about 30 miles away). Then the concept of a "big trip," that was within my reach, was extended to Lake Erie, then to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, then Florida, California, Hawaii, Europe and Asia. As I write this I am engaged in my 16th trip to China. Even though I've extended my traveling grasp, the most meaningful trips for me continue to be visits to the Lake Erie shore. My hunch is that this is the case because of the associations I made with that location during my childhood family vacations there. Something about the allure of that large body of water has a permanent place in my psychological makeup. There is a well worn groove in my psyche that is massaged as I walk along the Lake Erie shoreline.

In a detached mode, I can recognize the area isn't really that nice in comparison with other beach locations I can afford to visit (i.e. Hilton Head, Miami Beach, Maui, etc.) but the phenomenon I'm describing has much more to do with me than where I am traveling to. The associations I've made between Lake Erie and my peace of mind have been affirmed many times. I could've as easily made the same associations with the trunk of my car as with a specific lake location.

I videotaped the birth of my son. As I observed the videotape, and my early words to him, I was surprised to hear the words "We're gonna have a good time together. We're gonna go to Lake Erie." One of the most meaningful times I've had with him was the first time I took him swimming in Lake Erie and floated with him among the waves. It spoke to me on a very basic level. He, in turn, has made associations of his own with the lake. When he was three we showed him the videotape of his birth and he immediately noticed my words "We're gonna go to Lake Erie." Again, I use this to illustrate how meanings are ingrained into our minds over time via the associations we make with our surroundings.

My travels to China have provided me with similar insights from their perspective. We typically think of China as being a traditional culture but it has gone (and is going) through an immense amount of change and modernization. I started traveling to China in 1987 and each trip there exposes me to another level of modernization that didn't exist before. It is truly astonishing to observe. However, even with the fast paced modernization, one can still see elements of the previous perceptual infrastructure.

The first time I visited the Mao mausoleum, that showcases the body of Mao Tse Tung, in Tiananmen Square of Beijing I expected it to be a fairly bland experience but

instead found it to be emotionally laden. To me, as a foreigner, Mao is some historical figure that is something of a relic. But I've found that those who were alive during the reign of Mao still revere him as an influential figure of their life time. His outdated leadership doesn't relate to a political perspective that anybody seems to want to return to but, his imprint is so impressive in the minds of Chinese citizenry, that his legacy is unmistakable.

As I walked through the line entering the mausoleum I visited with a middle-aged Chinese man about his visits to the U.S. and his life in international business. He was from Shanghai, wearing an expensive suit, had a cell phone and was clearly part of the modernizing class of China. As we entered the mausoleum and neared the body of Mao everybody grew very quiet. I noticed tears coming down his cheeks. When we left the mausoleum he regained his composure. I was at a loss for words but commented that Mao obviously had meant a great deal to him. He explained that Mao's administration affected all areas of life in his youth and that actually seeing Mao brought back a flood of memories (some good and some bad). The nerve that was touched in him by this experience exemplifies and parallels the communicative infrastructure we all have within us. Though he hadn't thought about Mao in a long time, when he saw Mao he reverted to a mental framework that had long been buried within himself but was clearly still there.

China presents an interesting entity in this regard because there is more of a common harmonious mindset that can be collectively reverted to than exists in the U.S. As China modernizes that harmonious mindset gets buried further and further beneath the social landscape. It is kind of disappointing to see it happen and I treasure my initial travels to China (the "good old days" for me) because I had a glimpse of the more traditional social

structure. Ironically it is the opening of China, that permit foreigners such as myself to go there, that is diminishing the older way of life. Again though, I find the more traditional social infrastructure is still there. It just isn't stressed as much any more.

The changing ways of knowing the world around us is mind boggling. Consider how, in the mid-1700's, the King of England had to wait weeks to learn of each of the successive steps leading to the Revolutionary War. Word of each development had to pass across the ocean on a ship. Today one only needs to turn on CNN Headline News for real-time updates from around the globe. This not only speeds up the reporting of news stories, such rapid reporting in turn affects the stories themselves.

As we use these new pathways, or limbs, of communication we make less use of the historic/primitive limbs of communication we are naturally equipped/hard wired with through thousands of years of evolution. These historic/intuitive limbs of communication get rusty from disuse but they are still there. For example, intimate relationships still make considerable use of eye contact, facial movements, and tone of voice in daily interaction. Newer forms of communication don't allow for such emphasis but the pathways of understanding are still there.

I believe basic forms of sharing strike a chord in us because these tribal/interpersonally close experiences make use of our innate/intuitive limbs of communication. There is an inherent calm that comes with these experiences because the primitive/intuitive limbs of communication are internal to us (being grounded in our five senses) rather than external (making use of our five senses but artificially extended through new technologies).

It is mildly exhilarating/euphoric when we share this experience with others because it

serves to reaffirm our humanness and sensitivity with older limbs of communication that we intuitively know are within us but we have lost touch with due to lack of use. This can lead us to associate the generally great unknown, but jointly embraced, phenomenon with the supernatural/spiritual. I may associate it with God while others may associate it with something else. These sensations are nearly impossible to vividly describe but we recognize them when we experience them.

I can tell you I feel them when I'm singing with others at church camp, sharing meaningful dialog in the college classroom, sitting quietly among others and similar types of unrelated activity. We are "fed/rejuvenated" by such experiences, in part, because our internal limbs of communication are reawakened and stimulated. Similarly, I walk an hour everyday and find the experience fulfilling (in part) because it taps the more historic blend of senses within me. This is even more true when I walk at night.

The new communication technologies enhance our means of communication (via new "external limbs") in one regard but concurrently hinder our humanness because they serve to minimize our "internal limbs" of communication via use reduction that promotes atrophy. Our minds/beings cannot comfortably accommodate these new external limbs, and internalize them, because they are constantly in a state of evolution and redefinition.

I first became acquainted with telephone answering machines in the mid-1980's. By 1990 they evolved into the more common voice mail. I used to hang up the phone when I got such a greeting but, over time, I learned to become comfortable with voice mail. Now I typically prefer to get the voice mail so I don't need to speak with the recipient (it saves time, is more unidirectional, etc.).

This continual development of new limbs of communication constantly affects how we interact and come to "know" ourselves/others/our environment and, ultimately, it impacts what it means to be human. I started working at a small liberal arts college in 1989 (it had about 1,100 students at the time). A sense of community is a primary strength of such an institution. I began to notice in the mid-1990's how our use of e-mail had modified our organizational culture. It became preferable to e-mail someone rather than talk to them face to face. Other auxiliary variables came in to play as well (i.e. greater accountability because of a written record of exchanges, easier access to students and colleagues, closer linkage to the institution during non-business hours via remote access, etc.). As with voice mail, I got to a point where I preferred to e-mail a person eventhough his/her office might be down the hall. When this happens simultaneously in various types of organizational cultures it obviously rings true in the larger culture overall.

So many things (time, worth, etc.) are becoming more and more quantified (i.e. "time is money," increased emphasis on measures of time and money, etc.). As we rapidly progress materially/scientifically we decline in other areas. This is partially why "other" societies are so threatened by the United States, in that we are the primary force behind this movement. We do not actively export these byproducts of new communication technologies. They spread in the process of being passionately embraced and rejected by forces in other cultures. It is a strange love/hate relationship.

When I first went to China to teach in the 1980's, I could see they desperately wanted to learn skills from "foreign experts" but also desperately sought to reject foreign ideas and new ways of thinking. The result has shown the foreign skills/technology are

meshed with foreign ideas that produce a brew of change. Love me, love my dog.

The relevance of the aforementioned phenomena cannot be ignored. When Osama bin Laden and his Taliban supporters hijacked commercial aircraft and flew them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon it conveyed the degrees of desperation that exist as a result of the threatening change the United States represents. Taliban rule in Afghanistan represents a utopian life for many of the Taliban. They have no doubt felt threatened by, what they perceive as, U.S. cultural imperialism. This has occurred when threatening U.S. ideals are embraced by others in their society (civil rights for women, freedom of expression, etc.). These ideals do not need to be actively exported; they spread to such settings much like oxygen is drawn to open flames.

These types of changes represent a serious challenge to Taliban legitimacy. The question "Why do they hate us so much?" was asked in the U.S. after the September 11, 2001 attack. The answer is not that they hate us so much as it is that they hate what we represent. The United States is founded on the concept of change and it is promoted through our political and economic systems. As demand for new communication technologies increases worldwide, and the world becomes a smaller place, the material fruits of our way of life cannot be denied. Seeing is believing.

As these technologies are introduced and embraced in places such as Afghanistan (one of the more commonly shown video clips of Osama bin Laden is of him directing activities in a terrorist training camp with his cell phone in hand), new ideas correspondingly flow into these cultures much like invaders hidden in a Trojan Horse. They lost the battle, decades ago, the first time they turned on a television set.

As we look toward the future and consider the continued impact of new

communication technologies and channels on historically basic channels of communication it is clear more changes are in store with this evolution. Changes in communication patterns will change social orders and, in turn, change fundamental societal institutions and, at the most basic level, change what it means to be human. Such changes will be swift but subtle. Gains will be made and losses will be registered. There will be unexpected turns (keep in mind television and the internet were initially hailed as benefits to education rather than commercial interests). With the past as an indicator, future communication innovations will reflect who we are and, in turn, impact what we become. Thus, cycles we've experienced in the past will continue in the future, but at a more brisk pace. Stay tuned.