Media Perspectives:
How Social Media Reshape Consciousness, Redefine Identities

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A Shifted Paradigm: What’s the Message?

Speech, according to Neil Postman, in his canonical work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, is “the primal and indispensible medium” that defines what it means to be human (9). The structures of language, in their variations, tell people how to think about time, space, things, and processes. As such, we are greatly influenced and shaped by the language we use. In the ever-evolving humanity, we are constantly confronted by new languages and social behaviors prompted by the availability of new technologies. Today, scholars and communication practitioners are interested in how new media and social networking platforms impact our language structure and social trends. Though we may not isolate all effects of media into a single realm, like politics and education, we can ask a broader question: What kind of civilization can we expect from instantaneous electronic communication? Consider the experience of this mom from Minnesota:

Today, my daughter told me that she wanted to convert to a Christian. Not because she has a strong relation with God, but because she wants to post Facebook statuses about Him and “get a lot of likes.” FML. (“Fmylife.com”)

Social media have become common phenomena in the global society, with Facebook recently topping the chart of social networking sites by achieving its one-billionth unique membership in October 2012 – that means one out of seven persons on earth has a Facebook account. If that number isn’t intriguing, what’s more amazing is that this chart-topper has 140.3 billion friendships (friend connections) among its users. With that, editor Chris Taylor of Mashable.com, a major news source for social media, said, “Facebook is for real!”
Nonetheless, the question I would like to pose in this paper is this: how have the ways we interact with one another and make sense of the world around us changed due to the prolonged use of social media? Since Marshall McLuhan’s first proposal of the idea that the medium of communication shapes a society more than the content of its communications – *The Medium is the Message (and the Message)* – we have come only to a partial understanding of the media’s effect on our society (Leatherwood). Today, communication scholars are looking at a new paradigm of communication due to media change and convergence. Digital revolution has brought changes to our ways of looking at identity and connecting with others. Hence, it is important for communication and composition studies to look at what perceptions we have on human-human and human-computer interactions today, and discover how social media have influenced the way we make sense of the world around us. Drawing on McLuhan’s theories – a collection of interesting ideas drawn from critical cultural studies (Baran and Davis 218) – this paper looks at the impact of social media from the perspectives of the medium, the user, and the user’s community. The paper first identifies the role of the Internet as a networked medium in creating a new model of communication, sheds light on users’ sense of online identity, and finally unfolds the concept of users as social cyborgs in virtual communities.

*The Medium is the Message: An Integrated Communication Experience in Social Networks*

A society builds its own communication models and determines what a media system should be (Cardoso 117). According to David Foulger, these models of communication aim to examine and explain the process of human communication:
Our communication is not produced within any single system, but in the intersection of several interrelated systems, each of which is self-standing necessarily described by dedicated theories, but each of which is both the product of the others and, in its own limited way, an instance of the other. (18)

In his article, *From Mass to Networked Communication*, Gustavo Cardoso describes these communication models in brief: the first model is defined as interpersonal communication, which takes form of the two-way exchanges between two or more persons in a group. The second model is one-to-many communication, where an individual sends one single message to a limited group of persons. The third model is mass communication, where one single message can be sent to a mass, diverse group of people using specific mediation technologies (Cardoso 117-119). Today, many societies have witnessed the emergence of a new communication model: a fourth model that precedes the three traditional models in terms of its cycles of social affirmation (118). The fourth and current model, held dear by the American society, is described as “self-mass communication.” This model is shaped by the capacity of communication globalization and interpersonal media, and, accordingly, by the emergence of networked mediation (Cardoso 118). Thanks to the invention and enhancement of communication technologies – including portable integrated devices such as smartphones, laptops, and tablet computers – this model reflects innovation in the availability of user-generated content and also in the erasure of borders between traditional media genres and social appropriation through information-sharing (Cardoso 119). Given network connections, users can communicate with one another across various media without worrying about functional restrictions. For instance, a student can use the videoconference function on
Skype to do a presentation with the class at real-time, without having to record the video before hand and show it to his or her classmates later. In a networked communication environment, Cardoso also suggests that “transformation in the relationships between different media, which are now more networked than they are converging – be it in terms of hardware, service, or networks – make mediation an integrated experience” (119). As such, new technologies don’t just combine technical functions but create a whole new experience for users who utilize all kinds of media in relation to one another.

This integrated experience is essential to sustain online social networking sites today. Web 2.0 and online social platforms such as, in the order of their user membership, Facebook, YouTube, QQ, and Twitter (“Digital Marketing Ramblings”), are interactive and affective communication media. These platforms create a global integration process that forms a unified society (predicted by McLuhan in his “Global Village” prophesy) through acculturation, where values and common language connect the online citizens in an international network system (Ahmad et al. 71).
Figure 1: The volume of @replies traveling into and out of Japan and worldwide retweets in a one-hour period just before and after the Tohoku earthquake on March 11, 2011 (Visualization by Miguel Rios. Research done by Doer, Fouz & Friedrich, 2012).

More importantly, these social media enable greater web-based applications that allow users to generate web content. Subsequently, the autonomy to generate content transforms the role of the users from content consumers to content producers (Ahmad et al. 71). Thanks to the presence of these citizen producers and their content, we see a rise to the co-existence of different information models for different audiences. At the meantime, communication is established between different media in a network, based on the interactions between users, mass media companies, and regulators. This illustrates that network communication is a constant reformulation of the relations between media forms, interconnecting interpersonal communication media, and mass media (Cardoso 119).

In light of the Internet’s global social and commercial importance, we need to understand the structural and algorithmic properties of the complex social networks in order to study the way information is dispersed on these networks (Doer, Fouz & Friedrich 70). Communication scholars have looked at how news is disseminated in social networks by simulating information-spreading processes in various network topologies, the study of geometric properties and special relations in networked systems. Based on the findings from analyses of information-spreading in the mathematically defined preferential attachment (PA) network topology, these scholars demonstrate that
news spreads much quicker in existing social network topology than any other network topologies – such as radio and television. Despite the diversity in social networks, many types of online social platforms share similar characteristics and properties (Doer, Fouz & Friedrich 71). To learn the intrinsic properties of social networks, Doer and his colleagues studied the speed of rumors spreading on social networks and results show that social networks are observed to distribute information quickly, even though the process is not organized centrally, and the network is not designed in an intelligent way. They illustrate the way information interact with their sources in the form of hubs:

Crucial is the fruitful interaction between hubs (source of information) with many connections and average users with few friends. Hubs make the news available to a big audience, whereas average users quickly convey the information from one neighbor to the next. (Doer, Fouz and Fredrich 75)

![Figure 2: The interactions between hubs when information is transmitted on social networks. Information progresses from a large-degree node A to another node, B; and C pulls the rumors/information from A and quickly pushes it to B (Doer, Fouz and Friedrich 72).](image)

In short, social networks are different media for dissemination of information when compared to mass media such as television and newspapers as their structural and algorithmic nature proved to work differently than traditional media.
A medium is in itself, as McLuhan famously observed, a message that is “inherent to every content that is created or consumed from a medium” (Foulger). Foulger eloquently says that the medium is a language such that the content of a medium is not only inherent to a message itself, but often an element of its composition. This means the relationship between a medium and the message that it carries is symbiotic. Hence, McLuhan, in expounding his pivotal theory, believes that the way we are affected by a medium is more significant than the content it carries:

The medium, or process, of our time – electronic technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken or granted. Everything is changing – you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to “the others.” And they’re changing dramatically. (8)

In other words, new forms of media transform the users’ sense of presence in their society, and this influence is “ultimately more important than the content that is transmitted in its specific messages – technology determines experience” (Baran and Davis 220). Social media can further enhance that “user experience” as they converge traditional media into broader, richer, and integrated channels.

You are the Message: Social Identity in the New Virtual Society

The definitions of identity shift as we spend more of our social lives online. Social scientists have made a distinction between a found identity and a made identity (Brown 34). The found identity is created through one’s circumstances: ancestral background (parents, family inheritance, ethnic background, etc.), religion, gender,
sexual orientation, education level, profession, and other external factors that can be used to categorize and describe a person. On the other hand, the made identity is the one created by users themselves and how they want to be identified by others (Brown 34). Science journalist Jim Giles labels this behavior as sock puppetry – the act of pretending to be someone other than who you are for the sake of furthering self-interest (“The Real You”).

With an increased membership of online social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the level of engagement and interaction among users on these virtual societies has skyrocketed. In addition to engaging directly with other individuals, users may construct an idealized version of themselves in the social networks. Essentially, they can do so by uploading profile images that are representative of their idealized self, and providing personal information such as name, birthday, schools they attend, where they work and live, as well as contact information. With the idealized identity, the nature of online community may bestow advantages over face-to-face communication. But how far can cyber-relationships really replace the “real thing?” asked David Giles, senior lecturer at University of Winchester (271). For some champions of the Internet, this question seems meaningless: Cyber-relationships are just different, and their unique nature has the potential to change the way humans interact in general. Malcolm Parks and Kory Floyd argue that cyber-relationship necessitates a rethinking of traditional relationship theory. In their example, direct exchange and reciprocal feedback need no longer be thought of as essential for successful interaction (95). Hence, the online social worlds offer the potential for a completely new concept for the self, and reconstruct the ways we engage with one another, in which we are no longer
constrained by geography, embodiment, personal history, and other preset identities. The idea of a personal profile on Facebook, or a fanpage on Twitter, also presents emancipatory opportunities for different presentation of the self (Cheung 43).

In a study of new sociability of Facebook, Zizi Papacharissi and Andrew Mendelson find that individuals, “equipped with a toy that enables social connections,” are able to fulfill traditional mediated and interpersonal needs simultaneously, “while at the same time expanding their social connections and so-called social net worth in satellite social spheres” (214). This position raises the concern of “social needs” among the users of such social networking platforms. In regards to social relationship development, Patricia Lange (2007) conducted a study on the YouTube community and found that publicly private (private behaviors exhibited with the user’s true identity/information) and privately public (sharing publicly accessible videos without disclosing user’s identity/information) sharing behaviors “were developed within the architectural confines of the system to signal different depths of relationships and to communicate empathy, respect or inclusion among the members of the network” (“YouTube”). Whether it is to communicate affiliations with a particular taste of culture, or to attribute affections, or to merely establish an online presence, the social worlds have become a manifesto for their users to express themselves – both their emotions and identity – via the many functions and tools available on these platforms.

*We are the Message: Control, Connections, and Consciousness*

Just as Henry Jenkins describes, “media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (15-16). Technology is evolving us, says
digital anthropologist Amber Case (2011), into cyborgs of the online networks (“TED”). Like it or not, we now have a second self that lives behind the binaries of our computers and devices. People are interacting and dealing with their second self whether they are online or offline.

Hence, in order to maintain sociability, one learns to maintain that digital/idealized self and communicate to others like social cyborgs – travelling and compressing time and space. By staring at the screen and clicking on pages, social cyborgs are able to “alter history and create the future” (Case). In December of 2011, Facebook released the *Timeline* feature, which allows personal pages to create their individual milestones by deciding what to highlight on their timeline of events and stories, and to enjoy the autonomy to determine who can see those posts (with the options to hide or delete stories). This ability to “control” the past and the future is synonymous to a time machine. This new version of screen-staring, button-clicking cyborg Homo sapiens can now literally bend time and space. With that, a new sense of community is created. Case calls this “ambient intimacy,” a term coined by user-experience consultant Lisa Reichelt to define the ability to keep in touch with others on a new level of regularity and intimacy, in which one would not usually have access to – because time and space conspire to make it possible.

According to Case, there are some psychological effects that come with such perception of intimacy. She worries that online social networking users no longer take time to mentally reflect on their surroundings. “All those people in [the] room all the time [are] trying to compete for their attention on the simultaneous time interfaces, paleontology and panic architecture […]” (Case). And really, people began to lack
external input, in which Case has identified as important for the creation of self, to do long-term planning, and to ascertain one’s identity. They are now bolted in their internal/idealized self. Questions remain: when we are so consumed by the unlimited virtual space, how much consciousness is left for the physical world? After all, do we still need to maintain an analog self?

Figures 3 & 4: *Americans Embrace Media: The Year in Review 2012*; Pew Research Center’s top findings of the year take a closer look at the trends shaping our world today.

“We are communicating creatures,” writes Charles Meadow, “Other animals are, too, but none are like us in the variety of media we use and the range of content we express” (300). As professed by Meadow, every major change in communication technology tends to bring behavioral changes in individuals and society as a whole. The way we see ourselves relating to one another in cyberspace embraces an open principle of diversity and collectivity larger than “the aggregate of spaces that the human population on earth can actually explore” (Krippendorff 277). Krippendorff attempted to calculate the “actual size” of the cyberspace in his *Cyberspace and Its Artifacts* research, and concludes that traditional models of human communication, “which assume that
communicators share conventions and understand the complexities they confront,” are no longer workable in cyber networks due to 1) information overload, 2) adaptive behaviors, and 3) computer interfaces (277).

George Miller identifies that human beings cannot reliably handle more than seven, plus or minus two, meaningful units/chunks of unrelated bits of information (qtd. in Krippendorff 309). Comparing that single-digit number to the overwhelming information that one could possibly be exposed to on any online social networking site, Krippendorff concludes that in contemporary information processing, humans draw their own individually motivated distinctions from the pool of information available. Hence, it can be supposed that online users pay attention only to elements and features that are of their interests, resulting in possible acts of self-fulfilling prophecy. Take for example how a user finds articles of his or her interest on Twitter’s streaming dock. One could only skim through all the updates on the dock and spot interesting keywords that catches attention.

Krippendorff applies the chess-playing metaphor to describe the player/user’s motivation and actions following their opponent/correspondent’s moves. This, however, might seem old-fashioned today given the real-time, multiple corresponding capacity of most online social networks. Users may interact with their correspondents instantaneously, unlike the counter-moves configuration as mentioned by Krippendorff (309). Lastly, computers are complex machines, therefore changing the user’s comprehension to build a better command of dealing with complexity. Krippendorff used the metaphor of the “paper world” to illustrate how users filter out complexity that is
irrelevant or incomprehensible (310-311). These factors eventually determine a user’s behavior and how he or she responds to the stimulations in the online community.

As the “High Priest of Popcult,” the “Metaphysician of Media,” the “Oracle of the Electronic Age,” and ultimately the “darling of the media industry,” McLuhan points out ideas that were used to “rationalize rapid expansion of electronic media with little concern of their negative consequences” in the 1960s (Baran & Davis 220-221).

McLuhan uses the term “Global Village” to refer to the new form of social organization that would, as Baran and Davis translate, inevitably emerge as instantaneous electronic media that tie the entire world into one great social, political, and cultural system (220). The visionary predicted the way human beings would communicate with one another over social networking platforms even before computers were personalized for home usage. Evidently, his forecast has become a reality and the world continues to deal with this new paradigm shift.

Supported by psychological research, the “Global Village” concept exemplifies the culture of belongingness hyped within online social circles. Social networking sites offer “a space in which people can address this need to belong by using services provided by the sites that enable conversations and information gathering, along with the possibility of gaining social approval, expressing opinions, and influencing others” (Gangadharbatla 8). Therefore, users’ attitudes and behaviors with regard to these social platforms may stem from their need to belong. Provided with more features (such as Timeline) to control their ways of expression, users may manipulate their online space to display idealized behaviors and personality in order to gain recognition. Beyond that, users may experience a strong attachment to the machine and the virtual world that does
not physically exist. Case teases that some users may actually feel a sudden loss in their mind if they were to lose any relationship or information kept within the cyberspace – “it feels like a very strange emotion” (Case). Swiftly, the user has become the center for the message; the user is the content and struggles between the paradoxical extremes of controlling their online presence and being controlled by the space they have just created. Jenkins affirms that “audiences, empowered by these new technologies… are demanding the right to participate within the culture [of new media].” This hence may result in “struggles and compromises” that will (re)define the public culture of the future (24).

**Now What: Research Questions for Consideration**

Research and studies into social media and their adoption by Internet users remain limited. This paper prompts some important research questions deserving of future exploration:

1. What are social media users’ perceptions of the social implications of media consumption?
2. What are some ethical issues involved in users’ creation of an idealized second self?
3. Based on the common personalities and social media behaviors of their students, how can teachers integrate social learning across online community into their curriculum?
4. What are the pedagogical values of social networking sites in the writing classroom?
These questions represent the first steps of analysis, interpretation, and understanding of the communication and social behavior revolutions that are unfolding before our generation.

**Moving on: Co-creating the Future**

While future research should continue to examine the relationship between social networking users’ perception of their usage and the effectiveness of social media implementation in the higher education classroom, more attention should be given to comparing the users’ perception of their true identity and online identity. In closing, I would like to shed light on a more positive outlook on online technology. Case, in her presentation at the TED Women series, said that the most successful technology could get out of the way and help us live our lives. And, it could end up being more human than technology, *provided* that we are co-creating each other all the time while using social media. This could take form in many ways; we could help one another live truthfully in the online social worlds, ultimately, putting humanity back into technology to foster more meaningful interactions.

Nevertheless, this paper has focused exclusively on roles played by the medium, the user, and the user’s community in reshaping media perspectives in the users. The author plans to expand the study by looking at the major research questions raised above. Though Jenkins calls for more patience with the study of new media and has asked researchers to not “expect the uncertainties surrounding convergence to be resolved anytime soon, I feel the need to press on for answers. We are entering an era of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates” (Jenkins 24). Thus, the study of new media and the paradigm shift is indeed timely and essential.
Works Cited


