Connecting the Dots: The Dynamics of Communication in the Digital Era

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Abstract

People have been communicating since the beginning of time in different ways. Communication and understanding have taken many and varied forms over time, but what has been achieved in recent decades has far surpassed thousands of years of human communication and connection. It is about the complex modalities made available by the digital age and all the mechanisms developed in its wake. Radio, television, telephone and internet have revolutionised the world of communication and stretched the boundaries people had in this respect. Modern means of communication have rapidly overtaken letters, for example, and taken communication to new heights. In this research, we conduct an analysis of how people communicate through social platforms, as well as the language they use. The article could be beneficial for communication specialists as well as researchers in the field of social and human sciences.

1 Introduction

*"At the core of the technological change that unleashed the power of networks was the transformation of information and communication technologies, based on the microelectronics revolution that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. It constituted the foundation of a new technological paradigm, consolidated in the 1970s, mainly in the United States, and rapidly diffused throughout the world, ushering in what I have characterized, descriptively, as the information age." (*Manuel Castells, 2004, p. 6*)*

But what these means have brought with them is also an accumulation of information that not all people can cope with or manage. It is a time of technology, of speed, of the internet, and communication has adapted perfectly to those who have found the means to propagate it and make it possible in this era. Classical, verbal, interpersonal communication is the basis of the current communication that today's society is witnessing on the internet, but what is now in use has gone beyond the stage of classical communication. Today's generations communicate verbally, non-verbally, through graphic signs, pictures, videos, emoji or complex actions instead of words that are translated at the level of a click or touch. Technology and communication go hand in hand when today's generations choose any form of interaction. And this will become increasingly evident with the widespread use of virtual and augmented reality in communication. (Stănescu, G.C., 2022)

Like most of the things nowadays, communication is connected directly with new technology. That is why this new type of communication can be regarded as digitally mediated communication. Practically, any form of communication conducted through new communication technology can be described as being part of digitally mediated communication. When using e-mail, Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, or when engaged in an online discussion board, the user uses digital media resources when engaging in communication. The ability to communicate came not only as a result of technology uprising, but as a necessity to maintain social relationships. Starting from the basic phone used in the last century, out lives witnessed the technological evolution based on voice, video, audio, data and other communication channels. Mass media also played a very important role in this consolidation of the new digital life, making it a mobile, versatile and interconnected universe. Going back to the phone example of the last century, that was a simple but static device. Today, the whole world is on the move, the mobile phones making it easier to facilitate mobility. But not only the desk phone was static. Classic computers no longer offer the versatility of tablets, for example and the internet connection gives freedom and options to the users. Moreover, this digital communication offers the whole range of possibilities to interact. It can facilitate all types of communication, ranging from person to person, up to didactic interactions and mass-mediated messages. "And the Metaverse or Web 3.0 will take communication to new dimensions." (Vlăduțescu Ș. & Stănescu, G.C, 2023)

Another step forward is the synchronous and asynchronous character of communication. On one side, synchronous communication occurs when there is instantaneous sending and receiving of messages, such as in face-to-face or some text-message interactions, whereas asynchronous communication occurs when there is a small or even substantial delay in interaction. For example, discussion-board posts or responses to Facebook

messages are considered asynchronous models of this new digital communication. Another example for as asynchronous communication is the mail, where the communication flows on time delay, because prestructuring of messages is required. On the contrary, engaging in a two-way video chat implies no virtual delays and, therefore, communication is exactly as the real face-to face version. Actually, the more technology is implied, the more real feel the users get when communicating. The differences between face-to-face interaction and digitally mediated interaction became irrelevant as the tools involved have become more advanced. In the same time, the quality of communication may suffer changes as the ability to communicate in this realm is differently achieved by all users.

In the ever-evolving digital age, social media and online platforms have become a vital medium for social interaction, information and personal development. With this transformation in the way people communicate, important questions arise about how communication and politeness principles adapt and manifest themselves in the virtual environment. Communication is not just about conveying information, but also impacts the way interpersonal relationships evolve. It is thus an environment conducive not only to communication, but also to the establishment of social foundations; it is an environment that recreates classical reality and sometimes replaces, enhances or even eliminates it altogether. "When you communicate electronically, all you see is a computer screen. You don't have the opportunity to use facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to communicate your meaning; words -- lonely written words -- are all you've got. And that goes for your correspondent as well. When you're holding a conversation online -- whether it's an email exchange or a response to a discussion group posting -- it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning. And it's frighteningly easy to forget that your correspondent is a person with feelings more or less like your own." (Virginia Shea, Netiquette,1994, p.35)

This is why this environment is not only a supply-side one, but also extremely sensitive to manage, as it can generate a wide range of effects. In this context, politeness and etiquette become essential to keep online interactions pleasant, constructive and respectful. The development of specific online communication and behavioural norms plays a crucial role in preventing misinformation, conflict and polarisation, contributing to healthier communication and the development of a harmonious virtual space.

Because the internet hosts a multitude of websites, platforms and their interconnections, communication involves an exchange of information, ideas, opinions and content through words, symbols, pictures or videos, and immersive experiences will take interactivity in social media to a new dimension (Stănescu, G.C., 2023). This mix of communication media, in the context of the internet infrastructure, plays a crucial role in building and maintaining relationships, in personal development and in sharing experiences.

Facebook may have been the first major platform to enable unprecedented interactions, and what followed is the current generation of sites, platforms, channels and networks that facilitate not just communication, but ultimately, actual human relationships. "The site has changed the ways we communicate with each other and share information, it has challenged how we conceive of our identities, and broken down some traditional barriers of public and private lives in unprecedented ways". *(Brady Robards and Siân Lincoln, 2021)*

2 Overview of social media, internet characters and how they communicate

On the internet, as in real life, individuals communicate in all forms. Furthermore, this type of communication has brought about radical changes to traditional mass communication methods, as was the case with television (Stănescu, G.C., 2023). From simple communication between two people, to multi-company interaction or even shopping or talking in organisations or communication at government level, all these interactions have found their correspondence online. Indeed, it has fostered the emergence of new types of subjects and communications, such as influencers and content creators, for example, who have taken advantage of the vast possibilities of new media formats. In fact, many online platforms were originally conceived as a reflection of real-life situations, but later developed much more rapidly. For example, the Facebook platform uses terms such as 'friends' to define relationships between its users, just like in real life. In contrast, other sites have developed the idea of "follower" which in reality, at least not directly, is not obvious and does not happen with the frequency that it does online.

Online has developed a wide range of subjects: on the one hand there are individuals who are individual users communicating and interacting with friends, family, creating personal connections, discussing topics ranging from hobbies and passions to current events and normal topics. On the other hand, new media has fostered the presence of brands and companies that target audiences with products and services, build virtual spaces, websites and presentation pages, develop marketing activities, commerce and much more, offer much faster, feedback-based networking and loyalty building through specialised products. Influencers and content creators emerge. These people take advantage of new communication channels, develop a language and attitude that arouses interest, influencing opinions and behaviour. Communication at this stage involves advice, reviews and

interactions with followers. There is also a place for non-profit organisations or government institutions: various social or humanitarian causes are communicated, masses of people are sensitised by highlighting situations or life issues and real individuals are mobilised for various social changes, formal exchanges of information take place and the public is involved in decision-making. Last but not least, interest groups emerge, communication takes place in thematic groups or communities with common interests, specific topics are discussed.

Clearly, all of the above subjects are using communication to the fullest: from text posts, to comments and replies, to images, videos, emoji and symbols. Written messages can range from personal statements to informative articles, from simple opinions to opinionated ones in different fields. But communication develops through visual content: photos, graphics, animations and videos, or auditory content: voice messages. Emotions and reactions that people actually develop in conversations are also expressed through emoji and symbols, active feedback is given through comments and replies or questions and links. Communication seems to be at the peak of its development because it not only manifests itself in all the forms known to date, but also seems to be offering new ways of interacting every day, moving beyond the comfort of exclusively verbal communication to include non-verbal communication at the same time.

The Internet is an active part of today's life. Without the internet and its possibilities, life and individuals would not be where they are today and people would not have evolved as they have. Technology is part of people's lives in all forms, and communication has become a fast and diverse process, significantly influenced by the online environment and social media platforms. This is also noted by Jan A.G.M. van Dijk in his book, where the author considers the new shape of today's society to be that of a network. "A network structure connects all levels of society, usually called the micro-, meso- and macro-level, or the private and the public spheres. It was noticed that the dividing lines between these abstractions are blurring in reality. On the Internet, interpersonal, organizational and mass communication come together. Using this medium, we bring the 'whole world' into our homes and workplaces. However, the public computer networks used are intruding into our personal privacy here as well. Conversely, the personal autonomy of network users might increase through opportunities of individual choice never previously known in history. The blurring of traditional dividing lines does not result in their disappearance. On the contrary, it means both more integration and more differentiation, as has been observed in several chapters. This is a feature of rising complexity in society." (Dijk, J., 2006, p. 241)

Human interaction has seen a rapid development of two fundamental elements: verbal and non-verbal communication, migrating into the digital sphere and generating a series of changes and challenges. Verbal communication manifests itself on the internet mostly through written text. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Reddit allow users to post short messages, comments and blog posts. These textual messages become the digital representation of verbal communication, focusing on the content of words and phrases. Such communications, while often concise, rely on written language to convey information, opinions or emotions. But verbal communication has evolved because of the speed at which information is spread. An interesting feature of verbal communication online is the use of symbols and acronyms. For example, "LOL" (Laugh Out Loud) and "BRB" (Be Right Back) are examples of common acronyms used to express reactions and moods. This abbreviated and symbolic language has developed to save time and space in communication in a way that is specific to the digital environment.

Classically, non-verbal communication means all those gestures, facial expressions and tones of voice, as well as head and head movements to represent affirmations, denials or other meanings in communication. This type of communication has found a form adapted to the online environment. For example, users can use emoji and GIFs to convey emotions and reactions. From smiles and hearts to expressive faces and gestures, these images help add nuance and emotional meaning to digital communication. Other non-verbal aspects include the use of colours, fonts and formatting styles in messages and conversations to emphasise certain parts of the content and to grab the attention of the reader or interlocutor. Last but not least, subjects are provided with videos, shorts, reels and other video versions through which they can express their views or highlight ideas. These formatting decisions become part of non-verbal communication, contributing to the interpretation and understanding of messages.

But while verbal and non-verbal communication online has some similarities to traditional communication, such as information transfer and emotional expression, there are also significant differences. In traditional face-to-face communication, tone of voice, body language and facial expressions add significant dimensions in conveying the message. In the online environment, these aspects are limited and the interpretation of the message may vary depending on the context.

Online communication can also be misinterpreted more easily due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Without tone of voice or facial expressions, sarcasm or irony can be mistaken, leading to misunderstandings and even conflict.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, verbal and non-verbal communication online has evolved to adapt to the new platforms and demands of technology. This digital environment offers opportunities for expression and interaction, but also requires a deeper understanding of how content is perceived and interpreted without traditional physical cues. The use of images, acronyms and correct message formation becomes essential to convey messages effectively and avoid misunderstandings in digital communication.

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