

## ***Communication Technology: Future Priorities***

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As I consider technology research—where it has been and where it is going—I regularly think back to a response I wrote for my comprehensive exams as a doctoral student nearly 15 years ago. In an essay to defend the relevance of communication technology as an area of study, I somewhat boldly predicted that communication technology would never be a major subfield itself because experts across a wide range of more traditional subfields would end up studying the topic in each of their specialty areas. As with most things, I was only about half right. Indeed, one does not have to look very far to see the importance of communication technologies when it comes to research throughout the communication discipline. However, I missed the mark in anticipating the amazing growth of communication technology scholarship in our, and related, fields. Thanks to growing published scholarship, new research and teaching jobs, and rising professional memberships related to communication and technology, this area has begun to carve out its own identity as distinct and complementary to other subfields in our discipline.

Despite my admittedly poor record at attempting to predict the future—and the even more difficult endeavor to actually shape it—I think such efforts are necessary to stimulate thinking and set priorities. I would like to suggest three directions for communication and technology research—but given that limited ability to predict the future accurately, I will actually provide six future directions in hopes 2-3 might pan out. Given the limited space, let me just briefly introduce each idea here.

### ***#1: We can't keep up with new innovations, so we need theory and models that can***

Although we may lament that research tends to trail, sometimes markedly, developments in communication technology, that situation seems largely inevitable. Except for opportunities to research new innovations with test groups as they are being developed, our interest in users of these tools almost always results in research that comes several years after communication technologies emerge. I think our best response to this is to develop theories and models that equip us to understand new communication technologies as they emerge. Developing theory may not be sexy to many scholars—and there is clearly some backlash against continued efforts to examine media choice/selection theories—but it is essential in this area as one way to remain current in what appears to others as a regularly changing media environment.

### ***#2: Presence/place studies are needed as wireless/mobile communication continues to develop***

Although we may not be especially able to keep up with changing technology, we are savvy enough to recognize trends. One of those is the tremendous growth of wireless/mobile communication (see Katz & Aakhus, 2002). One of the social dynamics implicated in wireless/mobile communication concerns the ever expanding sense of presence and place that become relevant as communicators interact in various locales and experience various degrees of physical, social, and psychological presence with others. Lee (2004) offers a very useful theoretical model on presence that can serve as a nice launching point for more focused research in this area—but communication technology scholars should be expanding this and exploring related constructs more closely as mobile users interact with one another.

### ***#3: Include, but go beyond, Internet studies***

Consistent with increasing attention to mobile devices, communication technology research should not be limited strictly to Internet-based tools. Although the Internet dominates new media currently, that will not always be the case. I am not sure the “Internetness” of these tools is what matters—regardless of whether we spell it with a capital or lowercase. Interactivity and connectivity and bandwidth may matter, but focusing too heavily on the backbone or platform of the technologies seems to me more restrictive than empowering—and it has not been the approach we have taken with other technologies historically.

### ***#4: Examine privacy and surveillance as well as anonymity and identity***

For communication scholars, I believe two of the many tensions problematized by communication technologies deserve special attention. The first of these concerns the use of these tools in ways that enhance privacy and/or facilitate surveillance. Although it may be time to move past models based strictly on the panopticon (see D’Urso, 2006), there is substantial momentum around this issue already. As we more closely examine communication privacy and surveillance in a variety of contexts, communication scholars can make valuable research contributions. A related, but distinct tension concerns anonymity and identity. Both in terms of technological features and user perceptions, new media have a great deal to do with identity and anonymity. Although research into SIDE (Postmes, Spears, and Lea, 1998) provides one useful way to examine issues of identity and anonymity, we should not be limited to this approach. Anonymity and identity represent rich and complex constructs as they manifest themselves in mediated communication, and scholars should more closely examine these tensions.

### ***#5: Look to others inside and outside field while maintaining central focus***

Calls for interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and multidisciplinary seem especially relevant to scholars examining communication technology. I have seen firsthand what our colleagues in fields such as library and information studies, computing science, and management (to name but a few) have to offer us (and what we can bring to their work as well). But, as we make these connections, I still think it vital to

play to our strengths and to maintain some focus as we foreground communication in our work. We are often the experts in social interaction and meaning and should not lose sight of that. Similarly, we have much to share with others within our discipline. Although historically somewhat slow to develop, one need only look at a conference program or browse the contents of our journals to see the application of communication technologies in nearly every other subdiscipline within communication. Here I think our challenge is to maintain a focus on technology (and all that potentially entails) as we articulate what it is about the mediated communication that is of importance. We do have much to offer to and learn from other scholars of communication—and indeed many scholars in this area likely identify even more strongly with one of those other research contexts—but we should also continue to develop our own identity.. With the growth and popularity of communication technology also emerges the potential for fragmentation (e.g., separate gaming groups) and the difficulty in clearly articulating our own relevance and importance. We must simultaneously strengthen our own identity while making stronger connections to others within and beyond communication.

#### **#6: Develop and promote policy implications related to our research**

The nature of much of our work naturally lends itself to application. It should also be highly relevant to policy related to the use of new communication technologies. As legislators and courts wrestle with laws surrounding issues such as privacy and anonymity with communication technologies, we should be at the forefront armed with research and knowledge relevant to these issues. As organizations and communities make choices about acceptable communication technology use, we should do all we can to make sure our work is accessible. I had the pleasure of working with a lawyer recently who cited some of my work (Bronco, 2004) in a brief she was preparing, and the experience has helped reinforce my belief that we are doing research that is highly relevant to policy. We must work as individuals, as research institutions, and as scholarly societies to better leverage this particular expertise.

#### **References**

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### ***Author Biography***

Craig R. Scott (Ph.D., Arizona State University, 1994) is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers University. His research related to anonymity and new communication technologies has been published in journals such as *Communication Theory*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Western Journal of Communication*, and *Communication Quarterly* as well as the *Free Speech Yearbook*. His scholarly work related to teams and group communication technologies has been published in outlets such as *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Research*, *Small Group Research*, *Communication Education*, *Communication Reports*, and several book chapters. Scott also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in this area and conducts training workshops related to appropriate use of communication technologies in the workplace.