

The Past, Present and Future of Human Communication and Technology Research

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Challenge One:

One challenge we face is the timeboundedness of our theories. Technological possibilities change radically in short periods of time, and it seems that our theories are always tied to the last technological stage. For example, media choice theories largely assume that people do not multicomunicate. What would a theory look like that considers that people will be IMing while talking face-to-face and perhaps teleconferencing another location, somehow swapping in and out of not only media but also separate conversations? A paper by Reinsch et al. in press at Academy of Management Review makes a start on this issue, but we have a long way to go. Another example is technology supported networks. Network theory and methods is now able to examine networks where players have multiple links (multiplexity), of multiple types and valences, to multiple different classes of agents (multimodal), which change over time in terms of both who is in the networks and which potential links are actualized at any point in time. We need to upgrade our theories of technology supported networks to reflect both the new types and forms of networking that are possible as a result of technological advances, and also the new capabilities for capture and analysis on complex, evolving network patterns that emerge from use of these new technologies. In short, how can we build theory that will be robust in the face of future technological changes?

Challenge Two:

Online communities of all kinds have cropped up at a very rapid pace. They can be found in relation to business, government, health, politics, entertainment—virtually any sector of society and/or commerce. Online blogs, forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards, social networking sites, games and many other forms have built substantial followings. Yet we know so little about them and their communicative roles. The field lacks even a consistent definition of an online community, much less a classificatory framework or guiding theory. Such foundations are not simply a convenience for researchers, but instead are critical to understanding similarities and differences in findings across different communities, contexts, and time. There is much debate, for example, about the “effects” of participation in online gaming communities. It is highly likely that the nature of the effects and their overall positive or negative trend will vary based on the functionalities afforded by the particular gaming community and the types of interaction that take place in each particular online world. A framework that adequately captures such variation should help to resolve conflicts and contradictions in the effects literature and also help designers of online gaming communities. Online communities continue to grow rapidly and to change rapidly. There is much to be

learned about their evolution and embeddedness in everyday lives. Such success at the theoretical level should help researchers focus on basic issues of communication, organization, and community rather than simply chasing the next latest (soon to be passé) technological opportunities. There is tremendous opportunity here for communication researchers to bring conceptual coherence to an exciting new area in the study of human communication technology.

Author Biography

Janet Fulk is Professor of Communications and Professor of Management & Organization at University of Southern California. Her research examines how communication systems impact collaboration and knowledge distribution across boundaries of space, time, team, organization, and nation. Her books include *Shaping Organizational Form: Communication, Connection and Community* (with Gerardine DeSanctis), the award-winning *Organizations and Communication Technology* (with Charles Steinfield), and *Policing Hawthorne* (with Greg Patton and Peter Monge). Recent articles have appeared in *Organization Science*, *Human Relations*, *Communication Theory* and *Communication Research*, and an award-winning article in *Academy of Management Journal*. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Management.