

## ***What Will We Study When the Internet Disappears?***

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The Internet is not really disappearing in any literal sense, of course, but it is becoming less visible as its applications become more transparent and ubiquitous. That's partly the result of widespread use and partly the result of its incorporation into our daily activities. Between 60-70% of the population of North America and Western Europe is now on line and, though substantial gaps remain, use in all other regions of the world grew at triple digit rates over the past 7 years

(<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). Many Internet-based applications are so commonplace and so integrated into our daily activities that they are easily taken for granted. As others have suggested (Turow & Kavanaugh, 2003), we should probably stop capitalizing the word "internet" in acknowledgement of this fact.

With greater breadth and depth of penetration comes greater impact. This is true both for the internet in general and for particular applications or uses. This in turn implies that the ultimate impact of the internet will be determined less by its exotic uses, and more by its most common, even mundane uses.

If that's true, then I think our research may face two challenges. First, we may be biased toward looking at the wrong phenomena. Media researchers are often early adopters themselves and are easily drawn to studying the "next big thing." But early effects may be quite different than later effects. Moreover, given that the internet is characterized by small populations of rapidly evolving technologies, most of which fail, focusing on the newest applications can easily lead us to invest time and energy in applications that have very limited impacts. I sometimes wonder, for instance, if some aspects of my own early work on MOOs might not simply be obsolete (Parks & Roberts, 1998). More generally, the attention given some applications may be disproportionate to their actual use (e.g., social networking), causing us to pay insufficient attention to others that have far wider application (e-mail).

Second, our emphasis on newer applications and technologies might skew the way we organize ourselves in unhelpful ways. We have divisions in our professional associations organized around technologies rather than around the underlying uses to which they are put. The most important effects of social technologies like the internet will, I believe, only emerge when we concentrate on the fundamental communicative processes in which they are enmeshed rather than on the technologies themselves. I'm obviously speaking to the wrong audience, but I wonder if divisions like CAT and Game Studies in ICA and HCT in NCA have as much long term intellectual utility as we think they do now.

The perspective articulated above obviously rests on several assumptions regarding the way in which social technologies are diffused and have impact. The bulk of the research on the diffusion of innovations is based on relatively "finished" products

or services. That is, we assume that the “thing” being disseminated (e.g., a smoking cessation program) does not change much during the diffusion process. Unfortunately this may be a questionable assumption with the internet which is, after all, not a discrete technology but rather a sort of “metatechnology” that hosts populations of related and rapidly evolving applications. The design of many of these applications is fluid, responding not only to adoption decisions, but also to direct modification by users (Neff & Stark, 2003). Innovation in many technologies has become a much more user-centered, user-driven process (Hippel, 2005). As a result, research on the mutual influence processes linking innovators and users might be one of our priorities. Second, I’d advocate much more systematic attention to the arc of public discourse surrounding new communicative technologies. Many have noted the tensions between utopian and dystopian narratives regarding the internet. Others have explored historical narratives on social technologies (e.g., Marvin, 1987). Some have examined the way technologies such as the personal computer we frame in journalistic accounts (Cogan, 2005). I know of few attempts, however, to track the public discourse surrounding a given internet application over time. Have public narratives about MySpace, for example, changed over the past 3-4 years in predictable ways? Do we talk about instant messaging or online dating sites the same way now as we did in the past? Do public narratives on diverse social technologies follow similar trajectories over time? It seems to me that research on questions such as these could inform both theory and public understanding.

Increasingly, it seems to me, our research attention should turn to the most common features of social technologies and to their most routine social uses. Increasing numbers of people appear to use these technologies in a simultaneous fashion. They do e-mail, surf the net, watch television, and listen to their iPods all at the same time. We know something about distraction effects, but we know very little about the effects, if any, of regular, simultaneous multimedia use on attention, problem-solving, and face-to-face interaction. Nor do we know enough about the associations, if any, between regular immersion in virtual environments such as Second Life and engagement in interpersonal and civic relationships in offline settings. Concepts like “internet addiction” illuminate little beyond a few extreme cases. We need to move beyond the disease model if we are to understand the more subtle and undoubtedly more varied links between immersive VR and other activities.

Still another set of research priorities are suggested by the fact that many of our relationships have become “mixed-mode” (Walther & Parks, 2002). That is, relationships have become multimedia affairs in which people draw on different interactive media at different points for different tasks. Understanding how people make these choices will inform theory and may have practical implications for media designers who often appear to operate as if every social process is an equally good candidate for a web-based application. We also need to understand more about “mode-switching” in everyday interaction. An excellent foundation is provided by the research on how people manage long-distance relationships and the research on how people who have met online transition to face-to-face interaction (e.g., Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). We should build on that foundation by, first, moving beyond

dramatic changes in mode (e.g., going from being exclusively on line to meeting F2F) to examine how people in established relationships make, interpret, and manage each other's media choices on a daily basis. In addition, it could be useful to ask if the results of recent research on media choice and the related work on uses and gratifications might not be aimed at a moving target. The reversal of fortune suffered by advocates of the "internet paradox" is a powerful reminder that the results that are here today can be gone tomorrow (Kraut et al., 2002).

One last research priority cuts across several of the issues raised above. Although broadband access has reached a clear majority of Americans, recent polling data suggests that a substantial portion of people either make light use of it or are holdouts (Horrigan, 2007). The holdouts tend to be older people who are content with their existing media options. More interesting is the approximately 26% of the population that use cell phones, the internet, and related new media lightly and selectively. Additional research on this group may illuminate the overall diffusion process, help us understand how people interpret public discourse about new media, and manage information and relationships more generally.

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### ***Author Biography***

Malcolm Parks, Assoc. Professor, conducts research on interpersonal relationships, persuasion, organizational change, and social networks. Current projects include studies of how social network factors might account for differences in the strength of attitudes on controversial issues, ways organizations can influence the health of their employees and clients, and the nature of interaction on social network sites like MySpace. His work examines interaction in both face-to-face and online settings. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in interpersonal communication, social scientific methods, computer-mediated communication, communication networks, and community. He is also affiliated with the Health Marketing and Communication Research Center.

Parks was the recipient of the 1996 Woolbert Award for disciplinary impact from the National Communication Association and the Hammer Award from the Office of the Vice President of the United States for his applied work in organizational innovation. His research has been supported by the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Army Research Organization, and the U.S. Air Force Office of Prevention and Health Services Assessment.