

Fluidity, Promiscuity, and Mash-ups

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For many years, we have asked some variant on the question “when/why/how do people use a technology?” Or, “what are the consequences or implications of that use?” And so forth. These remain important questions, made even more challenging by the constantly changing technological landscape. It is difficult to ask artifact-centered questions when the artifact changes constantly.

But I find I am increasingly interested in the question “how will we use that which is created when everyone uses a technology?” In particular, I am fascinated by what is being created due to the “database turn” in our communication technology infrastructure. The combination of high bandwidth, constant connection, and low storage cost has created an environment in which it is possible to capture vast amounts of individual lived experience. And – importantly – we live in an environment in which it is possible to segment that captured experience into databases that will be accessed for as-yet-unknown purposes.

In the Sept 2007 forum of *Communication Monographs* I propose that the infrastructure of our technological system is being transformed by this change, which I propose to frame as *mobility 2.0*, and that transformation will have deep implications for communication research as well as communication practice.

The core move in this transformation is the removal of the contextual markers of (potentially) any and all communication:

“Increasingly, as a matter of routine across multiple domains, information produced for one purpose or in one context is captured, digitized, and stored in databases for other uses. That is, information is *disconnected* from its particular context, and is then *reconnected* to other information services, and ‘served up’ for different purposes.” (p. 409)

Mobility, here, refers not only to *our* mobility, but also the mobility of any/all communication and information. Communication unmoored from context is *fluid*, it is *protean*:

“Communication, then, is the work of configuring this shapeshifting environment; social actors commit to collaboratively constructing and maintaining a shared, stable social reality.” (p. 410)

This raises very interesting challenges for conceptualizing communication, returning us to pragmatism, and communication as accomplishment.

Communication, disconnected from context and residing in databases, becomes agnostic with regard to further use or further meaning. It becomes a piece of data, a

record in a database that can be put into a potentially infinite number of further contexts. “Databases make content promiscuous by creating the potential for indiscriminate association” (p. 411). An application—such as News.yahoo.com or GoogleMaps—presents to the user a coherent message, but actually may be composed of content *created* for completely different purposes.

Where this takes us, I believe, is considering communication as a *mash-up*: “The mash-up is the communication archetype in a fluid and promiscuous environment: It brings together disconnected and mutable information from multiple and disparate sources to maintain the form of a coherent, meaningful whole.” (p. 411-12)

As technology matures, and as mash-ups develop in sophistication, I believe we will see deep changes to communication processes. We will see a greater reliance, for example, on illustration rather than on narrative or accounts. Imagine old friends reminiscing not by sharing stories of the past, but by queuing up key moments from past interactions. We will see a greater expectation of informational currency and a heightened sense of “datedness.” Consider, for example, a student’s paper on political discourse, posted online, pulling real-time information from a continuously updated source website. We will see a progressive dissolution of social boundaries that are due to physical location and or social fragmentation, and will find more instances of groups doing conscious work to create identity and demarcations from context. For example, classrooms will be created by the intentional invocation of structures associated with that type of interaction, rather than something determined by the physical surroundings.

All of these possibilities are exciting, not just because they seem novel and innovative to us now, but because they continue to demonstrate the centrality of communication to constructing our social world.

Author Biography

Michele H. Jackson is associate professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has long ago come to terms with the fact that digital communication technologies tend to not stick around for very long in any one form, even when they seemed like good ideas at the time. For the past several years, she has focused on (1) design of applications to motivate collaboration, (2) interrogating the social function of determinism in organizations and groups, and (3) theorizing how we socially construct communication within a technologically-induced context of indeterminacy and change.