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Social Media and the Length of Our Arms

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Social Media and the Length of Our Arms

I use, work alongside, and sometimes dabble in social media. The thing I do for a living is to teach and research communication, but I teach the kind that uses big, bulky news and video cameras and those microphones with fur jackets. Personally, I use my mobile phone frequently, but for me it is a kind of computer I keep in my pocket. I read the news there (sometimes), Google things (sometimes), and speak on it (a lot). I certainly text, but only if it is impractical or impolite for me to actually call someone. I am told that this is precisely the opposite use pattern of millennials and the Z-Generation, who have reversed those things; they call only when it is absolutely necessary, and text at all other times (Howe, 2015). When queried about this tendency, interviewed millennials and Gen-Z-ers state that texting is more low-risk, more impersonal, easier, and more economical of their time (Loechner, 2016). In other words, it is their way of keeping others at arms' length.

Any communication researcher worth their salt will tell you that voice communication is “richer” than textual communication, because along with the words come vocal inflection, pitch, nasality, accent, and many other bits of evidence that can clue us in on the emotional state of the communicator (Orlando, 2016). Moreover, to an experienced reader of these signals, the actual words spoken might be just the sideshow, there just as placeholders to let someone know how the speaker feels. Or the speaker might by their tone of voice seem to lie or reveal something painful for them to admit. Yet despite these advantages for voice communications, for some reason, texting has become by far the most popular communication activity for mobile phones, somewhat putting the lie to the word “phone” (Newport, 2014).

Nevertheless, I think that if phones were to have their voice communication utility removed, people wouldn't buy them, because when we feel we need to speak rather than write,

we want that feature, even if it is only once or twice a week. This may be similar to the interesting case in the late 20th century when they attempted to introduce VHS players to the market. These devices didn't record; they were therefore not, strictly speaking, VCRs. The theory was, most people used VCRs to watch movies, and didn't record off TV; VHS's two-hour length was the reason VHS won out over Betamax in the format wars of the 1980s (Owen, 2005). So why keep the record function? Yet people still wanted to record television on the off chance that something historic needed to be saved for posterity, or someone needed to tape a particularly interesting sports game or some such. So those player-only devices didn't sell well at all.

Today, some believe that people want to watch television and movies on their phones, on the go (quibi.com). But the coronavirus had other plans, and with people stuck at home, everyone returned to their bigger televisions (Mullin, Flint, & Farrell, 2020). But texting, if anything, is more popular than ever, and now people are hired and fired by text and important business deals are conducted with it. Social scientists, psychologists, and other expert observers note about texting that despite its vast prevalence and its polymodal applicability to dating, business, politics, and our personal lives, we are quite sensitive about the texts we receive from others, even if we rather thoughtlessly send out hundreds of texts of our own every week. For example, there is a controversy currently raging over whether it is socially acceptable to break up with someone via text, or whether someone should just "ghost" the person (Vilhauer, 2015). Ghosting is the act of simply refusing to respond to texts, DMs, emails, and social media posts after having communicated profusely via these means in the very recent past.

For all of our sensitivity toward texts that we receive, we are actually dealing with a very penurious form of communication. By this I mean that a brief textual communication like "LOL"

could be a put-down, an example of camaraderie, or anything in between. We just don't know.

Texting does not require the greatest writing skills in the world, or even the human touch.

There is a test, advanced in 1950 by the mathematician Alan Turing (1950) that proposes that if any hidden computer, given access to a means of typing text, were able to fool some number of people (say, 30%) into believing that the text was the product of a thinking person, that computer must in some way be thought of as thinking as well.

To consider how people might be fooled in this way, one must think of texts as only having meaning in context. This is a very important concept, both for our understanding of short communications like texts, as well as for more long-form communications like plays or novels. Plays, novels, and other longer-form literary genres are in an important sense self-contained; that is, they can be understood and critiqued on their own. Yes, knowledge about the author or other works by that author may assist one's critical grasp, but it is not absolutely necessary to have read a biography of an author in order to have a reasonable understanding of his or her work. Nor does geographical or social context matter; one may read *Love's Labour's Lost* (Shakespeare & Woudhuysen, 2001) or *The Red and the Black* (Stendhal & Madden, 2004) in any locale, with anyone else present, yet still have a good idea of what the work is about. Texts, on the other hand, absolutely require context (Shen, 2012; Davis, 2016). They are generally short bursts of semantic economy, either tersely responding with as few letters as possible to the communiqué of another, or expressing or asking a question whose context is embedded in other texts, or in another medium altogether. Everything is designed to be as short and to the point as possible. Abbreviations for cliché phrases are regularly given, such as FWIW (for what it's worth) or IMHO (in my humble opinion); even the humble affirmative "OK" is often reduced to the barren "k." This penury comes at a price, however. While we usually *believe* we understand a text, what

guarantee do we have for our certainty? What do we know about the other person (again, context) that leads us to what we believe they intended? And there are reasons to be suspicious, as I discovered.

Although I have never used a dating site, I have often idly wondered whether everyone on the various dating sites was, in fact, a real person. As it turns out, many sites are based around the exchanging of texts, and on these social sites, so-called chatbots are often present (Rauch, 2016). These little nuggets of artificial intelligence are generally there to lure someone into an extended text conversation after which they attempt to sell a service or a product to them. Evidently, some are very good at this (Nguyen, 2020). The other interesting thing is that, at least so far, they are only rarely illegal. Apparently, you get no guarantee that the “people” you are texting with are actually human.

In this issue, we deal with two very different “takes” on texting and social media. Through the medium that is sometimes called “concrete” poetry, Stefani Boutelier gives us “#SOCIALPOVERTYFROMASOCIALCONTRADICTION” which features a stylized text conversation with herself, in which she ponders how social media and texting have changed her and changed society. The poetry is presented in the shell of a mobile phone, and mimics the appearance of a real textual conversation. She laments that the phone has made her both smarter and more ignorant at the same time. It is a forceful critique of the way we live today.

In “On the Night of My Grandmother’s Stroke,” originally entitled “I Receive a Text Message that my Grandmother has had a Stroke,” Rick Marlatt provides us with no such evidence. It is a poem that has not a whisper of a text – no quote from one or even suggestion of one, other than what appears in the title line. In the poem he reminisces about his natural

surroundings, and how far away he is both from where his grandmother lives, and also from his childhood with her. It is an elegant and moving elegy.

Like these poets, each of us must grapple in our own way with the communication affordances of today. We can embrace them, become champions of their use, and exploit them for the convenience and immediacy that they provide. Or, as some people do, we can avoid using them unless we absolutely have to. A lot of people find themselves in the middle. They text, and they call when they need to. Or they call, and text when they need to. It is all about keeping the encroaching world at arms' length. But now, our arms are longer.

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