VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS: THE SOLITARY WORLD OF CMC

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ABSTRACT
Computer-mediated communication has begun to produce many interesting side
effects relative to how people communicate with each other when using this
medium. One of the more interesting is the feeling a person gets upon realizing
that, while sitting alone in front of a computer screen, one is literally
connected to thousands of people at once. This article dis- cusses the
implications and overtones related to the idea of "virtual solitude."

Every time I go through the process it seems more and more like a religious
ritual. I sit in front of the machine and throw the switch. Electricity flows,
lights blink, circuits are checked. The clank of the hard disk is heard as it
searches for commands and information. The screen begins to glow; sometimes
green, sometimes a peaceful blue, occasionally an eye-catching red. The right
hand spins the mouse across the pad, the right index finger clicks the button.
The communications program is launched; more whirring and clanking. Several
keystrokes later, I am "on line," carrying on discussions, arguments, writing
news, exchanging ideas and information with people I know only by the words that
appear as characters on my screen. Right at that very moment I am in the midst
of a paradox which blends the technological with the human. I am connected to
thousands, perhaps millions of people worldwide, while sitting in the solitary
confines of my own den.

It is a strange feeling. Perhaps, strangest of all, I find that I like the feeling. I get a very distinct pleasure out of being able to engage in discussions with many different people and yet maintain a sense of solitude. The most frightening aspect of it all is that I find on many occasions I like my computer-mediated communication (CMC) better than talking with most real people with whom I come into daily contact face-to- face.

I've always been somewhat of a solitary person, despite the fact that my field of study is theatre arts. Theatre as an art form is a collaborative effort, requiring some of the most intense human interaction and communication you could find. Perhaps this is why I like solitude. My average day is so intensely interpersonal that I need the "alone time" simply to recharge for next day's efforts.

I'm also not much of a socializer. Parties and other affairs which require small talk and light conversation are not my métier. I've always been partial to serious conversation and discussion of issues and ideas, passionate talk, where you can sense that what people are saying and professing comes from the very heart of their being. Sad to say, the social opportunities (and even the academic opportunities) for such conversations are dwindling, as our culture becomes more and more trivial and superficial.

Computer-mediated communication has relieved both these social difficulties for me, while at the same time presenting me with new problems. Sitting in the silence of my den at home, I can carry on very interesting conversations with a whole range of people, most of whom I find are as articulate and passionate about what they are saying as I am. In that way, CMC has been a godsend for me, supplying me with much-needed intellectual stimulation. On the other hand, its instant availability and anonymity make it a much easier, and therefore a much more comfortable, but perhaps less human, way of interpersonal communication.

In the realm of human communication, CMC is a new phenomenon. What does the introduction of technologies such as e-mail, "interactive chat" relays and the like bring to the human experience of communication? I cannot speak to any body of research, but I can speak to my observations of my own feelings in the matter and my observations based on using e-mail and "lurking" on predominately student-used "chat" relays. The observations are not objective, but subjective, and I think raise some interesting questions and avenues for research.

I've tried to analyze why CMC works for me, and what its attraction is. Some of my observations concern me, because the change in the patterns of my behavior after being introduced to CMC reflect a change in how I am viewing human relationships.

First, CMC has brought me into contact with people who share my interests in life. I teach in a rather small, out-of-the-way college about 50 miles southwest of Buffalo NY. I find that my primary interest in life, which is stage acting, is an interest which is too highly specialized for such a small community.

There aren't any other serious actors with whom to talk shop. Most people who know something about theatre usually know the mundane and popular, or tend to view the art as a hobby rather than a serious pursuit. It gets a little lonely when you can't find someone to spark your intellectual engines.

Consequently, when I found out about this thing called "electronic mail" and that you could join discussion lists and engage in conversations with people about different ideas, I plunged in with the hope of meeting interesting people. I've not been disappointed. CMC has allowed me to converse and share ideas with like-minded theatre instructors from across the USA.

I've had great discussions and furor-filled debates on such issues as the role of the National Endowments for the Arts, performance-based studies, the work of Bertold Brecht, and the current state of theatre education at the university level. None of this would have been possible without CMC. It's allowed me to find like-minded theatre people and carry on private conversations with them as well as public ones.

The second benefit of CMC is that it has allowed me to expand in areas which I consider hobbies. The country of Canada has always fascinated me. I adore its scenic beauty, and much of its political life and social structures I find quite attractive. I've had the good fortune to travel across much of Canada, including the Northwest Territories to the mouth of the MacKenzie River.

One of my most favorite aspects of Canada is the quality of its radio broadcasting. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is far superior to National Public Radio in the US, and I happen to live in an area where I can receive a CBC station out of Toronto. When I found a discussion list which dealt with Canadian issues, I joined up right away. I've gotten so involved that at this point I provide something of a "news service" for Canadians away from home. I listen to CBC news broadcasts and then post a news summary on the discussion list based on the broadcasts. The service to Canadians away from home has been appreciated. One person from Santiago, Chile sent me the following message:

I just wanted you to know how much your news reports are appreciated down here in Chile. I have started to fax copies to other Canadians, who really like the opportunity of keeping in touch. To teach the silly servants a lesson, I also fax a copy to the Canadian Embassy. I hear they are delighted; their state-of-the-art information services usually involve three- week-old copies of the _Globe & Mail_.

Not only has CMC allowed me to pursue hobbies such as my interest in Canada, but as a former radio announcer it allows me to keep my newswriting skills up, even if the job is second-hand.

A third aspect of CMC which I have discovered is that I can make friends. The medium, however, has forced me to re-define what I mean by a "friend," since I have never seen any of the people with whom I communicate face-to-face. These are people to whom I write and with whom I can share my professional and personal concerns. By virtue of the medium's anonymity, CMC becomes rather like a confessional. I sit alone in my den, compose my messages, and send them out to people who "hear" what I say and then give me advice or cut me down or share their own thoughts. One friend I have, a prominent writer and scholar, has been kind enough to listen to my concerns about the future of university teaching and the fears and worries a young professor who is striving for tenure has to face. The benefit of having such a friend off my own campus has been enormous. Another friend has expressed interest in how I have developed our current curriculum for our major, and he and I have batted back and forth several times our various anxieties and concerns, personal and professional. I've even very recently been in contact with one of the theatre's most prominent figures,

Richard Schechner, who was very briefly one of my professors at NYU in the late 70s.

This quality of anonymity in friendship, however, is a totally new experience. I find myself trying to picture what each of these people looks like, what the sound of their voice might be. I try and picture them in their offices, in a classroom giving a lecture. While gaining the benefit of their words, their thoughts and advice, I lose that subliminal interaction so important to a friendship. On the other hand, were it not for CMC I might not know these people at all.

I am captivated, addicted even, to the wonder of all this. Still, I am concerned. While CMC has allowed me to expand myself as a person, find friends, engage in discussion and debate, I have to admit it has also reduced my humanity is some ways. Because I am more inclined to stay home and hack away at the computer, I seem to spend less time around flesh-and-blood people.

The phenomenon known as privatization is the most worrisome aspect of CMC. Privatization is a theme first introduced by Marshall McLuhan and expanded upon by Alvin Toffler and most recently by Neil Postman. The theory states that as entertainment and information becomes readily available to people in their own home, people are less likely to leave the home and seek entertainment or intellectual stimulation outside of the home. The classic example is that of the replacement of the activity of sitting on the front porch of your home with sitting in front of the TV. Sitting on the porch brought you in contact with your neighbors and your community, while watching TV only brings you in contact with flickering electrons. Radio and cinema have had the same effect on theatre.

CMC is another step along the path to further privatization. Its disguise is the notion of "interaction." CMC claims to be an "interactive" medium, but that is true only in terms of the computer itself, the computer being a non-interactive machine. When I am engaged in CMC, in point of fact I am only engaging the computer. There is a certain thrill in the idea that the machine "responds" by sending my message out and that it receives messages for me, but mostly they are messages from people I have never met. Even if I use the "chat" relays, which allow me to communicate with others in real time, my interface is still the computer, and the "chat" is less than human in terms of human communication as it is classically defined, since it is generally shallow and incomplete and by necessity brief. Thus, by allowing me to select those people with whom I will converse, CMC can shield me from the need or necessity to communicate and relate to those around me. I need never converse with my neighbors except on the most basic levels, since I can simply trot on up to the privacy of my den and converse with whom I choose. My entertainment and amusement, and even my conversations, are carried out in a very private and privatized fashion.

The computer also eats up time. On nights when I am home I can spend up to three hours alone in my den doing nothing but reading and writing e-mail. This is time taken away from family and acquaintances, time taken away from reading, time taken away from relaxation. In short, it's time taken away from any sort of actual human contact. Many times I wonder if I am not better off going to a local nightspot and conversing with other people. Should I not be cultivating more friendships with colleagues on my campus? How many good books have I missed reading because I stare at my screen? Shouldn't I be going to more

theatre, seeing more plays? I do keep in mind that I am dealing with human
beings via CMC, but the anonymity makes the interaction far different. I've
come to the conclusion that, while CMC may be personal, it's not interpersonal.
All the subtle interpersonal clues one usually receives in human relationships
disappear behind the monitor.

In some ways, CMC levels the interpersonal playing field. Anyone can join who
has a computer and a modem. Everyone from undergraduate to emeritus can get in
on the action. It can be a free-for-all at times, with little control or focus.
Indeed, there is much in CMC that is garbage. Learning to separate the dross
from the gold is one of the first challenges of riding the network.

Also, CMC allows you to form opinions about people based solely on the quality
of their words and thoughts. How they look or what their titles may be carries
little or no weight in many instances. People who might be the dullest talkers
in the world have a chance with CMC to have their ideas dealt with on their own
merits, without worrying about how quality of delivery might affect the
acceptance of the message (unless they are poor writers).

But without clues such as body language and vocal tonalities, clues so important
for the totality of meaning, CMC becomes fraught with problems. Clarity of
language and choice of words becomes paramount. Sarcasm and wit has a whole
different feel on the net than it does in person, and is likely to be quickly
misunderstood (as I discovered once, much to my chagrin).

The evolution of such low-graphic gimmicks as "smileys" e.g. :-) (tip your head
to left shoulder) help a bit, but it's not like looking someone in the eye and
listening to the sound of their voice. I find that writing how I feel is
nothing compared to speaking how I feel. Speaking has an immediacy that writing
simply cannot match.

There is, however, little doubt that CMC is the wave of the future. Its
capabilities for information exchange as well as social exchange, and the
potential for research that it holds, means that CMC, although in its infancy,
is probably here to stay. It will have a great impact on human relationships
and communication, to be sure, at least as great an impact as the invention of
mass media entertainment has had upon the theatre.

In thinking about all the ramifications of this new medium, I'm reminded of the
story about Socrates, who, when he was introduced to the new medium called
writing, scoffed at it. He feared that writing would mean that people would no
longer interact with each other, would no longer engage in dialogue, but rather
would follow arguments solitarily and interpret words in any way they chose
rather than how the author might intend them. Despite Socrates' fears, writing
has remained, but the dangers he spoke of have not been quite so threatening
until now. It may be that CMC, for all its powers and benefits, may well bring
us into a faceless and solitary world of interaction; interactive, but alone;
human, but machine-mediated. As Kent says in *King Lear*, "Is this the promised
end?"

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