Part II

Shaping Daily Life: The Internet and Society

Introduction to Part II

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The Internet's impact on society is fundamental. How we seek information, how we transact daily business, how we communicate with each other, how all of those activities are regulated and controlled – all are being changed by the choices we make in regard to the code, hardware, and governance surrounding the Internet. Such shifts in the fabric of social life may come slowly, incrementally, and in everyday, banal ways as well as through dramatic changes. But the quiet changes are no less profound for a lack of attention or excitement surrounding them.

Part II examines the multiple roles the Internet has played in contemporary society. In doing so, we study how the Internet mediates and transforms specific societal elements such as politics, religion, and language, as well as healthcare and advancement of developing nations and indigenous groups. But before introducing the individual chapters that tackle those topics in more depth, we should mention common elements that cut across the chapters, and important questions that Part II raises for future studies of the Internet.

There's a common tendency when studying or even talking about the Internet to make it seem that it is fundamentally new in terms of a communications technology, that its role in the transformation of our world is unprecedented, that it is so new and different, past models cannot apply. Yet as several of the authors in Part II point out, the Internet is only one in a growing line of transformative technological developments. Equally if not more important were technologies such as writing, the printing press, and the telegraph. Likewise, fears and hopes surround the introduction of each new technology. Optimists promise how inherent aspects of the medium will restore or instantiate democracy, or level hierarchies, or give us increased access to information and thus knowledge. Pessimists bemoan the losses of traditional cultures and ways of life, growing commercialization of public space, and troubling losses of privacy. Yet as the chapters in this section show, the Internet's effects and potentials lie somewhere in between the hyperbole and promises, both positive and negative.

The following chapters illustrate how the Internet has indeed changed society in fundamental ways, most notably in its integration into everyday life practices

(see Chapter 4 for more on that topic). More specifically, individuals and groups have used the Internet to transform as well as supplement religious and spiritual activities, political discussion, international development, and health communication. Likewise, it has given a voice to indigenous peoples globally, at the same time that it has reified particular gendered positions. The Internet is also transforming our corpus of laws and policy, from the most local instances to the widest global changes; just as it contributes to certain changes in our language.

While each contributor takes a slightly different approach to their topic, Heidi Campbell's identification of "waves" of Internet research is particularly helpful in understanding how research has progressed over the past decade. While each area of inquiry is different, it is fair to say that much work has progressed from early descriptive accounts to more nuanced, interpretive, theory-related work. That work has also drawn upon familiar as well as new methods and theories, as researchers have attempted both to draw linkages with other bodies of work and past technologies, and to figure out how to best study something so seemingly new, particularly in relation to its interactivity, its multiple forms (blogs, websites, email, chat, games, transfer protocols, and so on), and its growing reach globally.

Another point of convergence among the chapters is the insistence that online/offline distinctions are difficult, if not impossible, to draw. While policy must address how the Internet functions as a medium or technology that is different from broadcast or other media, policy must also distinguish which issues are truly medium-related, and which are simply old issues in a new form. And as we move away from policy to topics such as health communication or political discussions, we can see how the Internet gives us new opportunities to communicate or create communities of interest, but also how those activities inevitably tie back to daily lives and decisions. Likewise, chapters that discuss the role of the Internet for women, or indigenous peoples, or international development, demonstrate the challenges of seeing Internet activities as cut off or separate from daily lived activities. One way to gauge that problematic is in the increasing discomfort that researchers have with terms such as "virtual/real" or "online/offline," as there is little that is fundamentally in one or the other category. Likewise, the loadedness of particular terms such as "real" and the wrongness of a simple binary designation, suggest that we need as a field to find better ways of expressing those differences, which cannot be so easily contained now, if they ever were in the past.

Introducing the Chapters

Part II begins with Naomi S. Baron's chapter "Assessing the Internet's Impact on Language." Baron explores the somewhat hyperbolic claim that online and mobile language are influencing essential mechanics of grammar. She highlights popular fears that abbreviations and lack of proper grammar usage are widespread and changing how we communicate. Her survey of literature includes both large-scale and small-scale studies, documenting not only types of changes and their

actual prevalence, but also their relation to the wider history of language use in societies. She concludes that while we have not witnessed the significant changes to our language that some alarmists have claimed, we must still consider the role of online and mobile technologies in shaping language, calling for studies which meaningfully assess "the full range of potential influences that EMC [electronically mediated communication] may be having on language, not just at the surface phenomena such as abbreviations and acronyms."

Moving from language to regulation, Sandra Braman provides a comprehensive overview of the topic in Chapter 7, "Internet Policy." Explaining that the Internet is "simultaneously a general use tool, communication medium, set of material objects, and factor of economic production," Braman helps us see the range of issues critical to Internet policymakers, and those who advise them. Taking us from local topics such as community wi-fi access to challenges facing the future of global governing bodies, Braman argues for four "big issues" that must be confronted in terms of making future Internet policy – access to the Internet, access to content, property rights, and privacy.

Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Alexis Wichowski ask who is talking about politics and why in Chapter 8, "Political Discussion Online." In their review of research spanning North America, Europe, and parts of Asia, Stromer-Galley and Wichowski seek to counter a claim that online political conversation is "sophomoric" and "an insult to democracy." Their chapter details who is talking about politics online, and why they seek to do so, finding that while some talk can indeed be limited, more structured opportunities for collaborative discussion have produced better outcomes. They conclude that while high-quality discussions may not always predominate, political conversations of any type can offer useful – even critical – functions, particularly for citizens in non-democratic countries.

Deborah L. Wheeler explores other avenues for change in non-democratic and developing nations in Chapter 9, "Does the Internet Empower? A Look at the Internet and International Development." Taking an interdisciplinary, multi-regional case-study approach, her chapter "analyzes several projects which illustrate facets of a complex development dance" to ask how the Internet can help to create a more equitable world. Ultimately she argues that while some problems are simply too big for the Internet – such as food and safe drinking-water – Internet connectivity can empower some people and their communities, providing them access to information, capital, and economic development.

Lorna Heaton analyses the changes in health care communication resulting from Internet use in Chapter 10, "Internet and Health Communication." Covering a wide terrain including the accessing of health information now online, assessments and systems built to assess the quality of that information, patient online communities, health interventions, and electronic health records, Heaton writes that quality-control measures and privacy concerns remain paramount, even as new technological possibilities emerge. Her survey and analysis of the literature leads her to conclude that "the human and social side of the health communication and Internet equation is developing more slowly than its technical possibilities,"

but still, some of the most interesting and inventive uses of the Internet center on patient-driven communities, a fundamentally social use of the technology.

In Chapter 11, "Internet and Religion" Heidi Campbell takes us through three waves of research concerning religion and spirituality online. She describes the metaphor of the wave as implying a process, where "each wave or phase of research moves forward with a distinctive approach informed by a certain set of cultural and social perceptions about the research topic it is studying . . . the knowledge gained creates new momentum and gives birth to another wave which is pushed forward by a new set of questions and refined approaches." Her analysis of those waves in religious studies encompasses descriptive studies of practices, more refined research that explores the integration of online and offline religious practices, and emerging work that is more collaborative, interdisciplinary, and longitudinal than what has come before. She argues in her conclusion that such new research should focus on a multitude of areas, including greater attention to Asian religions and better study of the nature and quality of people's experiences when doing religious tasks online.

Taking on the task of engaging in global research, Laurel Dyson helps us understand research about "Indigenous Peoples on the Internet" (Chapter 12). Focusing on Internet practices and products created *by* indigenous peoples, rather than those created for or about them, Dyson explores the tensions surrounding the deployment of what some see as a "foreign" or "Western" technology which could also bring benefits or advances to one's life or community. Surveying challenges to access and misappropriation of identities, Dyson also details how specific Internet uses can reaffirm indigenous identity, reconnect diasporic communities, and promote particular forms of activism. And she reminds us that the Internet is still relatively new, and therefore "it has the power to be shaped by those who choose to use it."

Finally, in Chapter 13, Janne Bromseth and Jenny Sundén close the section with "Queering Internet Studies: Intersections of Gender and Sexuality." Moving between careful synthesis of the literature and stories and accounts that highlight their themes, Bromseth and Sundén argue persuasively that we cannot study aspects of identity in isolation from each other. Gender, in particular, has critical links to sexuality and indeed their co-construction must not be ignored. Tracing a history of study of the Internet from early utopian cyberfeminist accounts to more recent work on massively multiplayer games, the authors explore how notions of play and identity have likewise evolved, and call for more queer critiques of the Internet.

Final Questions

Before commencing with the individual chapters, it's also useful to consider a few questions that contributors ask which draw across the specific issues and areas discussed. First to consider is the global impact of the Internet. Most chapters

draw from international studies, and likewise show the importance of the local in understanding particular practices. How might that continue, as the Internet diffuses even more deeply across the globe? Will common standards or uses emerge, or will there always be divergence in how local users take up, understand, and reconfigure the Internet?

Likewise, what are the best practices and methods involved in studying such changes and activities? While traditional methodological approaches can continue to give us reliable ways to study the Internet, we will need new and innovative ways to study emerging forms, as well as scale upward in greater levels of complexity. Understanding broad social trends is just as important as studying deeper local practices, and we will need methods equal to both tasks.

Finally, contributors in this section question where research is going, and make arguments for what is needed next. We have clearly moved beyond the broad brush strokes of early descriptive work, we have deconstructed the idea that we radically change when we "go online." For most of us, the online is a mixture of the banal and the extraordinary, helping with the everyday, as well as redefining what communication in our lives might mean. Researchers need to be up to the task of following those changes, being careful to interpret that activity in the context of the social.