

Media Ecology and Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract

This paper examines Mead's role in media ecological studies and will explore his relationship to media ecology from an interpersonal communication perspective. Included in this discussion are Mead's concepts of self, symbolic interactionism, and the relationship between symbolic interactionism and media ecology. Examples from Internet research are used to illustrate how media ecology can be applied to interpersonal mediated communication analysis.

Media Ecology, a term introduced by Neil Postman (1970), is defined as the study of media environments. Many media ecologists have examined media environments and their impact on culture, social institutions, and social settings. For instance, Postman's (1985) classic book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* argues that American television is a media environment that transforms information into entertainment. Other well-known media ecological studies include Harold Innis's (1951) *The Bias of Communication*, Marshall McLuhan's (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Walter Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy*, and Lance Strate, Ron Jacobson, and Stephanie Gibson's (2003) *Communication and Cyberspace*. The majority of these works explore the influence of communication technology on culture. To date, very few media ecologists have explored the impact of media on interpersonal communication.

Two notable exceptions, however, are Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart's (1986) *Intermedia*, and Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) *No Sense of Place*. Meyrowitz employs the theories of George Herbert Mead to argue that "electronic media alter one's 'generalized other'—the general sense of how other people think and evaluate one's actions" (p. 131). Mead suggests that individuals perceive their own behavior when they can envision themselves as social objects in relationship to others. According to Meyrowitz, television is a media environment that enables viewers to experience the feeling of developing an interpersonal relationship with television actors (or media friends). But, the relationship that forms between actor and audience

member is limited because television actors do not provide interactive feedback. Meyrowitz describes this as a *parasocial relationship*. In contrast, interpersonal relationships that develop in face-to-face contexts are subject to change and communicators adjust their messages based on feedback from the other person. Although television creates the feeling of interpersonal communication, the media environment places limitations on the quality of the interpersonal relationships that develop.

When we move from the macro level of culture to the micro level of the individual in relationship to others, Mead's ideas can be used as a theoretical foundation for exploring interpersonal media ecological studies. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how media ecological research can be applied to concepts of self and *interpersonal mediated communication*, a term coined by Cathcart and Gumpert (1986). They define interpersonal mediated communication as "any person-to-person interaction where a medium has been interposed to transcend the limitations of time and space" (p. 30). First, Mead's concepts of self and symbolic interactionism will be discussed. Second, the relationship between symbolic interactionism and media ecology will be explored. Finally, examples from Internet research will be discussed that illustrate how media ecology can be applied to interpersonal mediated communication analysis.

During the first half of the 20th Century, Mead (1932, 1934) formulated his theory about how the self is constructed through interactions with others. In the first stage of development, individuals internalize objects. An individual consciously realizes there is a relationship between holding an object and the effort of pressure in the action of holding. When the individual internalizes the physical object with the act of holding, the object becomes part of the individual's inner experience. In the next stage, a transference occurs when the individual realizes that he or she is also an object that exists with other objects in an environment. Filmer, Jenks, Searle & Walsh (1998) describe this realization as follows: "Within the individual, self-formation is generated in terms of a dialogue between two parts, the 'I' and the 'me'" (p. 29). The "I" is made up of sociological and psychic stimuli that produce gestural behavior. In

contrast, the “me” is the “response of the other which is internalized by the individual” (p. 29). As an individual becomes self aware, he or she is simultaneously becoming aware of others. Conscious awareness of the self and others leads to identity formation.

Mead applied a pragmatist perspective to social behavior. In American scholarship, pragmatist philosophy can be found in the writings of Dewey (1920/1948) and Peirce (1998), who argue that human social behavior is based on problem-solving adaptation to the physical environment. In contrast to animals that instinctively adapt to their environments, human beings consciously understand their environment. Humans use their senses to understand the world and social behavior has a symbolic character.

The American pragmatic approach to philosophy was later known as *symbolic interactionism*. Symbolic interactionists contend that the formation of social worlds involves inter-communicative symbolic interaction. In addition to exploring how individuals symbolically interact to create social worlds, symbolic interactionism has been used to explain the human communication process. For instance, Julia T. Wood (1992) described a symbolic interaction model for understanding human communication. Her model depicts human communication as a dynamic and systematic process in which communicators create meanings through interactions with symbols. According to symbolic interactionists, language creates a symbolic or media environment that shapes the communication exchange. Wood’s symbolic interactionism model contains the following eight elements: time; shared systems; communication constraints; symbolic interactions; communicator A’s personal systems; communicator B’s personal systems; the phenomenal world of A; and the phenomenal world of B. Symbolic interactionism links communicators together in both sequential and simultaneous actions.

As identified by Cathcart and Gumpert (1986) and Dance (1967), time is a principal factor in the human communication process. Time is also a medium characteristic that is central to the media ecological studies conducted by Innis (1951) and Strate (2003). Human relationships build over time and different media support the exchange of messages in either

synchronous or asynchronous time. In interpersonal communication, the exchange of synchronous messages are often very spontaneous; in contrast, the exchange of asynchronous written messages tends to be more reflective. According to Cathcart and Gumpert (1986), “a handwritten or typed letter can facilitate a personal relationship over distance, but the time it takes to transport the message along with the lack of immediate feedback alters the quality and quantity of information shared” (p. 30). Through communication over time, the symbolic interactionism communication model suggests that communicators share a symbolic world that enlarges over time.

Drawing on systems theory as a theoretical foundation (see Bertalanffy, 1968 and Laszlo, 1996), shared systems is the second element in the symbolic interactionism communication model. Systems theorists argue that all parts of a system are interrelated. As a result, parts interdependently and interactively influence each other. In communication research, systems are often referred to as contexts and systems are nested within other systems. Wood (1992) states: “All communication takes place within a matrix of systems: the relationship between communicators, the physical setting, the society” (p. 13). Society and culture are two systems that influence the communication process, especially the interpretation of messages.

Conversely, communication supports the formation of culture and cultural belief systems. From a media ecological perspective, Carey’s (1989) ritual view of communication draws attention to the ways in which communication supports the maintenance of society in time through shared belief systems. It is through the formation of shared belief systems that culture is established and maintained. When exploring the symbolic interactionism model from a media ecological point-of-view, micro-level systems, such as interpersonal communication, support the macro-level systems of culture and society. Both interpersonal and cultural communication depend upon the sharing of symbolic messages over time and space.

According to Innis (1951), communications media create biases that emphasize either time or space. He states: "A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and time and it becomes necessary to study its

characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting" (p. 33). By understanding the biases of time and space in media, media ecologists can explore the ways in which a new technology could influence interpersonal communication. For instance, the Internet has a space bias because it enables people to instantly send and receive messages across vast distances of geographic space. Although people can easily send messages across vast distances, the amount of information sent and received is often less than the information exchanged in a face-to-face encounter, which includes facial movements, gestures, and tone of voice. Thus, the space bias of the Internet introduces a technological constraint in the interpersonal communication process, which can be identified as lack of physical co-presence.

Communication systems contain potential constraints. In the symbolic interactionism communication model, "a constraint is something that influences our efforts to communicate and understand each other" (Wood, 1992, p. 15). Thus, constraints can modify or distort the meaning of a message. Constraints are both physical and sociological. Physical constraints include background noises, distractions, and uncomfortable conditions. Sociological factors, such as gendered discourse, educational background, and social status, can also influence how an individual receives and understands a message. For instance, poor use of grammar and spelling in electronic mail (e-mail) messages can create a negative impression. Similarly, people who use too much technical jargon can alienate an audience. In addition to these constraints, technological constraints can also influence how people understand messages. Technological constraints is a media ecological factor that can be added to the symbolic interactionism communication model to describe how media environments shape the ways in which communicators understand messages. For instance, as a media environment, the Internet enables people to share e-mail messages across distances without ever meeting in-person. Due to the lack of visual and aural information, communicators must imagine what the other person looks like and how they sound. Often this leads to misperceptions about others and the meaning of their messages. Thus, the separation of people from their words alters the ways in which people interpret messages exchanged through e-mail. Moreover, the text-based orientation of many

Internet environments, such as e-mail, is limited to the symbolic alphabet characters available on a computer keyboard.

Both media ecologists and symbolic interactionists are interested in the different types of symbol systems utilized in the communication process. Because media ecology tends to focus on technology, the messages exchanged in human communication are not often researched. With the widespread use of the Internet, human communication now occurs within a mediated environment. Both face-to-face and mediated communication involve symbolic interaction. According to Wood (1992), "The symbols we select and the way in which we organize them affect how others interpret our talk" (p. 16). From a media ecological perspective both the symbols and the environment in which they are exchanged will influence how a message is understood.

According to media ecologists, media create symbolic environments that influence the ways in which information is interpreted. Postman (1985), for instance, argues that commercial American television creates an environment that presents information primarily as a form of entertainment. As a result, it is difficult to present serious issues through American television programming. Moreover, the emphasis of visual symbols on television tends to evoke emotional responses in viewers. According to Barry (1997), people first respond to visual imagery on an emotional, unconscious level before rational interpretation takes place. Additionally, the visual representation of objects and people tends to evoke feelings because of the direct relationship between image and object it represents. In contrast, the printed word tends to be more logical and reflective because language is abstracted from the object, which requires a different type of cognitive understanding (see Postman, 1979). Words must be related to objects, places, and things. Moreover, people must know the language before they can understand what the words represent. Thus, the use of a particular symbol system can influence the creation and understanding of messages. Presently, different media environments support different types of symbol systems that are interpreted differently.

In addition to symbol systems, symbolic interactionism approaches to communication

examine the shared phenomenal worlds of the participants involved in the communication exchange. In the symbolic interactionism communication model, communicators interpret messages based on their individual phenomenal worlds. Individual phenomenal worlds include past experiences, self-concept, feelings, goals, skills, attitudes, and values. “To the extent that these worlds overlap (that is dual perspective), [communicators] will have relatively similar understandings and meanings” (Wood, 1992, p. 27). Phillips and Metzger (1976) describe dual perspective as follows: “We must understand that it is possible to motivate others, even as it is possible for others to motivate us. . . . When we are rewarded, we tend to continue the behavior; when punished, we tend to inhibit it”(p. 119). Society shapes rules of behavior and most social behavior is first learned within the context of the family unit. Once family behavior is understood, the individual moves out into other social groups. The ability to conceptualize the self with others in social settings is key to identity formation and effective interpersonal communication.

In contrast to a transmission model of communication, such as the Shannon/Weaver model, that describes how messages are delivered to individuals and audiences, the symbolic interaction models depicts communicators engaged in an interactive process. As new media become more interactive, media ecologists need to become aware of how people communicate and interact within media environments, which involves examining how messages are exchanged and what type of messages people are exchanging. Interactivity is a defining characteristic of computer-based communication, such as the Internet and World Wide Web. Interactivity enables messages to flow in multiple directions. For instance, *interpersonal interactivity* is a “two-way correspondence between people in which senders and receivers can exchange positions and develop ongoing relationships” (Barnes, 2003, p. 21). In mediated interpersonal communication contexts, Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1998) state, “interactivity is associated with those message qualities which invite people and make people gravitate to groups” (p. 173). Thus, interactivity is an important aspect of Internet communication because it supports message interest and involvement. New media environments, such as the Internet and World Wide Web,

are interactive media environments that support mediated interpersonal communication.

A difference between examining interpersonal human communication and media environments, is the focus on communicators. In different communication models, communicators are referred to as speakers and listeners, senders and receivers, and source and destination. Symbolic interactionists examine how meaning is constructed by individual communicators. No two people construct meaning in exactly the same way. A communicator's personal belief system and the phenomenal world in which they live influence how messages are understood.

A personal system is based on past experiences, feelings, needs, desires, goals, values, self-concepts, and knowledge of the other communicator. When people are in a good mood and feeling optimistic, they will interpret messages differently from a day when they feel tired and depressed. Thus, meanings can vary within an individual depending upon their mood. When exploring the ways in which communicators construct meaning, two levels need go be considered—content and relational. The content level is the information or literal meaning in a message. According to Wood (1992), "Content-level meaning is straightforward information" (p. 18). In contrast, the relational meaning is concerned with the relationship between the communicators, which will influence the ways in which the communicators interpret the information conveyed through the message.

Symbolic interactionists clearly place human intention and action at the center of their investigations. In contrast, media ecologists tend to focus on the type of environments media create. When shifting the focus from technology to people, Mead's ideas can be used to better understand how people present themselves to others through the Internet. When applying symbolic interactionism to media ecology, media ecologists need to examine the media environment and technological constraints, such as the limited symbol system available in e-mail exchanges, plus the ways in which communicators interpret messages [see Figure 1]. The following describes e-mail correspondence using symbolic interaction and media ecological principles.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, e-mail is the most popular Internet application. On an average day, 49% of Americans who go online send e-mail (Pew, 2002). E-mail is text-based and it supports the interpersonal exchange of written communication, which is often referred to as *computer-mediated communication*. According to Giese (1998), “By and large people engaged in computer-mediated communication tend to conceptualize their communicative acts as conversation despite the fact that they employ written rather than verbal modes” (p. 5). Since the introduction of e-mail, people have altered their use of written language to add nonverbal cues to their messages. These nonverbal cues attempt to compensate for the lack of visual and aural information available through other communication environments, such as the telephone. Textual linguistic alterations, including emoticons, attempt to counterbalance the lack of physical co-presence. According to Lee (2003), written online communication mixes orality and literacy together: “E-mail merges the literate emphasis on sight with the breezy informality of talk, with its many variations of sound” (p. 319).

Despite limited symbolic cues, people present themselves in a variety of ways on the Internet including e-mail addresses, screen names, personal profiles, and signature lines. The primary identity marker in Internet communication is an e-mail address because it is the name people use to locate an individual on the network. In business contexts, e-mail addresses generally have a relationship to the person’s actual identity and they indicate the company for which the person is employed. Social e-mail addresses, such as Yahoo or Hot Mail accounts allow people to play with identity by creating e-mail addresses with nicknames (bronzgirl@hotmail.com, RedSue@Yahoo.com). Chat participants often consider their nicknames to be an extension of themselves. Names are carefully selected and they invite associations or they play with the oral sounds of language (MrLA, Ezzzzzz, ZigZag, Starman). In a sense, these names are masks or electronic costumes. Nicknames draw on fantasy and fictional characters from mythology, comics, literature, science fiction, films, and other popular culture themes.

Nicknames and screen names contribute to the emergence of cyberself. Dennis Waskul

and Mark Douglass (1997) define a cyberself as “*the meaning of personhood (or experience of personal identity) emergent within dislocated and disembodied forms of electronic-computer-mediated interaction between persona and/or communication technologies*” (original emphasis p. 386-387). Lee (2003) refers to the cyberself as the *textual self* and online electronic presence has also been referred as the digital self (see Strate, Jacobson & Gibson, 2003).

People are faceless in many Internet contexts. Aspects of self that are easily observable in face-to-face interactions must be presented to others in Internet environments. E-mail correspondents can choose when and where they want to reveal their physical features. This raises the following question: Can people clearly represent themselves through text-only correspondence? In *Online Connections*, this question was explored by comparing autobiographical descriptions written by Gerald M. Phillips (GMP) to descriptions written about him by online friends (see Barnes, 2001). Between 1993 and 1995, Phillips was a leading contributor to the online discussion group called Interpersonal Computing and Technology (IPCT-L). Using provocative posts, signature lines, and private e-mail messages, Phillips presented himself to others. He exchanged such a large volume of messages with other people that he established a *net presence*. Net presence is a term that was coined by Phil Agre (1994) to describe the awareness of an electronic identity or cyberself by others. Agre became aware of his net presence when several people commented about his electronic appearance on the network created by messages he sent to discussion lists. Similarly, Phillips’s messages frequently appeared on discussion lists, especially IPCT-L. As a result, Phillips developed a strong net presence on the Internet.

When Phillips passed away on April 26, 1995, a spontaneous outpouring of personal tributes and descriptions were posted to the IPCT-L group. These messages provided an opportunity to examine the identity that Phillips communicated to others through his text-based correspondence. However, it should be noted that some of the online participants, including this researcher, knew Phillips from various face-to-face meetings and contexts. Moreover, face-to-face and interpersonal interaction with Phillips was a central theme running throughout the

personal tributes.

A media ecological analysis of the IPCT-L messages revealed several key findings (Barnes, 2001). First, many of the descriptions written by online friends did capture the essence of Phillips's in-person personality. Second, Phillips understood how to play with electronic text and present himself online. He cultivated an online performance style that attracted many online friends. However, Phillips felt as if his online relationships were not as rewarding as face-to-face ones (personal correspondence, April 2, 1995). At times he was frustrated by the lack of direct visual and aural feedback from his online interactions. Third, some IPCT-L members developed an exaggerated image of Phillips that was similar to the way people view celebrities rather than personal acquaintances. Exaggerated perceptions primarily occurred in descriptions written by people who were geographically and culturally distanced from Phillips. Finally, a new social group status emerged that was based on face-to-face or interpersonal contact. People who had more contact with Phillips had higher status in the group. Access to Phillips created status within this Internet group and in some cases envy. Similarly, it was observed that face-to-face interaction between group members influenced status in another social online group in which Phillips participated. In another group, face-to-face interaction with Phillips and other group members separated people into in and out-groups (see Barnes, 2000 and 2001).

These studies revealed that the presentation of self through the Internet incorporated characteristics of both face-to-face and mediated communication environments. When people spend time presenting themselves to others, individuals can acquire a realistic understanding about another person through text-based interaction. However, the lack of shared physical experience can lead to fantasy or exaggerated impressions about others because individuals who receive messages will add their own visual and contextual interpretations to text-based correspondence. The fantasy aspect of computer-mediated communication may not be factored into Internet studies conducted by interpersonal researchers because they will focus on the communication exchange and neglect to examine the influence of the media environment on how people understand messages. People compensate for the lack of physical co-presence in e-mail

by adding fantasy and imagining the other. By examining the communication exchange and the environment in which the exchange is taking place, researchers can develop a better understanding of the online communication process.

Exaggerated interpretation of e-mail messages in Internet environments supports Walther's theory of *hyperpersonal communication*. Walther (1996) states that hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication occurs when CMC "is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF [Face-to-Face] interaction" (p. 17). Sometimes, the receivers of text-only computer messages will inflate their perceptions about online correspondents due to the lack of shared face-to-face visual, verbal, and social cues. As a result, receivers of e-mail messages will imagine stereotypical and idealized impressions about others. These idealized views about other people contribute to the phenomenon of hyperpersonal communication and the feeling that computer-mediated correspondence can be more appealing than face-to-face conversations.

Although it is possible to present a fairly accurate picture of oneself through textual communication, receivers of text-based messages may idealize their perceptions about others. Idealization increases when the phenomenal worlds or personal experiences of communicators are vastly different. For instance, people who were from other countries and not part of the American academic experience tended to describe Phillips in exaggerated ways. They compared him to film characters and as being larger than life (see Barnes 2001). Thus, the lack of physical co-presence in Internet environments can influence the ways in which different communicators understand messages.

The lack of physical co-presence also enables communicators to deliberately misrepresent themselves in Internet environments (see Sternberg, 2001 for an examination of misbehavior on the Internet). This idea was illustrated by the cartoon of a dog sitting next to a computer with the caption: "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." Lee (2003) states: "The ill effects of the invisible persona [cyberself or textual self] have received the most attention. Deborah Tannen (1994) editorializing in a sidebar to a *Newsweek* feature on e-mail,

specifically blames ‘the anonymity of networks’ for emboldening some men to ‘deluge women with questions about their appearance and invitations to sex’” (p. 315). Tales about sexual predators who pretend to be teenagers to lure young women into face-to-face meetings is a topic of newspaper and television magazine stories. Unscrupulous people can hide behind an electronic mask. “In contrast to the antisocial few, many other men and women find opportunities to play in the chance to fabricate a textual self” (p. 283). The majority of online communicators play with their identity rather than misrepresent it.

As previously stated, self presentation through the Internet separates the physical body from the communication exchange (also see Barnes,1999). This provides an opportunity for individuals to selectively present themselves to others by emphasizing positive aspects of their personality. Limited cues can be used to enhanced self presentation because textual representations of self can be edited, modulated, and presented as partial identities (see Barnes, 2000). Moreover, anonymity is an important aspect of faceless Internet correspondence. Similar to printed texts, Internet authors can remain anonymous. Helen Nissenbaum (1999) defines anonymity as remaining nameless or “conducting oneself without revealing one’s name” (p. 141). In printed texts, writing is anonymous when it is not attributed to a named person. On the Internet, people can remain anonymous by using pseudonyms and fictitious screen names. Moreover, in text-based communication, people are not associated with physical appearance. Thus, anonymity is easily maintained in Internet correspondence.

The separation of people from their words can lead to identity misinterpretation and misrepresentation. As previously discussed, communicators can visualize idealized misconceptions about the identity of others. Similarly, people can deliberately misrepresent themselves. Identity misrepresentation occurs for several reasons, including experimentation, protection, and fraud. According to Turkle (1995), individuals use Internet environments to experiment with their identity and playfully change their gender and personality as a game. In other instances, individuals use false identities to protect themselves from public humiliation or harassment (see Barnes, 1999). For instance, a gay teen living in a community that did not

accept homosexuality assumed an online false identity as a way to protect himself from real world harassment (see Egan, 2000). In extreme cases, identity misrepresentation is used to commit a crime (see Ephron & Chen, 2001). Because corporeal identity is separated from Internet identity, people need to verify that people are who and what they say they are before planning a face-to-face encounter. However, sometimes when people discover that the person they have been corresponding with through the Internet is a fraud, they still refuse to accept the deception. Instead they will modify their understanding of the other. Consider the following *New York Times Magazine* story.

Michael Lewis (2001) wrote a story about a teenager who presented himself as a lawyer on the Internet. His article described how a 15-year old California teenager presented himself as a hot-shot lawyer on a web site called AskMe.com. A software company developed the web site to demonstrate one of their products called AskMe. The software program enables employees of large corporations to share knowledge through their private computer networks. Employees post questions on the AskMe program and anyone in the company can answer. Questions and answers are then organized and saved on the system to share corporate expertise.

However, AskMe clients became concerned about heavy usage of the program. To answer these concerns, AskMe setup a web site using the software to demonstrate how the program would handle large volumes of users. In its first year, the site had over 10 million visitors. People would post questions and other Web users would answer. AskMe made no money from the site and it did not monitor or edit the information being exchanged. Lewis (2001) states that the experts providing information “were self-appointed and ranked by the people who sought the advice. Experts with high rankings received small cash prizes from AskMe.com” (p. 35).

A fifteen-year-old high school student named Marcus Arnold began to offer legal advice on the web site. His down-to-earth replies to legal questions asked by others eventually moved him to the number one position as a legal expert. He became so popular that people began calling him at home and seeking out his advice. At some point, Marcus became concerned

because he was only 15 and not an established lawyer. As a result, Marcus changed his Internet profile from “legal expert” to “15-year-old intern attorney expert.” However, Marcus was not a legal intern. In reality, he never studied law or read a law book. His knowledge about the American legal system came from watching television programs and Court TV.

After revealing his true identity as a teenager on AskMe.com, Marcus began to receive flames and nasty messages from the real lawyers who were competing against him for rankings on the site. A confrontation broke out on the AskMe discussion boards. The actual lawyers accused Marcus of not knowing what he was talking about. To prove this, the lawyers asked him detailed legal questions, which he could not readily answer. Marcus was humiliated in the discussion boards, however, he still kept offering online legal guidance. Eventually, the people seeking legal counsel from Marcus told the real lawyers “to leave the kid alone!” Instead of accepting the fact that Marcus was playing the role of a lawyer, people rationalized his actions by calling him a legal genius. Moreover, people continued to seek out Marcus for legal help. Two weeks after Marcus disclosed his actual age and the fact he was not a lawyer, he was again in the number one position for legal advice on AskMe.com.

There were mixed reactions to Marcus’s role-playing as a lawyer on the Internet. Real lawyers were outraged by his deception; conversely, people who needed legal advice appreciated his down-to-earth answers. As a result, he again climbed to the number one position in the legal rankings on the site. Marcus’s parents also had mixed reactions to his Internet identity. His father was skeptical about all of the people calling their house asking for Marcus, in contrast, his mother was proud of her son who showed an ability to understand the law.

Reactions to Marcus’s cyberself versus his real self provide an opportunity to apply symbolic interactionism and media ecological analysis to Lewis’s report. An interesting aspect of this case is the fact that people did not want to believe that they were receiving advice from a teenage high school student. To compensate for the discrepancy between the impressions people imagined about Marcus and his actual identity, recipients of his advice decided that he must be a legal genius. These individuals created a new shared belief system on the AskMe

discussion boards that described Marcus as a “legal genius.” Once people create an exaggerated or idealized image of an Internet communicator, the image was difficult to change. Instead of accepting the real life alternative, participants in AskMe.com rationalized their misconceptions about Marcus. When misunderstandings occur in Internet communication, people will adjust their image of the other, but not completely replace it.

A similar reaction was revealed in a study conducted about an online group before and after they met face-to-face (see Barnes, 2000). When members of this online group created a shared belief system through textual correspondence, the beliefs transferred to face-to-face contexts. People who believed they were friends online behaved as friends when they were offline. Similar to the participants in AskMe.com, members of the online group rationalized differences between the cyber and physical self. For example, one member created an elaborate explanation to rationalize why one woman had a gregarious personality online and a shy personality offline. Thus, once a belief system is established about another individual, it is difficult to completely change the system. Instead, people will modify it to maintain their comfort levels with others.

In terms of self development, the Marcus story illustrates a conflict between social and interpersonal acceptance. On a cultural level, Marcus would not be considered to be a legal expert. On an interpersonal level, his role as a lawyer was confirmed by the people who sought his help on AskMe.com. Many of these people appreciated his down-to-earth answers to legal questions. Thus, Marcus’s legal identity was confirmed by AskMe.com users, but not confirmed by actual lawyers. Although not accepted on a cultural level, Marcus’s expertise was accepted on a personal level. AskMe.com users wanted to believe that Marcus was a legal expert because they liked his answers to legal questions and they encouraged his participation. A clash between social and person systems occurred when Marcus played a lawyer on the Internet. In terms of Mead’s theory of self, Marcus is both being accepted and rejected for his legal knowledge, which could create identity confusion. This confusion may not have occurred if AskMe.com participants had been interacting with Marcus in a face-to-face context. A face-to-

face encounter would automatically reveal that Marcus is a teenager, who is not old enough to intern in a law firm.

Understanding discrepancies between the cyberself and the physical self is a topic that media ecologists need to more carefully examine because this is a phenomenon that occurs in media environments, which separate messages from the communicator. When communicators interact within contexts that eliminate visual and aural information, understanding others and their messages requires communicators to fill-in and imagine missing information. Thus, the process of interpersonal communication is altered. Combining the symbolic interaction communication model with media ecology is a method that can be used to conduct interpersonal mediated communication research.

Conclusion

Because physical features are separated from online identity, people can represent themselves as anyone they want to be. This is a characteristic of the Internet's media environment, which influences the ways in which communicators exchange and understand messages. For example, 15-year-old Marcus successfully presented himself to others as an attorney on the Internet by establishing credibility through his down-to-earth interactions with others. People can present a credible cyberself through text-only correspondence by spending time exchanging messages through symbolic interactions. However, the cyberself may be totally constructed through the use of language and have no relationship to the physical appearance and actual credentials of an individual. Understanding how this occurs requires researchers to examine both the media environment and the messages being exchanged within Internet contexts. To conduct this type of research, media ecologists can build on the theoretical foundations of Mead and symbolic interactionism.

Similar to media ecological studies, symbolic interactionism considers time and space in the communication process. Unlike many media ecological studies, symbolic interactionism adds message analysis into an examination of the media environment. By altering the symbolic interactionism model to include media characteristics, such as technological constraints,

researchers can better understand how media environments influence the ways in which people understand messages. For instance, compensating for the lack of physical co-presence in e-mail exchanges encourages the use of fantasy, which in some cases can lead to a more desirable communication experiences. Conversely, removing people from their words enables individuals to misrepresent themselves in electronic environments. Thus, a media ecological approach to the study of online communication reveals both potential positive and negative aspects relating to communication in media environments that replace physical co-presence with symbolic co-presence.

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