Web-Mediated Communication
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Web-mediated communication is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of types of communication on the Internet. In the past, different applications were used to access areas of the Internet, but nowadays all kinds of communication are web based. In this article, four types of web-mediated communication are distinguished: (a) system to user (e.g., e-mails from social networking sites announcing that a user has commented on an entry, a pop-up window indicating that an instant messaging friend is attempting communication with the user); (b) user to system (e.g., users’ activity in search engines, reading content on the Internet); (c) user to user (all the range of communicative options both in the synchronous axis-chat rooms, instant messaging, WhatsApp, and in the asynchronous axis (e.g., e-mail, Internet fora, messages to friends on social networking sites); and (d) user to collectivity (the kind of communication that is mainly intended to shape the user’s identity by generating feelings of group membership).

Scope of “web-mediated” and “communication”
In the early 1990s, when the Internet was something that we had to log onto access was managed by different software applications (e.g., Telnet). By contrast, nowadays for many users Internet is a synonym of the web, and the web is the whole range of html-based applications for synchronous (e.g., chat rooms, instant messaging, phone-enabled conversations) and asynchronous (e.g., e-mail, web fora, Twitter, entries on social networking sites) communication, and now ubiquitously extended to varieties of communication that are only managed through smartphones, such as texting (e.g., WhatsApp, Line).

First the term “web-mediated communication” needs delimiting. The term “web-mediated” should cover most—if not all—of the forms of web-based interactions and information processing that are available nowadays. Besides, “communication” is also a slippery term. For pragmatics, for example, communication only covers discourses intentionally addressed from and to humans, and all the range of unintentional “exuded” information from people’s nonverbal behavior (e.g., blushing) would fall outside its scope. This is the case of the so-called cyberpragmatics, a cognitive pragmatics model of human-to-human Internet-mediated communication (Yus, 2010, 2011). In this article, however, a more “relaxed” conceptualization of the term “communication” will be adopted, in which all sorts of information exchange are covered, including automatic messages generated by software, as long as one of the participants in the communicative process is a human being. If such a broad approach is adopted, four types of communication can be isolated: system to user, user to system, user to user, and user to collectivity. These will be briefly commented upon.

From the system to the user
Users get all sorts of messages from the system when they engage in daily interactions on the web. These include social networking site notifications (about friends commenting on a photo, people willing to be added to the user’s list of friends, or alerts of asynchronous user-to-user messages). These messages also include automatic messages in chat rooms that inform users when somebody enters or leaves the site or changes their nickname. They also include RSS feeds: when the software automatically filters and selects information from predetermined sources and feeds users with information that should be relevant to them. Instead of the user clicking on potentially relevant links it is the site that feeds the user with preestablished topics of interest. The RSS feed is rewritten automatically whenever some
updating takes place in the content of a website. In this way, users can know whether the website has added new content or texts without having to go to the actual website.

In all of these cases, the system takes full responsibility for what is considered to be relevant to the user and even stops users from accessing certain information if this information fails to comply with the relevance criterion that initiated this system-to-user communication. An example is Facebook, which filters information in three different ways (Pariser, 2011, pp. 37–38): (1) by affinity—the more you become friendly with somebody and the more someone visits your profile and engages in conversations with you, the more likely it is that Facebook will show updates from that user; (2) by the relative value of content—updates on user status, for example, on the user being no longer married, are more valuable and the computer system emphasizes them, but other types of content are also underlined by the system if it detects the user’s tendency to see that kind of content; and (3) by time—obviously, the most recently published entries have prominence over the older entries.

Other kinds of system-to-user communication include automatic recommendations made by online shops such as Amazon, according to the information gathered from the user’s previous purchases. But, undoubtedly, the most ubiquitous form of system filtering is the list of output results from search engines such as Google. Again, the system makes decisions according to the users’ search history and shows the output results that are considered to be more relevant to them. However, as Pariser (2011) suggests, this creates a vicious circle in which we obtain what we aim for and end up aiming for what we are destined to obtain, preventing the unexpected clash of incoming pieces of information that very often trigger productive thoughts. Creativity is filled with unpredicted processing of information that surprisingly combines with background knowledge to yield relevant conclusions. Search engines and their algorithms often prevent surprising access to information by continuously filtering the information that users will invariably find relevant.

From the user to the system

A great deal of web-mediated communication refers to users accessing content on the web (i.e., on websites, cybernewspapers, etc.) through establishing communication with sites in search of relevant information. Although most of it is created and uploaded by authors (and hence it should properly be called user-to-user communication) the feeling is that information is there for any user who wants to read it and not addressed to a specific user (as in the narrow conceptualization of user-to-user web-mediated communication that will be outlined below).

The screen is a small area inside which several sources of information fight for the user’s attention (advertisements, link-mediated content, tags for sections, unframed text that has to be scrolled down, etc.). In this sense, the key term in this user-to-system communication is usability, the impact of content design of information processing, that is, how chunks of text are linked and structured, whether the text fits the screen or not, and so forth. If the content is not well structured, organized, and coherently linked, the user is certain to end up frustrated. Within cyberpragmatics, an explanation is provided (Yus, 2010, 2011) in cognitive terms. Users engage in a cost-benefit processing of information and a badly designed site can increase mental effort hence, decreasing the eventual relevance of its content. This happens both in a quantitative sense (too many links to click on in order to reach the desired piece of information lead to increased mental effort and reduced relevance) and in a qualitative sense (little or no coherence between chunks of text linked hypertextually will puzzle the user, demanding increased effort and, again, leading to decreased relevance).

Similarly, the outcome of processing content differs if this content originated inside or outside the web. Several (traditionally offline) discourses have been transferred to the web,
for example, newspapers and advertisements, exhibiting several phases in how independent these online discourses are from their offline counterparts. In this sense, Shepherd and Watters’ (1998) classification is interesting, since the quality of the format and the eventual interpretation of online discourses depend enormously on their stage in the evolution of cybergenres. Initially, discourses were simply replicated, transferred to the web with no change in their format. In a second phase, discourses are variant, in the sense that the content is roughly the same but the format takes advantage of the qualities of the web (e.g., links). In a third phase, discourses are emergent, with little resemblance to offline counterparts. Finally, a fourth phase concerns discourses that are unique and have been created on and for the web (e.g., Facebook). Each kind of discourse will require specific strategies of design and processing.

From the user to another user
User-to-user communication is the most important area of web-mediated communication. Every day millions of messages are exchanged between users all over the world, both in a synchronous and in an asynchronous mode. Although nowadays the bandwidth allows for audiovisual communication (e.g., Skype), cue-filtered text-based communication is still the norm in many popular forms of user-to-user interaction (e-mail, chat option in social networking sites, Internet fora, instant messaging, etc.). In this case, users often connote their messages with innovative forms of text (emojis, repetition of letters, creative use of punctuation, etc.) so as to enrich texts with an additional layer of information. If addressed from a cognitive point of view, these creative uses of typed text generate interpretive gaps that have to be filled by the addressee by using inferential strategies (Yus, 2011, pp. 18–19):

What the “sender user” intends to communicate.
[resembles…]
What the “sender user” could have said (in a context-saturated face-to-face conversation).
[resembles…]
What the “sender user” actually types.
[resembles…]
What the “addressee user” could have listened to (in a context-saturated face-to-face conversation).
[resembles…]
What the “addressee user” actually reads.
[resembles…]
What the “addressee user” interprets.

This strategic use of text deformation has become ubiquitous in most forms of text-based communication, to the extent that very often the resulting text may not be understood by readers who do not master these textual strategies. A clear example is texting. Besides, chat rooms and instant messaging services, within social networking, sites are filled with text deformation and emoticons. These iconically connoted configurations of text have evolved from the initial “faces” typed on the keyboard by the user to the current galleries of 3D emoticons that appear in most text-based communication (Silva, 2010). However, it is surprising that these programs for user-to-user conversations have become so popular, considering how little the system aids in achieving a kind of interaction that resembles face-to-face communication. Even though these portals for chatting have evolved enormously, incorporating a webcam facility, users still prefer this kind of cues-filtered plain text that they can control in terms of how much information they are willing or ready to give away to other
In any case, the boundary between synchronous and asynchronous modes of user-to-user interaction is becoming increasingly blurred in today’s web-mediated communication, together with the blurred boundary between online and offline communication. In the past, e-mail was clearly asynchronous, whereas today’s high-speed networks bring this kind of communication closer to synchronous chats. Besides, typically offline forms of communication such as the aforementioned texting have “jumped” into the web, as newer forms of mobile-enabled text-based communication have evolved into more sophisticated (and free or very cheap) programs such as WhatsApp or Line, which incorporate photo sharing but also require nonstop Internet connection.

**From the user to the collectivity of users**

Today’s web-mediated communication exhibits an increasing interest in producing content for a group of users (specifically, content to be acknowledged by a community), a clear form of identity shaping on the Internet through group membership and through validation by the community depending on how often and how much content is uploaded and also according to the popularity and impact of this content on friends, contacts, and acquaintances (Bugeja, 2005). This is particularly prominent in the case of social networking sites in which users produce information that is likely to be interesting to their friends and expect some identity-enhancing feedback from them in terms of comments, “likes,” and so on (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Nowadays, users are not passive consumers of information. Instead, they are active produsers (both consumers and producers), and the increasing amount of user-generated content within the trend of participatory culture demands some attention.

The premise in this user-to-collectivity trend is that communication lies at the heart of all the identity-shaping strategies, either as individuals or as members of a collectivity. This entails an increasing role of the web in social activities that were once typically managed in offline scenarios. In this sense, five stages can be identified in the role of communication in group membership on the Internet. Initially, in the early 1990s, the Internet was clearly outside people’s lives and hence its role in identity shaping or in generating feelings of group membership was minimal. Secondly, in the late 1990s, the role of online communication in users’ identity can be pictured as a triangle, the top representing inherited features such as race, sex, or nationality (the top being small because these features were masked by text-based communication); the middle part represents optional sources of identity such as Internet fora or e-mail lists, and finally a broad part at the bottom exhibits personal features of identity (this area is broad because users could play with different identities). Thirdly, at the beginning of the 21st century, offline sources of identity and community bonding (neighbors, streets, bars) underwent a process of virtualization and, at the same time, online activity, groups, and fora became more and more pervasive for these purposes. Fourthly, nowadays there is a tendency towards blurring the online/offline boundary, the user being a sort of intersecting node for a number of online, offline and especially hybrid networks managed through web-mediated communication. Finally, even though today the same user-as-node picture applies, there is a tendency towards building up physical or offline foundations for most of the users’ activity on the web, since web-mediated communication has an impact on the users’ offline activity (or is subservient to it) in a society in which the web (and web-mediated communication) is no longer something we have to log onto but, rather, is always active in this era of nonstop connection.

**Concluding remarks: The future of web-mediated communication**

We cannot foresee what lies ahead for web-mediated communication but it is clear that two aspects of human communicative activity on the web will be prominent. There is an
increasing use of mobile phones in daily interactions thus making the online/offline divide increasingly blurred. Secondly, there will be an increasing adaptation of the interfaces for web communication to the requirements of digital natives and their communicative needs, together with increasing adaptation of interfaces to audio, visual, and multimodal options for interaction. This will be especially interesting in the case of small mobile phone screens whose interfaces will have to meet the users’ need for interaction as an intuitive and user-friendly environment.

SEE ALSO: Identity Construction; Online News; Social Media Discourse

References

Further reading

Francisco Yus teaches pragmatics and applied linguistics at the University of Alicante, Spain. He has a PhD in linguistics and has specialized in the application of pragmatics (especially relevance theory) to media discourses and conversational issues. For instance, he has proposed a pragmatic model of communication in media discourses (*La interpretación y la imagen de masas*, 1997) and developed a pragmatic approach to Internet-mediated communication (*Ciberpragmática*, 2001; *Ciberpragmática 2.0*, 2010; *Cyberpragmatics*, 2011). His latest research concerns the analysis of misunderstandings and irony in conversation, and the production and interpretation of humorous discourses.