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Introduction to the international encyclopedia of digital communication and society

Book section

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International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society
3 Volume Set

Introduction

by

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Introduction

When we agreed to take on the editorship of this encyclopedia, it was with a mixture of excitement and eagerness, but also trepidation. Our enthusiasm stemmed from the ability to contribute to a growing field of research by creating a set of reference entries for scholars and students who often work in relatively narrowly defined areas. What a privilege and a rare opportunity to make a difference. Our trepidation stemmed from the challenges we expected to face along the way.

The International Encyclopedia of Communication, published by Wiley Blackwell in 2008, and *The Concise International Encyclopedia of Communication*, in press, 2014, both edited by Wolfgang Donsbach, are initiatives of the International Communication Association. The subdisciplinary *Encyclopedia on Digital Communication and Society* and others in the series are commissioned by an Advisory Board, chaired by General Editor Wolfgang Donsbach. The subdisciplinary collections are expected to extend coverage in selected areas, and entries will be definitive, reputable, authoritative, interdisciplinary, wide-ranging, international, and accessible.

We have compiled *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society* – one of the subdisciplinary collections – together with a group of associate editors, who were selected for their specialized expertise.

Name and Scope

A title that would indicate the scope of this subdisciplinary encyclopedia was the first order of business. Research in the area of digitally mediated communication is growing rapidly in the field of media and communication studies with the expansion and intensification of global connectivity. Mobile telephones and the internet are providing a means of entry into the digital age for many who formerly were excluded. These technologies are augmenting the experience of virtual and everyday life in numerous ways for the included. These developments are uneven and they have multiple intended and unintended consequences. Stakeholders – state, corporate, civil society, individuals, and informally networked groups – have diverse interests in the digitally mediated environment. Neither the International Communication Association (ICA) nor the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has a division or section specifically dedicated to “digital communication and society” – and for good reason. Change in this area is associated with technological innovations with pervasive implications. These cut across the boundaries of theoretical and empirical research in the media and communication field, which, itself, draws upon research in many related fields and disciplines.

We selected the title – *Digital Communication and Society* – to signal that the entries in this encyclopedia bring together research informing understandings of past, present, and, likely, future implications of digital connectivity and communicative practice for the

advantaged and the disadvantaged, for the excluded or marginalized, and for the included. Some entries focus on the new and the old: the intersections, for instance, of radio, traditional television, and the press, with internet-supported means of producing and circulating data, information, and certain kinds of knowledge.

We approached our associate editors with five broad themes and worked with them to define the scope of the entries in each area.

Three themes fall within the scope of research on digitally mediated or computer mediated communication (CMC), which, in addition to work in the field of media and communication studies, draws upon theory and empirical studies within management studies, science and technology studies, science and technology innovation studies, as well as multiple disciplines, and it draws upon both mainstream and critical perspectives. These themes are:

Commercial Applications in Digital Communication: Associate Editor Charles Steinfield, Michigan State University

With a focus on the production and consumption of digital networks, services, and applications in the commercial world, these entries provide access to research on electronic commerce, including mobile commerce. They focus on issues of online competition and marketplaces, global trade, standards, online payments, and recommendation systems, as well as on emerging forms of online collaboration and the implications of data mining, rights of access to content, and monitoring online behavior. Research in this area is concerned with business models, business strategies, issues of relationship management in increasingly complex value chains involving commercial website owners, intermediaries, and consumers, as well as issues of trust and confidence in digital information. Entry contributors draw principally on management perspectives and economic theory, as well as on the field of media and communications. For an introductory overview, see “Commercial Applications in Digital Communication.”

Social Media: Associate Editors, Shenja van der Graaf and Pieter Ballon, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The focus here is principally on the way social media are becoming embedded in the everyday lives of citizens. Online digital platforms are hosting social media applications attractive to all age groups and interactive services for entertainment and education. Entries in this theme address tensions between open collaborative activities and commercial developments. They draw upon studies informed by psychological and sociological theories of how technologies are both accommodated and resisted, and many consider the way power relations are implicated in online identity construction and in online activism. This theme also covers research in the field of social network analysis and on applications such as blogs and wikis. Issues of ethics, privacy, and surveillance are also addressed in research on the often-contested roles of the state and the private sector in shaping the electronic environments in

which citizens' lives – the young and the old – are mediated. For an introductory overview, see “Social Media.”

Online Games: Associate Editors, Aphra Kerr, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and James D. Ivory, Virginia Tech

Online gaming is a fast emerging research area, made more challenging because some research questions and populations are elusive for researchers with limited game experience and competency. Entries in this theme cover the history of online game development, global markets, and the various types of games and kinds of players – from casual to professional. Research is included on issues such as cheating, crime, content ownership, and archiving, as well as issues of identity, gender, addiction and mobility, together with research on the governance of virtual currencies and user generated content. These entries draw on a rich set of theories from many disciplines and a growing corpus of empirical evidence. They offer in-depth explanations of games and gaming terms, recent research and analysis of the nature, harms and benefits of gaming communities involving the young, but also an increasingly diverse gaming population. For an introductory overview, see “Online Games.”

Two horizontal themes are included in recognition of the significance of change in the digitally mediated communication environment for legal arrangements and policymaking at all levels and to acknowledge the often distinctive scholarly perspectives on issues in the global North and global South.

Law and Policy: Associate Editor, Sandra Braman, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Legal and policy issues from internet governance to network neutrality, and concerning digital content services and network infrastructure, are being contested in countries around the world. Whether concerning access to data or information, rights to their use by the state, private sector, and individuals, or the treatment of online communication in the context of crime, hate speech and obscenity, privacy or freedom of expression, there are enormous challenges. These are being addressed by scholarship that addresses lawmaking and enforcement, rights and obligations, and their implications for policymakers and other stakeholders who are affected by change in these areas. Some contributors to this theme use their own countries as case studies, and then devote a section to comparing and contrasting approaches to a particular area of law and/or policy in their country and in other countries. Others discuss issues as they appear at the international level, and then discuss what these international developments, treaties, organizations, or policies mean for legal decision-making at the state and, in some cases, regional or country levels. Many of the entries under this theme cut across issues discussed under the three CMC themes and the ICT4D theme. For an introductory overview, see “Law and Technology.”

ICT4D: Associate Editors, Dorothea Kleine and David Grimshaw, ICT4D Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London.

[p]This theme addresses research in the information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) field. Researchers focusing on issues of inequality and development, especially in countries and regions in the global South, are generating a strongly interdisciplinary field of work. This field cuts across issues dealt with under the law and policy theme and the three CMC themes. Here, however, contributors focus particularly on the challenges facing the state, private sector, and civil society as they appear in low- and middle-income countries and in disadvantaged communities wherever they may be. The entries focus on controversies and analytical frameworks that are helpful in privileging citizens' needs in research on the ways digital networks and their applications (as well as earlier communication technologies) are providing new opportunities, but also in some instances, creating disadvantage for the poor. The entries give particular attention to monitoring and evaluation of digital technology interventions, digital divides, the role of donor agencies and partnerships in efforts to achieve poverty reduction and sustainability, issues of the gendered nature of ICT4D interventions, and the roles of open source software and open education in opening new possibilities. A number of entries challenge complacency with respect to what it means to participate in digital environments and discuss research that provides theoretical and empirically grounded critiques of asymmetrical power relations and their replication in the online environments constructed by and for those in the global South. For an introductory overview, see "ICT4D."

The five themes partly reflect our own interests and expertise. We selected areas in which there is an enormous amount of speculation in the media, in policy forums, and at sites of communicative practice about the impact of the digitally mediated world. The themes cover topics which we think are the focus of important scholarship that helps to counter speculation through systematic research. They are areas in which it can be very challenging to discover early and current research, to find researchers undertaking studies in various regions and countries, to understand what is controversial and what are regarded as important priorities for future work. The themes were conceived to minimize overlap, but it was impossible to make them mutually exclusive.

Entries

Some entries emphasize the development and supply of digital technologies and services, some their consumption or use, and others, both. Some entries emphasize markets and commercial developments, while others focus on developments in the open information commons.

The entries are devoted to research principally within the social sciences and humanities, focusing on the development and application of digital technologies, and their

consequences – cultural, social, political, and economic. A few entries contain more technical information than might be expected in an encyclopedia with this focus, since, in this field, many terms are becoming embedded in everyday discourse; for instance, “3G,” or “last mile,” or, indeed, “the internet.” Contributors often provide definitions and explanations of these and other concepts, abbreviations, and acronyms.

Entries in this encyclopedia are not intended to advance an author’s own argument, but, rather, to summarize theoretical perspectives and evidence in an authoritative, comprehensive, and balanced way.

The encyclopedia entries are arranged alphabetically. They vary in length – 2,000, 4,000, 6,000, or 8,000 words, with the longest being approximately 10,000 words – reflecting the weight we deemed appropriate for the particular topic. The aim of each entry is to capture the salient issues in an area – to achieve, as far as possible, coverage of research being undertaken in a variety of countries and regions. The entries provide critical assessments of what is known, giving attention to strengths and weaknesses in each research domain, and also anticipating possible developments and suggesting forward-looking research agendas.

Where there are overlaps, there are different emphases and interpretations of evidence depending on specialist expertise and the location(s) of an entry author’s research – connections can be traced using the “see also” sections at the end of each entry. All the entries within a theme can also be traced by looking at the “see also” terms at the end of each of the introductory entries (“Commercial Applications in Digital Communication,” “Social Media,” “Online Games,” “Law and Technology,” and “ICT4D.”

Future

Research in any rapidly changing environment involving technologies and human beings dispersed around the world is a moving target. The impacts of digital communication on society are often characterized as “revolutionary.” The entries in this subdisciplinary encyclopedia show, however, that much can be learned by attending to people, their hopes, values, motivations, and institutions, and the way these interact with the designs and applications of digital technology in the past and in the present.

Although no compilation of entries can retain its currency forever, we hope that the work to set up the processes to commission, edit, and publish our entries has produced a collection that will be useful for current and future generations of researchers and students, and also for those whose work takes them beyond universities into diverse domains of practice – all increasingly interlinked in the digital environment. In the future, we hope that dispersed online communities with diverse specialist knowledge will find it easier to construct a resource such as this one using digital applications and innovative ways of sharing information through both open models and commercial models that respect the interests of all.

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