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SILENCE, SOLITUDE, AND TRUE PRESENCE:
A Qualitative Study of the Relational Ramifications of the Use of Personal Mobile Media

In a culture that places such a high premium on efficiency, the need for silence is not readily perceived. In fact, in the multi-channel, information-infused media environment that so greatly expands the number of options individuals have for communication, silence seems to be no more than the distant second cousin of speech, or worse, something to be shunned. As the west increasingly comes to depend on the existence of instant connection and extols the virtues of mobility, even the idea of "silence" becomes an audacious one. Silence eschews progress. Silence is inefficient. Silence wastes time. Yet, as we move more deeply into the 21st century it seems that complaints of the hectic pace of life and increased, -- barely manageable -- demands of everyday life are on the rise. While normal job functions are often purported to be easier because of the Internet and its increasingly functionality, many people seem to have even less time to relate to others than they did a mere twenty years ago. As the era of multi-tasking takes root we are doing more with greater ease, and seeming to like it less. There is a dissonance here.

Face-to-face conversational situations are still very much a part of normal social practice, but much of our "everyday talk" is occurring in the virtual sphere, on the streets and sidewalks via mediating devices, and at great distances where time and space are increasingly collapsed into shaky fold-a-way ladders of abstraction. Devices as commonplace as iPods, blackberries, cell phones, and pagers are not just new gadgets that have added interest and convenience to individual lives, they are the accoutrements of a new kind of culture – one that is based on mobility, informed by the principle of

utility. These devices allow interpersonal communication, but many are tools that allow the disbursement of messages to audiences beyond one. They are, therefore, more than mass media, *and less.* Thus, for the purpose of clarity, I have bundled them and refer to them as *personal mobile media* [PMM].

Along with the many benefits of PMM -- such as expedience, comfort, and extended connections-- the rapid ramping up of digital gadgetry and communication technologies have added multiple layers of noise and information to the social landscape and increasingly encroach upon any quiet time to think, reflect, or relate in to others in face-to-face situations. Noise, both interior in the way of information, and exterior in the presence of sound, has become an extenuating factor in the communication model, -- a factor that cannot be ignored. Cell phones vibrate and jingle, marketers pipe music and messages into public spaces, blaring televisions accompany most every meal. On the road, GPS systems "talk to us," billboards blink and emit messages using voice activation programs, and in the midst of conversation and meetings our blackberries beep with dogging repetition and the inferred demand to respond immediately. In these days of dazzling digitality, engaging in actual, meaningful conversation presents an increasing challenge, and it may largely be due to the fact that multiple activities are possible simultaneously. While communicating in mobile situations we add the noise of other conversations to our own, along with the accumulated sounds of television, radio, and other "old" media. Our use of Personal Mobile Media (PMM) has created a situation

where the presence of silence may recede even further as the waters of information overload rise.

. Approaching this info-glut and underbelly of PMM as a given, this study examines both the intrapersonal and interpersonal ramifications of the change in ratio between sound/information and silence. In it we will consider the need for silence as a distinct and necessary part of our interpersonal communication cache and explore ways in which this shift toward increased extraneous noise influences the ability in to maintain healthy cognitive processes, social continuity, and a balanced sense of self. Most specifically, this study explores the following question:

RQ: How does the growing lack of silence in the communication landscape affect the ability to be reflective, relational, and conscious of one's self and surroundings?

Is "Information Overload" something that actually exists, or is it simply a linguistic construction of our data-clogged culture? Often the opinions and persuasive arguments of scholars pontificating about the perils of unchecked technological advance are based on careful observations. By including the relatively small sample of participant responses, this research attempts to provide a deeper look and insight into the lives of people accustomed to living in a highly mobile, communicationally-efficient society. The experiment involved giving up the use of (or fasting from) personal mobile media (PMM) along other more traditional electronic media for a consecutive period of 24 hours, 6-10 hours of which could be spent sleeping. These responses were generated from a study conducted over a period of seven years that involved a 24-hour fast from electronic and digital media, which will heretofore be known as the "eMedia fast."

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Approximately 500 people participated in the study. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 28. All were students working toward undergraduate degrees, but were chosen from four different institutions of higher education. Without prior knowledge of my own research agenda, participants were asked to keep a log noting their experiences during the time they would refrain from using all digital devices, television, radios, movies, and alarm clocks. The use of print media was not prohibited. When the experiment was complete, participants were asked to write an essay reflecting on their experience. Using their logs as a means to recall their fasting experience they were prompted to describe the following: a) what they gained, b) what they might have lost, and c) how they felt about it. The responses below provide a small sample of the most typical reactions and reflections offered. All the names have been changed, but the ages and years are reflective of the time of the experiment. After a brief review of literature and sample responses, we will explore and discuss the implications of this study.

"In sum, thought and reflection have been rendered thoroughly pointless by the circumstances in which modern men and women live and act." - Jacques Ellul

Walter Ong

Walter Ong (1912-2003) suggested that the various human faculties used in different symbol systems apply to all changes in primary modes of communication. He contended that in the move from oral discourse to literacy reading individuals began to think in more abstract ways (1982). Although there are many contributing factors to the societal changes, Ong suggests that the ability to send a letter from one locale to another

and communicate with another person without being physically present created an entirely new type of consciousness and way to perceive reality (1967, p. 309). For Ong (1982), the perceptual and mental processing used to hear and comprehend the spoken word are qualitatively different from the comprehension and cognition involved in interpreting the written word, for print embeds the word in space, more definitively (p. 123). Because of the pervasiveness of literacy, particularly in the west, current human perceptions and thought processes are biased toward sight. In a world of reading, writing, and images, "seeing is believing." Yet, as technological advancements continue they catapult us into a new kind of "being," a consciousness that typifies what Ong called a "secondary orality" (1982).

In his most widely read volume, *Orality and Literacy*, Ong "establishes the primacy of sound and speech inhuman life, introducing the concepts of primary orality as the orality that existed before writing, and secondary orality as the orality associated with the electronic media"(Strate, 2004, p. 12). Applying Ong's thoughts to the use of Personal Mobile Media [PMM] and the eMedia fast suggest that just as the shift between orality and literacy brought about major changes in expression and human behavior, the shift toward use of personal mobile media is effectuating similar change in consciousness as well as the manner, attitude, and mindset in which human beings relate one to another. While many of the personal mobile media being used today depend on hearing (such as the cell phone), "competing sounds" brought about by lack of close physical proximity often impede some of the necessary functions of hearing. Additionally, human

interpretive function is tied cognitively to the non-verbal realm of communication, and a part of the overall richness of interpersonal connectedness. The interrelatedness of verbal and nonverbal communication overlaps to produce meaning that is unified. As Ong explains: "When the sounds will not unite, when they are cacophonous, hearing is in agony, for it cannot eliminate selectively. There is no auditory equivalent for averting one's face or eyes" (1967, p. 130). This strain of Ong's thinking is especially salient as it relates to the dialectical relationship of sound and silence, particularly in the selection of information that the mind processes (1967). The spoken word may be accessed via cell phones, but being in the presence of the other assures that the power of speech has its full effect. A helpful trope used by Ong (1973) is recorded in an interview with Wayne Altree. Here, using the the picture of a hunter and a buffalo to provide insight into the overarching significance of the use of sound, Ong explains:

> The hunter, remember, can see, touch, smell, and taste a buffalo when the buffalo is inert, even dead. If he hears a buffalo, it's a different matter: the buffalo is doing something. *Sound signals the present use of power* (emphasis mine). Scholars sometimes say that primitive peoples naively associate words with power. It is such scholars who are naïve: if you think of real words, of sounds, words are always an indication of power-in-use. (p. 15)

Technological innovation such as the myriad of personal mobile media help to shape not just the way people work, eat, sleep, and study but the way we filter information, and the way we think. If this is so, the dynamics of an exchange occurring face-to-face versus text-messaging or other mediated means of communication will have quite different interpretive dimensions, for, as Ong suggested, "Hearing does not of itself dissect as sight does. It will register all the sounds within its range, which are selected

out only by specific acts of attention and only then if competing sounds are not too loud" (1967, p. 130). Ong's research suggests that similar dynamics are at work in the use of new media. Contending that the information provided by sight as opposed to sound creates greater disparity because of "the simultaneity of hearing everything going on at once" (p. 129), he made the distinction clear, saying:

> [. . .] hearing makes me intimately aware of a great many goings-on which it lets me know are simultaneous but which I cannot possibly view simultaneously and thus have difficulty in dissecting or analyzing, and consequently of managing. Auditory syntheses overwhelm me with phenomena beyond all control. (pp. 129-130)

Ong's conception of the disparity between viewing and speaking, seeing and sound, and the socio-relational changes that emerge because of the switch in dominant mode of communication are especially salient to a discussion of PMM. Due to the options and ease of the new media there are an overwhelming number of messages and mass of information available streaming into the average communicator's cognitive and conversational space, a phenomenon that aligns with Neil Postman's concept of the *information-action ratio*, which suggests an inability for people to act upon news and information (1999). The imbalance purported by Postman began with the telegraph where the reaction of people hearing news of distant strangers was increasingly met with anxiety, stress because of the inability to act.

Martin Buber

For Martin Buber (1878-1965), the knowledge gained about self, the other, and life, in general, issues from a place that is far beyond the everyday data exchanges that occur via wireless formats. This knowledge is pure action; it is a matter of spirit. For Buber, the importance of relationship cannot be underestimated, and it is wrapped up "in

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the moment of encounter rather than a fixed point in space and time" (p. 63).[1] In this sense, the high connectivity and interactive aspect of cell phones and other digital hand-held devices might be viewed as enhancing relationship development rather than hindering it. Certainly, each time the cell phone rings forth from one's pocket or belt loop it establishes a connection. The nudging question, however, is "what kind of connection is made, and is it interpersonal?" Is it possible or likely that interlocutors can hope experience this "moment of encounter" via text message? While not face-to-face, the connection does provide the ability to participate in a verbal exchange and it does create a "sense" of being with another. This may be particularly so when using the cell phone where the sound of the human voice is evident. However, according to Martin Buber's concept of the other, to really connect with another one must receive the other *as other* and engage in dialogical listening to experience what he calls an "encounter." Buber (1970) depicted the outcome of such encounter, as "living speech" (p. 91) and positioned the dialectical grammar of such conversation as "the truth of relation," which he contended is most basic to the "relation of man to the It-world" or world of people-as-things (p. 88). He explains that relating to the other involves much more than simply exchanging information or connecting, and explains living speech as that which:

> towers about the spirit of knowledge and the spirit of art because here evanescent, corporeal man need not banish himself into the enduring matter but outlasts it and

[1] There are several other conceptions of dialogue in communication theory worth mentioning. While Buber associates dialogue with a form of human meeting and relationship, those who study conversation analysis perceive dialogue as the intricacies of human conversation. Mikhail Bakhkin's conception of dialogue is called "dialogism," and refers to dialogue as a cultural form of human knowing. For Hans-Georg Gadamer dialogue is seen as the philosophy of textual understanding and interpretation.

> rises, himself an image, on the starry sky of the spirit, as the music of his living speech roars around him –pure action –the act that is not arbitrary. [2]

Such depth and meaningfulness in communication is virtually impossible in settings in which the interlocutors have reconciled themselves to the "it-world" of things. Even when face-to-face communication is chosen realizing this high level of relational encounter is a challenge. When communicating long distance or in the case of using PMM, this may be especially so, for the layers of mediation between interlocutors create a situation that prioritizes a certain type of speech – one that is more instrumental than dialogic. **(QUOTE ARNETT IN THE NEW COMM RESEARCH PUB)**

For Buber (1970), living speech is essential for it is in these encounters that individuals may find meaning and "truth." He wrote, that it is only in "silence toward the You, the silence of all tongues, [that, sic] the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, pre-linguistic word leaves the You free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is" (p. 89). While Buber's intensely philosophical approach to the human communication process follows in somewhat esoteric language, his view underscores the importance of maintaining face-to-face presence while communicating. Waiting for the other, patient listening, discerning, and active looking for "the other" are essential elements of interpersonal communication for Buber. Therefore, if *conversation* is to be relational and dialogic, a measure of silence must be appropriated, for relationship cannot emerge if one does not accept and know the other, as other.

[2] *I & Thou.* (p. 91).

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Certainly, however, complete silence is problematic; Silence and speech must work together dialectically in an ebb and flow, a give and take. The tidal metaphor of ebb and flow is another way to infer that meaningfulness silence must be intermingled with the well-articulated spoken word. Both are necessary for meaning to emerge. Both are necessary for Buber's "revelation of otherness" to take place (p. 17). Awareness of this need may be the beginning of relational advancement, but the process of relating to the other must be attended to, for without intention and awareness, the mediating layers of PMM may become exponentially degenerative. As Buber explained, "when a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into the It-World which is broken only intermittently by the eruptive, glowing deeds of solitary spirits" (1970; p. 103). This objectification of the other seems to be particularly compromised when the physical presence of the other is avoided or simply unavailable. Use of the spoken word, particularly in the unmediated true presence of the other, may help to guard against the objectifying elements of increasingly mobile communication behavior. As communication ethicist Clifford Christians reminds us: ". . . language is the marrow of community, the public agent through which our identity is realized. Persons are displayed, made accessible, nurtured, and integrated into social units through symbol, myth, and metaphor (p.4)." This accessibility, though seemingly apparent via PMM, disregards the importance of presence and may be seriously compromising the efficacy and praxis of community relations.

Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton (1957), the contemplative Cistercian monk who lived and wrote in the 20th century, was perhaps best known for his popular work, *Seeds of Contemplation.*

He argued that although solitude and silence are necessary components to the development of the true self, this did not mean that he was an advocate of asceticism (p. 7). Merton contended that ignoring the tensions and trials of progress and all the noise and other social challenges it fosters could be "very harmful to the development of true personal identity, [for, *sic*] the identity of the person is fully realized only in conscious and mature collaboration with others" (p. 7). Additionally, Merton contended that technology fosters alienation rather than relationship. "A technological society, he claimed, does not concern itself with the value of the human being," but exists to "promote the functioning of its own processes" (Kelly, 1998, p. 9). This is very much in accord with Buber's thinking, and may suggest the need to maintain a measure of intentional silence in our communication praxis.

Merton suggested active engagement with the world and advocated silence (at least periodic retreat) as the only suitable antidote. Merton's concern, however, was primarily spiritual and involved an appreciation for solitude, not just silence in terms of conversational pauses and turn-taking.[3] In particular was his observation that fellow monks were increasingly restless and distracted from their environment of peaceful similitude as farm equipment and other noise-magnifying technologies were introduced into the monasteries. While his concern was to avoid the hyper-technologizing of society, it may be said that Merton's ultimate concern was the effect of the erosion of

[3] In a small, spiritually-oriented discussion of contemplation and silence in the 1957 *The Silent Life*, Merton framed the life of a monk as completely non-utilitarian, but a necessary presence in a world that is transfixed on efficiency and progress. He acknowledges the lack of resonance most westerners experience when considering the monastic life, explaining, "In a materialistic culture which is fundamentally irreligious the monk is incomprehensible because he 'produces' nothing (p. 10).

silence on human relationships and the human community. He did not advocate a monk's life for all, but wondered, "What hope is there for cultivating a sense of belonging in a society that is increasingly dominated by a technological mentality?" (p. 12).

Silence as a non-verbal function in conversation

The work of Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (1984) supports the necessity of silence as a conversational function in which they posit a need for non-verbal communication cues which can only be accessed through face-to-face communication. The authors contend that "communication behavior consists of both sounds and silences; adequate description and interpretation of the process of communication require that we understand the structure, meaning, and functions of silence as well as of sound" (p. 4).

Although silence in conversation can be disconfirming as well as confirming, it is often necessary to bring calm and de-stress. The common rant, "I just need a little peace and quiet" is not always limited to the cries of an over-busy person. Medical research suggests that silence itself has soothing properties. In the lives of seriously ill babies, hospital "intensive care nurseries have found that special headphones that block noise reduce the stress caused by the sounds of respirators, ventilators and other hospital machinery" (Wood, 2004, p. 147). The need for this particular kind of silence may not appear to correlate to the use of personal mobile media and relationship development, however, it does elaborate the need for relative and intermittent quiet of the mind so that the intrapersonal may be well attended to and, as an integral part of the (potential) quality and meaning of communication, shared interpersonally.

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But the communicational function of silence today continues, and as digital media become more dominant, the need for silence and solitude is perhaps even more significant. The functions of silence in communication are many. Here, we will review several.

Silence as a speech intensifier and social organizer

Crown and Feldstein (1995) identified several parameters of the use of silence in speech, and used as a metaphor, the phrase "conversation choreography" (33). In their conceptualization, intentionality is key to interpreting conversational silence and the "silences and sounds of conversational interactions are [considered, *sic*] psychological variables" (31). In their studies, these scholars limited the choice of media to establish nonvariables and investigated the seemingly endless variables associated with sound-silence correlates of personality. They discovered a variety of types of silence in this context. The first "type" of silence is incorporated into conversation as a turn-taking pause. This silence indicates that it is time for the listener to initiate a response. The others include indications of a) vocalization, b) a pause, c) a switching pause, and d) simultaneous speech (33). In an empirical study of conversation coherence among 36 dyads, Crown and Feldstein found that the existence of silence had more to do with interpretation and overall meaning than it did with syntax or pragmatics alone (34). The authors found that without the visual access and dependence upon nonverbal communication cues, dyadic partners often assumed cues were there when they were not present. Other times, the conversation partners assumed meaning without the nonverbal cues and they were correct.

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While there is much room for the seemingly insignificant "space fillers" of conversation (such as "well," "you know," and "uh") between long-term relational partners, a relationship of breadth and depth cannot be sustained without conversation coherence. Interpersonal communication must incorporate the connecting fibers or "glue" that helps to shape messages and bring clarity. So much of this takes place in the silent spaces or pauses between interlocutors. Silence helps to intensify speech. The nuances of being a good listener necessitate full attention to these pauses, although some may have little to do with meaningful interpretation.

Along with its function as a speech intensifier, silence is a social organizer. According to Tannen and Saville-Troike (1984), social organization occurs continually in both grandiose and minute ways. They offer the example of this organizing function when observing interpersonal interaction on an airplane. In air travel, people are seated side by side in close proximity and often use silence to maintain personal space (p9-10).

Mark Knapp and Judith Hall (2006) also considered the silent pauses of conversation a significant element of the nonverbal communication necessary to convey meaning. The two note several other functions of communicational silence, which are as follows:

- evaluating, providing judgments of another's behavior
- revelation
- emotions
- mental activity; reflection
- punctuation or accenting, drawing attention to certain words. (397)

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Although Knapp and Hall do not provide a list of the various particular *meanings* of silent pauses because "silence, like the meaning of words, can only be deduced after careful analysis of the communicator's subject matter, time, place, culture, and so forth," they do conclude generally that these many variables contribute to and can alter the particular meaning of silence in conversation (p. 397). "Silence is charged with those words that have just been exchanged; words that have been exchanged in the past; words that have not or will not be said but are fantasized; and words that may actually be said in the future" (p. 397). Learning to interpret the various silences and the intersect with utterances in conversation is an art and requires the type of interpretation skills that come from listening not only to the words spoken but also to that which is not being said.

FINDINGS

When asked to describe their experience and reflect upon how they felt after "fasting" from all digital devices for one consecutive 24-hour period, student responses include a wide variety of both positive and negative reactions. The responses are grouped in four sections below.

1) Highly positive – ultimately enjoyed the solitude
2) Moderately positive – enjoyed the solitude somewhat
3) Moderately negative – did not enjoy the solitude
4) Highly negative – hated the solitude

HIGHLY POSITIVE

Most recently, one participant explained:

> I used all the extra time that I had from my lack of texting to spend time talking to my mom and sister. The assigned media fast (which I thought was going to be the end of me) actually turned into a nice excuse to turn off my phone, "escape" from my tendency to text excessively, and spend quality time with two of the people who mean to most to me in this world – my mom and my sister. Bess (2008)

Jennifer explained her feelings after spending the day "disconnected" from her PMM:

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> As I was thinking I realize how these devices and the diminishing alone time we have relate to each other. As most inventions entail, the purpose of these devices are to make life easier and to make doing certain things in a less timely manner. Before the telephone was invented, saying hello and catching up with a friend involved walking to their house, chatting, and walking back. Now it involves a quick dial on the cell and a short conversation. The time saved can be used doing something else. As our society gets adjusted to this quick and easy lifestyle, it becomes a habit. We then think everything must be on the go, so we give ourselves less and less alone time. - Jennifer (2008)

In 2005 Morgan wrote:

> The whole drive home from the beach I thought about my run. I was disappointed because I knew I couldn't run with my iPod. I never run without music; I was upset, but I just told myself that it would have to be a short run. I left my room at 4:15 to run. Unexpectedly, it was amazing! The whole run was dedicated to prayer and much thought about my future. I thanked Him for the things He has given me. And, for the first time in West Palm Beach, I listened for the birds and heard the sounds of the cars as they passed me. I ran 45 minutes and for about four and a half miles! When I got back I was so energized because I had such an amazing run. I felt like I grew so much from that short run, and it was funny because I run everyday, and it was NEVER than fulfilling and realizing. I felt God; he was running with me, and showing me a quick tour of His world. (2005)

> My typical routine has me so distracted from myself, that I often lose sight of who I really am. Last Saturday, [*when I fasted,* sic] I sang and really appreciated the words I was singing. I ran and truly understood my reason for running. I read a story and completely developed my sense of imagination. I had no one or nothing to divert me from my thoughts. Instead of being jaded by a lack of entertainment I became optimistic in my silence. April (2008)

> After laying outside (tanning) for about an hour I was extremely bored I went inside to find my younger sister, who is nineteen and usually someone I don't ask to hang out with just because she is my sister and we fight and disagree like sisters do. So I ask my sister to come outside and tan with me and surprisingly, she said "yes." My sister and I never really talk to each other not because we choose not to; it's just that I'm always too busy and I realized that when I had nothing to occupy my time, I took the time to talk with my sister. She told me all about her new boyfriend and how she hates her job and that she is excited to start college next semester. We chatted about girly things as well, and she told me that she liked me better with my iPhone in my hand at all times. She also told me that she looks up to me for everything but always thought that I did not care about her and hated her because I never asked her questions about how she was doing in her life. This, to me, was so cool because just in day going without a cell hone or other objects of media to distract you, really opened up my eyes on how important

> family is. And to be silent with yourself teaches you more than you could ever expect to learn. -- Kelly (2008)

Others participating in the e-media fast provided interesting observations and insights to the ongoing social phenomenon.

Adam wrote *" I would never have communicated in such a profound way."*

> I had to endure such detachment . . . and felt almost like I was on a deserted island. I felt a million miles away from everyone. I drove over to my friend's house around 5 for an uninvited "pop-in" and explained the situation to her. We had an extremely long and fulfilling conversation, talking for about two hours without even realizing it. I had never gotten to know her so well and vice versa. It was really enjoyable. If not for this assignment I may never have communicated with her in such a profound way. (2006)

Tricia wrote about *" feelings of detachment, anxiety, and failure":*

> Within the first few hours of the big day, I realized something about myself: I have a serious addiction to my cell phone. Probably the most difficult task throughout the whole day was to not use my cellular unit. I cannot even begin to describe the feelings of detachment, anxiety, and failure I experienced as the minutes ticked by with no text messages. It was pure torture hearing the familiar "beebeep" of voice mail or a special ring tone for incoming calls and not being able to respond accordingly. It had never occurred to me how much I relied on texting to communicate. Nor did I realize how I valued the return communication of a text message to assure me that I was still "in the loop." By midday, I thought for sure that all of my friends were irritated with me.

Further, she explained, "While the majority of my morning was spent looking for something non-electronic to do, by lunch time I was looking forward to an afternoon of sheer boredom. At times I felt as if I was in solitary confinement" (April 2006).

Maria said, it was *"the longest day of my life."*

> This twenty-four hour period seems to be one of the longest days of my life and throughout the day I felt myself constantly sympathizing with everyone who lived before the twentieth century. Fulfillment also came from the extensive communication that was required in order to make plans and be "on the same page." My conversation didn't exist of empty conversation about where to meet for dinner and what we were doing next, but instead it was filled with meaningful

> discussion. Why? Maybe because we were face-to-face, maybe because I knew we FOR SURE wouldn't be talking again for a while, who knows?

Andrew, writing of his face-to-face encounter with his girlfriend, explains:

> It was amazing to see how much we talked about in the little time that I spent over there. Without the television on, the radio playing, or being online, there was not much else to do but talk. I was pretty surprised to discover things about her that I would not have known otherwise. She, too, felt that same way and as funny as it sounds, our relationship became closer and more conversational, just in that small period of time. (2006)

Jillian wrote:

> Having silence throughout my day was nice; I had no distractions and I enjoyed a serene day. (2005)

MODERATELY POSITIVE

Travis is writing about his breakthrough late in the day of the fast:

> The whole time I had been fighting this experience, and I wasn't exactly sure why. I knew it was partly due to the boredom, but there was something deeper than I hadn't been able to put my finger on. Until now. The thing that I had been missing most was the sense of connection with the world I had become dependent upon. My friends. My favorite music artists. My teams. In a sense, my identity or – at least a significant part of it. I had been cut off from almost everything I had been intricately connected to and I had taken them all for granted. This was at the same time devastating, and, weirdly enough, peace-giving because while I realized the disconnect, I had from all these areas I also recognized how absolute the connection is that I have with God. He was the only constant, regardless of electronic companionship. I need no Internet connection, no cell phone signal, no cable hook-up to access to my Father in heaven. (2008)

And,

> . . . Steering clear of media created so much silence, and the silence forced my mind to race. My thoughts seemed to clear, like never before. At the beginning of the day, I found myself lost in the silence, but as the day continued, I used that silence to my benefit. I filled that space journaling, reading . . . doing things that I normally use the excuse of "not having enough time" for. (2008)

> A big reason why I missed music so much was because the background noise (which is usually the "soundtrack" of my life) was completely gone. Without

> music and the television playing in the background of my apartment I had to experience a great deal of silence. It was very strange having silence when I was not surrounded by other people. The solitude and quiet gave me time to think, and I believe it actually made me more focused. When doing homework I was not distracted because I was not sitting in front of the television or trying to listen to the my iPod at the same time. – Lauren 2008

Jennifer wrote:

> It was time for lunch but there was no way to get in contact with my friends to go with me. Therefore, I had to wait for my roommate to get out of class and come back to the room. As I sat waiting for her in the silence I stared outside my window and saw the gorgeous skyline. I realized because of all the noise, al the husble and bustle and stress put upon us in this society we fail to realize the simple things. I began to watch people walking by on the sidewalk, each one with a different story to tell. They all had their different odd characteristics and a unique walk to match it. Sometimes we fail to realize the beauty in nature. I saw a bird in a nearby tree lifting its head singing to the sky. It seemed to not have a care in the world which was an interesting contrast to the busy road of cars behind it honking and speeding along their way." (2008)

Lynae explained:

> Refraining from communication enhancements dictated how I could spend my time with my boyfriend that night, as well. Being that we usually watch television, we instead opted to play the game monopoly, which gave us something new and fun to engage ourselves in. Playing a game which requires interaction rather than just spending time passively listening to the TV made me realize that some forms of communication can potentially be harmful to a relationship. I realized that night that if my boyfriend and I let watching TV become the norm, we would inadvertently prevent our time spent together from strengthening our relationship. It is activities that necessitate personal involvement and engagement with each other such as simple board games that will assist us in sustaining our bond. 2008 Lynae

Another observation from an individual who spent a day without electronic media generated more specific reflections about silence and the general lack of it in his normal day-to-day existence. A 21-year old Sal likened the experience to that of a floodgate. He explained, *"a dam broke in my mind."*

> The silence was deafening. Before April 6th I never knew what that meant exactly, that phrase "the silence was deafening." I used to think that it was just

> some cliché that writers used to show that it was very quiet. I know differently now. The silence was deafening, that describes an utter silence. It's a silence that is so powerful; it feels almost like it has weight. It's a thick silence, almost palpable. At some point between my staring at the TV and trying to take a nap under the watchful eye of the TV, I started to feel this silence creeping in on me. It started in my ears and then spread outwards to my skin. It was almost unbearable. (Spring 2006)

Sitting down to talk about his day with the deafening silence, Sal reflected further on the reasons he thought he had such an eye-opening experience.

> in today's society we are scared of silence. We are scared that we may have to be alone, either with ourselves or with another person and that we may have to pay attention to what is going on. I think that we – as a society – are scared of what is in our minds, and we are scared to deal with it, so we simply kill the thoughts by drowning them in TV. We don't want to have to think about things like, what am I doing with my life? What do I have to do this week in school? Am I a good person? What can I do to better my life? Who am I going to marry? Am I in a good relationship with myself? With God? All these questions and more raced through my head as I sat there eating my lunch. And that is when I realized something. I have been taught not to think. I have been taught that I should wait for someone else to tell me what is going on or what I should think. The TV or the movies I watch all have a hand in this process. Without TV I had no distractions to keep me from considering all the choices in my life. I am not knocking TV, but I can see now that it influences a lot of what we as a society do. It tells us what clothes are cool to wear. What kind of car to buy, and that the best insurance comes from Geico. . . All of these though, and in the jumbled order I just presented above, hit me at once. It was as if once the media panic passed through my system a dam broke in my mind. I was flooded with thoughts. I am still a little perturbed, but tell the truth. I can't seem to shut it off completely and go back over these thoughts as I please. Instead, they keep trickling through and I am left with more self-knowledge.

Bryan, a 21-year old music major in 2006 wrote:

> Today I learned that my world is so much smaller when I do not have electronic media. My world consists of fewer things, fewer people, and few place that I have to be, and it is perfectly. I have a small productive world filled with people for whom I actually have time to invest. Electronic media and communication tools create a world too big for anyone to keep up with. There are fewer distractions; therefore much can get done, even for an ADD kid like me.
>
> This experiment "puts perspective into a person's life, putting one alone with

> oneself, forcing the person to get to know him or her self. It is a growing and learning experience that more people in the 21st century should experience. Though difficult, I definitely had more conversations and interpersonal communication, spending quality time with my friends and strengthening those relationships. I learned that I have more time in my day than I like to admit, and I can utilize that time for good in my studies or the relationships that I really care about.

Andrea – 20 year old female

> Having all the background noise in my life suddenly stop was kind of a shock to my system, because I constantly have things going. Not having them took me a minute to come to realize that I will not have it for a while longer. . . During this time I did a lot of reflecting on my life. (2005)

Ben wrote, *"it struck me as incredibly rude."*

> I reached work and spent the next five hours working away in the back making sandwiches at Chick-Fil-A. I began to notice how many people came in to the restaurant with their cell phones or iPods, and even the shocking number of people who came through the drive-thru while still talking on their cell phones. It struck me as incredibly rude, and I began to wonder, do I do this myself? (2006)

Jenna, a 19-year-old young woman, had several moments of self-realization that

reminded her of her visits to Africa. She wrote,

> There were several times throughout the day when I was frustrated over not having my cell phone. It is basically my only clock, and without it there were many times I was completely clueless about the time. That was interesting because many of those times I did not even really need to know at all, or I had a good enough idea to manage. Through this I realized that I have a really bad habit of constantly wanting to know the exact minute and am always checking the time without even thinking about it. Our culture is extremely time-oriented and very dependent on strict schedules and busyness. I was again reminded of my experience in Africa, where the world seems to move at a much slower pace, and life is more about relationships than duties; yet, everything always gets done that needs to get done there. People are in general more content there. Often it is our mindset that causes our stress, and the technologies that we have created in the name of convenience often add to it. (April 14, 2006)

John, a 20 year old tennis player wrote:

> Fasting from electronic media for a day is "a great tool that helped me analyze my own electronic dependency. My point is not that we should give up all modern

> conveniences, but that perhaps we should moderate our use of them. I want to be the one in control of my life and not have some expensive piece of technology setting the course for my day. I'm excited to see what the future holds in technological development, but also slightly frightened to think of how dependent we will be on them, and how lost we will be if we ever lose the opportunity to have them. (2005)

Hollie, a 19-year old student wrote:

> After a while, I decided not to do anything. I sat for about an hour and a half. During this time, there was complete silence. Though I wasn't doing anything, I actually enjoyed the silence. I just sat there and felt extremely relaxed just staring at the wall. I remember sitting there, not moving, soaking up the stillness and the silence. It was like I was able to just calm down and remain calm for a full hour and a half without having to worry. In those moments of silence I was able to stop and enjoy God's presence. I was able to really spend time with God, something I haven't really done for a long period of time since I got here. I was really able to sit there and speak with God about everything – my worries, my friends, my hopes, my dreams. It was a very rewarding and peaceful experience. I realize just how fast-paced our society is, and I was able to stop, and slowly enjoy the day. (2004)

And. . further:

> After the rewarding silence I picked up GATEKEEPER by Terry Craig and began to read. I was really getting into the book when my friend Jenn came in… we hung out and just talked for a couple of hours.

Others participating in the e-media fast provided interesting observations and insights to the ongoing social phenomenon.

> Adam wrote *" I would never have communicated in such a profound way."*

> I had to endure such detachment . . . and felt almost like I was on a deserted island. I felt a million miles away from everyone. I drove over to my friend's house around 5 for an uninvited "pop-in" and explained the situation to her. We had an extremely long and fulfilling conversation, talking for about two hours without even realizing it. I had never gotten to know her so well and vice versa. It was really enjoyable. If not for this assignment I may never have communicated with her in such a profound way.

Maria said, it was *"the longest day of my life."*

> This twenty-four hour period seems to be one of the longest days of my life and throughout the day I felt myself constantly sympathizing with everyone who lived before the twentieth century. Fulfillment also came from the extensive communication that was required in order to make plans and be "on the same page." My conversation didn't exist of empty conversation about where to meet for dinner and what we were doing next, but instead it was filled with meaningful discussion. Why? Maybe because we were face-to-face, maybe because I knew we FOR SURE wouldn't be talking again for a while, who knows?
>
> Like the others, Maria's reflections on her day without PMM acknowledged the difference between meaningful discussion and empty chatter. When forced to communicate without it, interlocutors realize the importance of meaningful communication and change their behavior.

Eva wrote:

> I did not miss any of [these devices, *sic*]. On the contrary, I had time to share with people that I love and care about. The silence was not a problem for me because I was able to rest a little. (2007)

Hannah – 18 year old female, wrote:

> In a positive sense electronics allows me to be available, fills silence, and offers and occasionally necessary escape. In a negative sense, electronic media can prevent relational intentionality or in other words – distract me from interaction. (2007)

MODERATELY NEGATIVE

In 2008, Marianne explained:

> When I read my book I had such a hard time focusing because my brain was so loud! I couldn't "hear" what was in the book because it seemed like my brain wanted to jump out of my head and talk. It was a strange experience, and I quickly realized that I wasn't going to get much out of reading. So at 5:30 I decided to go to the beach -- that was the one place I could be sure there was no eMedia. When I got to the beach I saw a lot of things, but because I couldn't hear (my music on my iPod) I felt like I couldn't properly take it all in. Again, my brain was so loud that I wasn't full present anywhere and I didn't know what my brain was saying. – Marianne (2008)

Leveshia wrote:

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> Throughout the course of the day I felt absent. It was a very different experience. I felt so bad, but it allowed me the opportunity to do a lot of thinking, dealing with my life . . . -- 2003

Paul wrote:

> The one thing I wasn't really used to was the silence. It affected me a lot because when I lie in bed I usually watch TV, so taking that away from me is taking me out of the ordinary. The silence seemed very weird because I always hear my cell hone ring and not hearing it gave me a funny feeling. 2007

Kimberly wrote:

> I survived an excruciating 24-hour period in which I was isolated from any and all electronic pleasantries. It was a difficult experience, but not a wasted day. When I first started this electronic fast I had all but positive expectations for this experiment. I predicted and anticipated the worst. I felt that without mechanical assistance I would be unable to function as usual. I had homework to complete, research to compile, and an addiction to music I needed to satisfy. I thought that without my computer, phone, or radio, life would be almost too much to bear. Yet, as my dreaded day dragged on, I realized that life without my electronic drugs was easier than I expected. I thought that without the routine chaos of endless noise I would grow antsy or nervous. Yet, much to my surprise, it was just the opposite. Without intruding sounds, I was able to think clearly, and have more concentration than I thought possible. I was able to complete all my research in one sitting, and take time to consider and contemplate things I didn't think I had time for. I could sleep peacefully and felt more calm and at ease. I was also able to notice things I never had before such as a beautiful bird's melody or the rhythm of an endlessly rotating fan or the therapeutic silence of solitude. I never noticed how peaceful a day could be without the hustle and bustle attitude we adopt when relying on our mechanical assistant.. I never noticed how quiet a room could become without the buzz of a a working machine or how deafening the lack of music is. (2002)

Rachel, a 20 year old theatre student wrote:

> Without my cell phone handy, I was irritated having to ask people for the time. In some cases I think that electronic media creates a breakdown in community because it reduces our need for each other. That is, -- in receiving information or just being distracted by these things because they are there. I tend to be independent and it's humbling for me to have to ask people for help, even with something as simple as asking for the time. (2005)

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Lauren, a 19 year old wrote:

> I started doing my homework for another class and became stuck because I needed to use the internet. I thought, "this is crazy, I can't even do homework the old fashioned way with my pen, paper, and book. I need a computer to complete the assignment correctly. By this time I was looking pretty bad, not myself for sure. Aside from the massive attack of boredom I was having, I actually started to feel physically bad. I thought, "it's not possible for me to feel the negative effects from no phone non Internet, no radio, and no television," but I really felt tired and rundown. Honestly, my dad and I started laughing because he said it's probably because your mind and body is going through withdrawals from electronic stimulation! (2005)

> Abbey – a 19 year old woman explains:
>
> ". . .. it was nearing dinnertime and I was almost redy to break the fast. I had become outraged without my cell pone and music. Thankfully, some friends stopped by my room to rescue me. I spend as much tiem as possible with my friends in order to keep my mind off my electronic media fast."

Jennifer – 18 year old student

> At first, I enjoyed abstaining form the modern conveniences of technology, for it gave me time which I had not previously had to mediate upon – facets of my life which needed work. It allowed me to catch up with my mom and to realize that I needed to spend more time doing so, even if I just took one minute out of my day to hug her and tell her how much I appreciated her. I probably missed being able to use my cell phone the most because I felt utterly disconnected from the world, although I did gain an appreciation for this convenience as well as other modern technologies that I had taken for granted. However, I would not go through twenty four hours alone with her again. 2005

And,

> This break gave me the mental and emotional retreat I been in desperate need of, yet it was too long for me to bear. After about three hours in to the fast I began to miss my boyfriend terribly, and I only became more lonesome and depressed as the isolation continued. 2005

And,

> Ultimately, this technology-free period pushed me to grow as a person, for I came out of it with a greater appreciation for the relationships I had begun to neglect while learning the value of the conveniences technology allows for when used in moderation.

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Dhanirys wrote:

> The silence started to attack my head. Later on, I was driving to school and I was getting crazy. (2004)

Kayla - a 19 year old woman majoring in Art explained her dilemma:

> My day seemed to drag on and on; it was the longest day I have ever had. What I found interesting is that this is like a form of detoxification, where I am abstaining from the use of media as opposed to drugs or alcohol. I could never understand ho one was so consumed by drugs or alcohol that their day depended on it, but now I am realizing how badly I have let the media world consume my life – to the point where I feel like I want to scream. (2005)

Yet, the experience was not totally negative. She continued:

> "The most valuable lesson in this whole experiment is that I really need to take time out for myself. I used to think that going online, listening to my I-pod was time well spend alone, but I was wrong. I need time to think about things I want to change about myself and my life, and being consumed by the media has not helped me. When the earplugs are in my ear ort he television is on I am distracted from my inner thoughts." (2006)

Simon – 22 year old male:

> There were times of boredom, where I just wanted to fill myself with some form of entertainment. There were times of great conversation with my girlfriend, where I realized that I haven't really had time to talk in a while without noise. There were times of great reflection, where I prayed;, red, listened, and just thought. I gained a little insight into myself after the fast. I realized that I waste a lot of time. . .

Courtney – 18 year old female

> After class I pulled out my cell phone and was about to contact a friend to meet for breakfast, when I realized that I made a pact that I was not going to use technology for the day; I regretfully went to the café and sat alone hoping to run into someone I knew. Using cell phones was such an easy way to get in touch with anyone in a matter of seconds. Throughout the day I almost used my cell phone sixteen times. 2002

Roberto wrote that he is known among his friends as "half-man, half-iPod." Because his life is "completely surrounded by music." He explained the impact of the experience this way:

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> A lot happened over the twenty-four hour period, which seemed to be the longest twenty-four hours of my life. I missed my computer and my cell phone among other things, but I missed my music the most. The first thing I did when the clock struck nine-twenty was to connect all the appliances in my room. My cell phone had nineteen messages, most of which came from my girlfriend and my friend. When I called my girlfriend she thought I was being dishonest about successfully completing the fast. This experience has really made it clear to me that in life, with courage and determination you can prove the odds wrong. None of my friends or family thought I would be capable of completing the fast. The electronic media fast has proven that I can exist without my electronic appliance and the next time I have something important to accomplish none of my appliances should hinder my progress. The fast ended up being a very profitable experience, and the main thought I am left with is that with courage, discipline, and determination, no task is unachievable. (2004)

HIGHLY NEGATIVE

Based on a fast from electronic media for one 24-hour period, the following comments and insights are presented by students between the ages of 18 and 22 years of age.

> I had a lot of things I had to do on the computer but I couldn't do them. I was bored because I couldn't listen to my radio and I do that daily. In this media fast I personally can say that I have lost more than I gained. I have lost some time that I could have used for something else. The society that we live in makes it seem like we can't do without all the media that we have so it is difficult for us to do things like a media fast. (Jaime 2004).

In 2004 Toni-Ann said:

> I felt deprived and robbed of my freedom for the whole day.

Nadine, writing about her experience driving without music, also in 2004, explained:

> Finally, the silence was too much so I began to break out in song. I distracted myself for a while, but then at the traffic light I got a red, so I stopped. Not knowing that the car next to me was watching me, the guy gave me a strange look, so I guess my singing was bad. I stopped singing and again the silence returned. I couldn't help but feel that this assignment was like living in hell, and the lack of my cell phone made this more of a reality for me.

More hellacious experiences coming from Lindsay, also in 2004, who boldly titled her paper, *My Day from Hell!* Lindsay wrote:

> This was the hardest assignment I ever embarked on. I was stressed going into it and I was stressed up until 23 hours and 59 minutes!

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Justin, in 2004, wrote:

> Driving without the radio drove me nuts! It seemed like it took longer for me to get places and it tempted me to speed…

Tricia wrote about *" feelings of detachment, anxiety, and failure":*

> Within the first few hours of the big day, I realized something about myself: I have a serious addiction to my cell phone. Probably the most difficult task throughout the whole day was to not use my cellular unit. I cannot even begin to describe the feelings of detachment, anxiety, and failure I experienced as the minutes ticked by with no text messages. It was pure torture hearing the familiar "beep beep" of voice mail or a special ring tone for incoming calls and not being able to respond accordingly. It had never occurred to me how much I relied on texting to communicate. Nor did I realize how I valued the return communication of a text message to assure me that I was still "in the loop." By midday, I thought for sure that all of my friends were irritated with me. (2006)

Further, she explained,

> While the majority of my morning was spent looking for something non-electronic to do, by lunch time I was looking forward to an afternoon of sheer boredom. At times I felt as if I was in solitary confinement. -- 2006.

Matt wrote:

> The most difficult part of the project was not having a cell phone. It has left a mark on me; I am dependent on it. Being without it for even one hour was horrible. -- 2003

Daphne wrote:

> What I missed most was the television. I feel the same way as the famous patriot who once said, "give me liberty or give me death." In my case, it was television or death, and LORD, did it feel like death! -- 2002

DISCUSSION

In conducting this primary research I endeavored to see what might emerge if all the media that we have become accustomed to using daily were removed. The 50 selections from the essays, interviews, and dialogue are representative of all of the

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responses. Without realizing it prior to removing the technological devices, all of the participants noted that the absence of PMM and electronic media created a shift in their own perception of self, others, and their relationships with others.

Typically, when participants removed these devices from their day the most significant thing they experienced was the dramatic effect of silence on their psyche, interactions, and sense of well being. What each expressed may best be described as something akin to an awakening, that is, a fresh awareness of the way in which their use of media affects not only their daily life, but their manner of thinking about life and their outlook on reality.

Despite the fact that the time span was only a 24-hour period, the results were dramatic. Some delighted in the shift; others were devastated. The fact that some did not enjoy the silence and really struggled with the lack of stimuli seemed to suggest that in the pervasiveness of these media people typically may not think that silence or solitude is something they need, but rather something to be avoided. Many of the participants found the disengagement from these media liberating. In spite of feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and frustration, those who embraced the "time off" from these media noted that they were able to connect in "deeper ways with those that they cared bout" in their own households, dorms, and communities. This will be explored in greater depth further on in our discussion.

Many participants pointed out the awkwardness they experienced in the absence of noise. Without having to filter the numerous messages they normally do, participants often felt a detachment not only from others, but from self and their world. Some could not cope and had to curtail the experiment, stopping the fast in mid-stream. Others

reported the absence of multi-media created a sense of disassociation and inability to concentrate, almost as if the lack of auditory stimuli became a distraction. Yet, too much extraneous noise in the semantic environment can push people to the limits of meaningful conversation. For some, when stimuli, both external and internal, encroached upon the conversational setting many reported that it was more difficult to concentrate on what was being said.

While most everyone has been privy to the loud conversations between a cell phone user in the marketplace, what presents an even greater perpetuation of communication breakdown and incoherence may be the glut of information saturating the social landscape. Everywhere we turn, there is information. There is noise, penetrating the soft shell of our craniums to invade the processing center of our brains, creating perhaps even more interior noise than exterior noise. An example of this in the interpersonal communication context is when external noise fills the conversational space allotted for listening. Instead of the appropriate "quiet," there is noise. This occurs every day in a wide variety of ways. For example, when a helicopter passes just overhead as one person is speaking with another in the open air, the sound of the voice will be muffled and the content of the message is likely to be misunderstood or unintelligible. Although this example is overly simplistic, it does point out the correlative need for a measure of silence in order for a message to be "received" and interpreted, suggesting the abiding efficacy of face-to-face presence while conversing with another. When the communication situation is affected by multiple, overlapping streams of noise such as equipment hum, connection interruption (dropped calls), or external stimulation such as traffic, dogs barking, work on the street or the conversations of other people, one's ability

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to maintain coherence is jeopardized even further, and relationship richness may deteriorate.

When asked to function without their mediating devices, the students often became more aware of the importance of meaningful communication and reported that they actually enjoyed the fast and felt closer, "tighter" with their friends, spouses, parents, or boyfriends/girlfriends. In using any mediating device psychological distance is unavoidable, but the distance – and ensuing lack of a sense of intimacy – was exacerbated when participants were unable to make plans with their friends. In other instances, many of those who realized how difficult it would be to be with their friends if they didn't make plans to meet prior to the fast, their experience seemed to be positive. For example, like many of the others, Maria's reflections on her day without PMM acknowledged the difference between shared activities that real presence and the empty chatter which she had become accustomed to amongst her friends. As Maria's friends respected and cooperated with her eMedia fast, they engaged in a variety of activities that did not involve cell phones, facebook, television or the movies. These activities were, in some cases, board games, cards, volleyball, soccer, or simply having a conversation at the beach. All the unmediated conversations that the participants reflected upon were reported to be more engaging, interesting, self-disclosing, and many cases, described as intimate.

Those who experienced a moderately positive to positive experience also noted the sense of richness that their conversations contained, which was contrary to their conversations taking place using PMM which typically reduced depth, coherence, understanding, and often contributed to communication breakdown. Some discussed the

break from email based communication gave them a sense of freedom. Others were happy to be free from navigating the outright "flaming" when communicating in text-only environments such as email discussion lists, text messaging, or instant message chat formats. Without the nonverbal communication cues, silence being the primary one, participants often acknowledged that meaningful, effective communication was often hindered. This was particularly noted when many participants used the time of "detachment" to reflect upon their own ideas, relationships, perceptions, and identity. Instead of being perceived as uncomfortable or "awkward," the silence gave some participants the opportunity to spend time with themselves, organizing thoughts, making plans, or considering life, in general. Often, this behavior resulted in the infusion of a higher quality of communication, greater self-disclosure, increased meaning, and greater "sense of presence" into the primary relationships.

While attempting to respond to an important e-mail there are often numerous additional messages to navigate and other types of internal and external "noise" to filter out. Some noise may be superfluous and easily filtered out, while other noise may constitute important messages that must be attended to; this presents a new level of message overload, also known as information overload. One example of this may be found in the unsolicited advertising messages known as "pop-ups," which often appear on the screen while a person is writing an e-mail. Instant-messages, known as "I-Ms," often appear unsolicited from known and unknown senders, as well.[4] This is to say nothing of the more traditional external noises such as a television or a radio that are left

[4] I-M is a linguistic shortcut meaning "instant message." Instant messaging provides immediate, one-to-one text-based contact between two people who are simultaneously connected to the Internet. In its present application it is being used in some cell phones and other handheld devices, such as the aforementioned PDA and Blackberry.

on while writing or a telephone or cell phone conversation that is occurring while viewing the message(s) on the screen. All of these messages must be managed or processed and constitute "noise." Having the time and space in their day to choose another means of communication provided participants with much more time than they realized they would have. Many used this time to make significant progress in their primary relationships through face-to-face communication.

Conclusion

Cell phones, email, and social networking sites have done more than simply added new features to the way people communicate; these media have changed everything. The wonders of these new media have created incalculable opportunities to communicate in ways that have never before been possible. but people aren't listening as well. As wonderful as the filtering system of the human brain is, information seems to be going in one ear and out the other with increasing speed, often usurping the incremental time and spaces to quietly reflect on all of it. Approaching interpersonal communication study from a more media ecological perspective is an important venture, for as these new tools of technology increase in societal penetration, the return to elements of oral culture seem to be emerging and slowly spreading across society. Essentially, then, as society delves more fully into PMM and increasingly "virtual" modes of communication behavior, it will become necessary to incorporate a more expansive analysis and methodology into future communication research. Traditional theoretical perspectives and principles of interpersonal communication may still apply, but in light of the constant connectivity associated with today's digital media environment it becomes increasingly essential to integrate medium theory into future study. Whether communication research

is approached from a social science perspective or that of the humanities, knowledge of context and history of media development is essential. We must learn from past shifts in dominant media. In particular, awareness of the very human need for touch, eye contact, the sound of the voice to help establish true presence, is something that cannot simply be edited out of the human experience without dire consequences. Grappling with the dialectical tensions associated with the desire to know and be known instead of ignoring them is a worthy venture that necessitates time, attention to detail, patient listening, and above all, respect for the symbolic exchange that is known as human communication.

In spite of the prosumer sloganeering[5] that has encouraged the use of PMM and even led to an increase in personal interactions among individuals who previously may never have met or experienced scant, distant relationship, PMM help create an environment that exalts utility. As they proliferate, these media often erode the presence of silence as a nonverbal necessity in the process of communication and readily promote a confusion of the means with the ends. This occurs because these media primarily provide opportunities for people to interact with each other without becoming closely involved, offering more of an appearance of 'real' presence than actual shared experience (Sontag, 2003). In our rush to accommodate new technological platforms and their social uses, the importance of physical embodiment (really being there) and the spoken language as a way to appropriate meaning too easily ignored. Instead of being too eager to adapt human activity to the tools of our communication, it would serve our relational

[5] The notion of producer-consumer has been given some traction in the vocabulary surrounding online interactions, particularly in the world of VR, Mobile Commerce (such as eBay, Amazon.com, etc.), and digital gaming.

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goals to choose the tools more carefully, and think critically about what is most appropriate for interpersonal situations.

A prime means of interpreting what is actually being said is to "read" the communication spoken without words. The ability of one to read another's face is of utmost importance in this process, and a measure of silence (as in the communicational pause and time for reflection) is necessary. For this to happen with any sense of artfulness and meaning, face-to-face communication must be valued as more than just a viable option. If not, face-to-face interpersonal communication may soon be perceived as an old-fashioned "idea" or a "last resort." Ultimately, then, due to the growing presence of an expanded and converging mediated landscape, interpersonal communication is in in danger of becoming increasingly ineffectual. The objectification of the other may seems to be encroaching in the midst of much mediated communication, and rather than helping to foster greater intimacy, self-disclosure, and even community, the digital environment may exacerbate the already noise-laden, information-rich communication landscape with reams of meaningless (or meaning-less) speech. This may be particularly so in the growing dominance of the use of PMM. Using personal mobile media allows people to stay in closer, more immediate touch, but "keeping "in touch" verbally or textually is not synonymous with developing intimacy and longevity in a relationship. This is because, as suggested earlier, so many of the elements described by Buber, Ong, Christians, and other communication scholars as essential in creating depth of relationship are inadvertently eliminated in day-to-day practice. Eliminating the need for a specific time and place to interact is an outgrowth of the mobility factor embedded in these media, an aspect of the communication environment that works to create a mindset accommodating

to the idea of conversation as utility. Awareness is the first step in steering clear of this mindset.

In this absence of awareness, conversations are much more susceptible to becoming incoherent, lacking in meaning and purpose, or devolving into superficial message exchange. By providing access to people as goals, objects, and tasks, these PMM are biased toward objectification. People become "things to do" instead of beings who are differentiated from the world of inanimate reality. As this sense of objectification advances, expectations change and individuals come to expect to be treated as something less than subjects. Notions of "the other" become buried in the black box of daily business. Conversation is reduced to message exchange. Instead of fostering deeper relationship, texting, truncating words, collapsing sentences into three letters and emotions into smiley faces becomes a technological imperative, reducing the purposes of connecting to others via PMM to a fascination with, and exploitation of, the means. Here, instead of the integrity of relationships, the principle of utility seems to set the pace for exchanging the purposeful "end" or goal of interpersonal communication for the means, thereby eroding the beauty and value of the communication process for a collapsed activity ending in the truncated dispensing of information (Ellul, 1985). Therefore, in spite of the proliferation of means, finding meaning*ful* ways to communicate may be more difficult in the present age than in times past, for meaning is never found in the words or symbols themselves, no matter how plentiful or accessible they may be. The meaning and purpose of words, as Neil Postman suggests, "are not in sentences but in situations – in the relationship between what is said and to whom, by whom, for what purposes, and in what set of circumstances (1976; 234).

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The uncritical, unchecked use of technological devices to mediate interpersonal communication seems only to exacerbate an unwieldy condition of the objectification of the individual, removing interlocutors from each other in proximity as well as in emotional and psychological distance (Arnett, 1994; Buber 1970; Friedman, 1974; Sontag, 2003).[6] Certainly, using a cell phone or text message to connect with another is not typically a means to objectify the other. It is inadvertent, yet how little do we stop to think critically about the reality we are shaping for ourselves? Can anything be done to counteract the effects of objectification? Waiting to be in the presence of another allows us to bring a more complete self to our conversations. When possible, using the voice, eye contact, facial expressions, and all the non-verbal cues to communicate may work toward creating greater relationship richness. But, if the same person is communicating simply using diverse media, isn't it the same? Is the human voice and presence really all that important? Of the efficacy of the human voice, Walter J. Ong wrote: "Communication, like knowledge itself, flowers in speech."[7] This is by no means to say that effective, relational communication cannot (or does not) take place via the written word or via the limited functionality of the cell phone or other PMM; rather that the flourishing of communication as a part of the process of human development, relationship, and community advances when the presence of the word is embodied *in* the person speaking. Even though in using the cell phone the human voice in the

[6] Buber's (1970) explication of the It-World fits with the relational implications of Jacque Ellul's *la technique.* Buber's picturesque language depicts the process of objectification and is similar to the argument Ellul posits of what happens to human function as a result of unchecked technological advancement. Buber writes: but in sick ages it happens that the It-World, no longer irrigated and fertilized by the living currents of the You-World, severed and stagnant, becomes a gigantic swamp phantom and overpowers man. As he accommodates himself to a world of objects that no longer achieve any presence for him, he succumbs to it. Then common causality grows into an oppressive and crushing doom. (p102-103)

[7] Ong, *The Presence of the Word, p.1.*

conversation retains some of the efficacy of presence, it is not the same as physical embodiment. Really "being there" is necessary if one desires to share the deepest aspects of "being" with another or maintaining a sense of integration and wholeness within one's self. Clifford Christians expands on the connection between human cognition of symbolic exchange and the need for relationship: "Our interpretive dimension forms an organic whole with our deepest humanness, and its validity or oppression inevitably conditions our well being" (p. 4). So, as we participate in the more digital means of communication it is important to remind ourselves the reason for these means – to communicate. Silence and Solitude give punctuation to our lives. Both words and the absence of words are needed to engage in meaningful relationships. Communicating with breadth, depth, longevity, and valence necessitate fewer layers of mediation rather than more. Ultimately, then, the use of PMM may do no more than add to the cacophony of early mass media and may be responsible for promoting as much social regress as advancement, particularly in regard to the development of rich, satisfying "I-Thou" relationships (Buber, 1952; Bugeja, 2005; Ong, 1952, 1981; Postman, 1993; Yaross-Lee, 2003). The benefits these media bring may increasingly serve to collapse the sense of well being and integration that is associated with quiet, reflective intrapersonal time to communicate with one's self (Gergen, 1991; Buber, 1970; Kelly, 1941; Merton, 1947; Palmer 1993). Whether it is blogging, text-messaging, email or cell phone conversations, the end result is that all these modes represent a paltry and largely insufficient way to communicate on serious issues, particularly those issues associated that are relational. Allowing the convenience and expedience of PMM to become the dominant mode of

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communication may pave the way for more misinterpretation and communication breakdown than relationship flourishing or communion.

As we barrel along life's highways in continuous "chat-mode" via personal mobile media it is meaningless to remind ourselves to enjoy it, because by-and-large, we do. Everyday, it is a miracle of technology that we can be immediately connected with friends and family who are separated by time and space. However, it is more essential to remember that *human beings* are the reason for the connection, not the devices, and not every device is appropriate for every situation. The ground or soil of our connection remains deeply rooted in recognizing the ultimate worth of "the other;" and while we may have the technology available to grow many rows of "hot house" flowers very quickly, a strongly rooted, sturdy relationship requires all of the elements in correct proportion that are natural to its growth. Simulating or extending the process may work for a season, but the respect, trust, and nurturing necessary to establish and maintain a relationship cannot be bypassed without consequences that work against the purpose of the relationship itself.

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