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ABSTRACT

The perception and acceptance of the Internet as a personal communication channel, and the functional characteristics of the Internet, provide a new means for geographically separated friends and family members to communicate with one another. This paper presents a theoretical framework for the study of family communication and electronic mail. A review of connected issues is presented, including: (1) the Internet and trends in human communication; (2) definitions of the family; (3) what relocation means for individuals and families; (4) communication technologies; (5) theories of family communication processes; (6) individuals as members of organizations; (7) organizations and the Internet; and (8) media theory and the Internet. Conclusions of this theoretical review propose guidelines for applied research to examine Internet communication among nuclear families and geographically dispersed family and extended family members. Such research would be an important component in understanding the potentially central functions of computer-mediated communication in nuclear and extended family dynamics. The paper notes that findings of related research may be crucial for institutions concerned with social effects of geographic mobility and networked communication upon organizational members and their families. (LPP)

Families, Geographical Separation, and the Internet:
A Theoretical Prospectus

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Abstract

The perception and acceptance of the Internet as a personal communication channel, and the functional characteristics of the Internet, provide a new means for geographically separated friends and family members to communicate with one another. This paper presents a theoretical framework for the study of family communication and electronic mail. A review of connected issues is presented, including (a) the Internet and trends in human communication, (b) definitions of the family, (c) what relocation means for individuals and families, (d) communication technologies, (e) theories of family communication processes, (f) individuals as members of organizations, (g) organizations and the Internet, and (h) media theory and the Internet. Conclusions of this theoretical review propose guidelines for applied research to examine Internet communication among nuclear families and geographically dispersed family and extended family members. Such research would be an important component in understanding the potentially central functions of computer-mediated communication in nuclear and extended family dynamics. Findings of related research may be crucial for institutions concerned with social effects of geographic mobility and networked communication upon organizational members and their families.

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Introduction

Up until 160 years ago, when the telegraph was invented, human communication depended upon a proximal human presence along the channel of communication. Systems of human-based messengers or line-of-sight relays helped extended and dispersed civilizations organize, operate, interact, and otherwise stay in touch. In the brief history since the introduction of the telegraph, human communication technology development has accelerated at an unprecedented rate. The capabilities and modalities of these developments are in a dynamic state as are our expectations and desires for speed and efficiency. We need not belabor the point that networked human communication is communicating at an asymptotic rate with electronic circuit and broadcast technologies. While most of us would be hard-pressed to explain the circuit-multiplexing technology of the telephone, let alone the time-multiplexed, packet-switched technology of the Internet, that lack of understanding does not undermine our acceptance of and adaptation to the new technologies.

The 1997 Find/SVP American Internet User Survey estimates that 31.3 million adults currently use the Internet in some form or another, and of these people, 59% use electronic mail (e-mail) on a daily basis. Only 49% of Internet users, by comparison, use the World Wide Web on a daily basis, while 3.6 million Internet users use it for e-mail only (Riphagen & Kanfer, 1997). Based on that survey, NCSA conducted a study on e-mail use. They asked people about where the people they talk with live.

> The results indicate that 64 percent of the people that non-users talked to live in the same town or neighborhood as they do, while only 48 percent of the people that e-mail users talked to live within the same town (t = 2.944, p = 0.005). Actually, the dividing line could have been drawn at any distance; e-mail users are more likely to talk to people outside their neighborhood, outside their town, outside their county, state, or country. What this tells us is that the network of people

> that e-mail users talk to is more geographically spread out than that of people who don't use e-mail. It seems that going online will facilitate communication with people who live further away. (Riphagen & Kanfer, 1997)

The development of far-reaching communication networks has occurred concurrently with an increasing migratory mobility of individuals. According to 1995 U.S. Census data, 5.8% of U.S. citizens moved to different counties, while 2.6% moved to different states between March 1993 and March 1994. This finding reflects a stable rate of migration over the last decade, and it implies that many of us will find ourselves moving great distances from our loved ones. For those of us in academia and the military, this figure is probably higher.

This paper offers a theoretical framework for the study of family communication and e-mail, particularly in cases of geographical separation. A review of connected issues is presented, including the Internet and trends in human communication, definitions of the family, what relocation means for individuals and families, communication technologies, theories of family communication processes, individuals as members of organizations, organizations and the Internet, and media theory and the Internet. Based on a review of the issues, we propose a theoretical model and an outline for research. Specifically, we aim to unpack the evolving role of e-mail in the context of the relocating family.

The Internet and Trends in Human Communication

Several trends in human communication seem to be reconfirmed in the establishment and growth of the Internet:

- The speed at which information is transferred is growing, though user expectations and wishes always seem to outpace development.
- Mediated communication technologies are proliferating globally. Interpersonal communication channels are, in short, vastly interconnected; individuals can speak to each other as well as obtain information from a multitude of sources. With the rich network of telephony infrastructure, ground-based radio-wave broadcasting, and the deployment of geostationary and orbiting communication satellites, there is literally no geographic boundary impeding an electronically mediated message where the technology is available.
- Media technologies are becoming more "personal." Electronic circuits have tended toward miniaturization, progressing from vacuum tubes to transistors, solid-state circuitry, and microcircuitry, thereby making devices such as radios, telephones, televisions, and computers easier to carry on the person and place in the home. Dropping manufacturing costs, reflecting economies of scale, make these technologies affordable for more people, though it is clear that higher "tiers" of a technology, "home theater" television, for instance, still distinguish economic status.
- Media technologies are becoming more intelligent. Largely in response to information overload resulting from the first trend noted above, new media are becoming characterized by the degree to which their operation is customized to our personal processing characteristics and preferences. E-mail programs, for instance, commonly include filtering specifications that allow users to specify certain addresses from which e-mail messages will be ignored and deleted automatically.

These increases in speed, global interconnectedness, personalization and affordability, and intelligence are integral to the wide acceptance the new technologies are gaining among individuals in general and among those who may be separated by geographical distance from family in particular. The following sections consider the definition of family and the modern phenomenon of families who undergo geographical relocation.

Defining the Family

Before we can begin to consider communication processes that involve families, it is necessary to clearly define what a "family" is. While this exercise might have been considered nitpicking or overly pedantic 50 years ago, today the definition of family is a dynamic issue that brings with it political, religious, and cultural significance. It seems myopic to limit our definition of family to ties of blood or of communally sanctioned marriage.

According to Sussman (1959), a married person's extended American family system consists of three interlocking nuclear families: the family of

procreation, the family of orientation, and the family of affinal relations, such as in-laws and close friends, whose interrelationships are determined by choice and residential proximity and not by culturally binding or legally enforced norms (p. 1). Sussman (1959) also wrote that despite trends of nuclearization, there are some empirical indications that many nuclear families are closely related within a matrix of mutual assistance and activity that results in an interdependent kin-related family system rather than the common depiction of the isolated nuclear family (p. 2).

> Historically three solutions have been proposed as definitions of what constitutes a family. The first class of definitions is based on family structure. An extended family is any group of individuals that has established biological or sociolegal legitimacy by virtue of shared genetics, marriage, or adoption. A nuclear family is further restricted to those extended family members residing within the same home. The second set of definitions focuses on whether certain tasks of family life are performed. Here a family is a psychosocial group consisting of at least one adult member and one or more other persons that as a group works toward mutual need fulfillment, nurturance, and development. A final class of definitions gives central importance to transactional processes. The family is a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity, complete with strong ties of loyalty and emotion, and an experience of a history and a future. (Fitzpatrick & Wamboldt, 1990, p. 425)

As communication is in fact a transactional process, the latter definition seems most appropriate for our theoretical treatment.

Yerby's (1995) definition goes further to express the continually changing nature of the family:

> A family is a collection of individuals who create a history and a set of memories from which family experience is continually reconstructed. In a sense, it is the shared memories of the family that help to make behavior in the family predictable and stable. (p. 352)

This definition is especially relevant to families who are relocating because it includes the possibility for looking at changes that might occur, especially in times of transition. The importance of extended family contact becomes especially evident during times of transition and crisis, when material and emotional support are most needed.

The Impact of Moving

Moving away from family is disruptive to the family ties, and it calls for social reorientation. Organizational members and their families who relocate undergo various types and degrees of stress and strain. In essence, these individuals become socially dislocated to the extent that they become separated from a local network of support and affiliation. Moving usually poses the challenge of learning new social coping skills, whether these include locating medical services or cultivating a circle of friends. Of course, many people, if not most, miss the kinship and security manifested in proximal interactions with friends, family, and colleagues they leave behind. People like knowing that they can shop, pray, eat, discuss, spectate, and bowl with certain others in familiar settings.

Moving can have an impact on individual and group identity. Identity, after all, is how we relate ourselves to our environments; more specifically, how we identify ourselves in relation to the *agencies* with which we interact. Therefore, when individuals move, they undergo some process of self-redefinition so that they can *recognize themselves* and recognize *their place* as agents in their new social environment. Likewise, the identification that family members feel with other family units might change as a result of new interests and values accompanying a change of venue. For example, new social pastimes might accompany a move to a different meteorological climate. Political redefinition or even realignment might be an outcome of a move to a region with certain sociopolitical tensions.

The concept of recognizing oneself and one's place in physical and social environments is of key importance considering that human beings have evolved and survived as information-processing, pattern-recognizing animals. The combination of organized, cooperative tribal activity with the drive to reduce environmental uncertainty in ever-increasing geographic ranges was crucial in man's functioning as a hunter/gatherer. The conclusion that one cannot recognize environmental patterns generates the affective, uncomfortable internal response of confusion.

As groups, human beings evolved successfully in changing contexts, not on the basis of a "hard-shelled" invulnerability, but by integrating environmental patterns and essential details into tribal

strategies. As individuals, human beings exercise social information processing to perceive, manipulate, and organize information about ourselves and others in the social world. Recognizing where one is socially placed is part and parcel of uncertainty reduction in human social contexts.

Communication Technologies and Staying in Touch

When a person relocates over a long distance, there is an anxiety that the intimacy of relationships with those left behind will deteriorate because of limitations of communication. Long-distance relationships of intimacy, especially those based upon shared activities, are undesirable in part because participants lack the means of transmitting and receiving expressive messages. The intimacy of face-to-face conversation depends on channels of communication that are "rich" and evoke feelings of "social presence." Richness in a medium refers to its variety of channels and symbols in use. Face-to-face, or FTF, is the richest of media because it affords communicators with the greatest variety of options, including facial, lingual, and paralingual expression. Typewritten text, on the other end of the continuum, is considered media poor.

Social presence is the strength of the feeling that one's co-communicator is "present" on the channel and is indeed another person. Immediate transmission and reception as well as media richness contribute to social presence. The telephone is considered to be a widely used interpersonal medium with the highest potential for social presence, though its audio-only mode limits its media richness. However, long-distance telephone use is relatively expensive compared with postal mail, and therefore with increased distance, the telephone is a less satisfactory mode of regular communication. Some people in fact use the postal mail to send audiotapes and photographs, thereby increasing media richness, but the immediacy is lost on a medium whose transmission typically requires at least two days.

It is clear, though, that people try to maintain contact with family members and intimate friends when they move away. Even over long distances, individuals provide each other with emotional support through media-poor and nonimmediate channels. Long-distance social networks, especially kin-oriented ones, can mobilize instrumental support during emergency situations. The centrality of one's individual or family cultural orientation may be especially strong and have emotional impacts, and may best be served by maintaining long-distance ties with others in that culture. Most important, perhaps, and the most difficult to deconstruct, is the emotional kinship that develops in relations of intimacy over time.

Thus, for the individual, there are various sources of stress and strain that accompany a long-distance relocation. Additional efforts are spent in parallel processes of maintaining distant ties of intimacy and forming new ones. It should be noted, though, that the effort to maintain ties is often "its own reward" because the communication process provides dimensions of social support and a sense of belonging. For families, these concerns are compounded when individuals serve the additional function of easing the transition period involved in moving for their young children or, in some cases, elderly parents.

The importance of seemingly trivial personal contacts over the course of time cannot be overestimated. Duck (1988) found that mundane, routine interactions play a significant role in the maintenance of close relationships. The character of everyday, routine interactions with intimates such as family and friends is a particularly important communicative mechanism for the maintenance and elaboration of working models of relationships and beliefs about the social world (p. 430). Our behaviors, even the mundane ones, in different social networks actually define the nature of these networks and their meaning to us. These behaviors, in turn, become functions of how we perceive the social environment, largely on the basis of familiarity with the agents in them. Hence, part of relocation stress is the disruption of these behaviors and, simultaneously, the break in the familiar social structure.

We see frequency of communication with intimate others left behind as a means of lessening the impact of such disruption. As Duck and Pittman (1994, p. 679) put it, talk, or interpersonal communication interaction, serves three specific relationship functions. Talk is instrumental in that it achieves concrete, specific aims. Talk is indexical in that its patterns manifest a relationship (e.g., through personal idioms). Talk is also essential in that it embodies a relationship through simple occurrence and presentation of world views.

Leach and Braithwaite (1996) refer to families as "one of the most important sources of informal support" (p. 201) not only in stressful situations but on an everyday basis as well. "The nature and provision of informal support within American families has changed dramatically, due to such factors as the geographic mobility of families..." (p. 201) so that families have to develop some sort of mechanism for maintaining contact, exchanging information, and giving support. Leach and Braithwaite point out that there is very little research on how family members maintain contact- and support-giving functions. Their own research focuses on the existence of particular family members known as "kinkeepers," who are those individuals in families who take responsibility for keeping the family in touch.

Leach (Leach, 1991; cited in Leach & Braithwaite, 1996) found in an exploratory study of kinkeepers that their communicative activities involve face-to-face visits and telephone calls more than any other type of channel. The results of that study found that the telephone was the most widely used channel (71.42%), followed by visits (20.53%), letter writing (4.46%), and sending cards (2.68%). E-mail was not mentioned as a channel, but it is easy to imagine that e-mail might provide an efficient channel for fulfilling kinkeeper functions that provide family support such as exchange of family information, keeping family members in touch, or gathering information for family planning to organize projects or events. While the original data for that study were collected as part of a 1992 master's thesis, the communication landscape has changed drastically since then. We still do not have the research to reflect that change in family communication.

Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Family Communication

Research on family processes cuts across disciplines in the social sciences. There are many ways to study family communication. Meadowcroft and Fitzpatrick (1988) delineate the metatheoretical overlap between mass communication study of family communication and interpersonal studies and spell out a model of family communication effects. They detail six major metatheoretical perspectives in the study of marriage and family communication. Each of the six emphasizes the development of intersubjectivity or mutual influence processes. Intersubjectivity involves shared meanings, while mutual influence involves bi-directional processes.

> Intersubjectivity is the creation of shared meaning or the process by which we understand others and are understood by them. Although we can never fully understand another, complete and total misunderstanding rarely occurs. Rather, intersubjectivity is more the rule than the exception. Thus the degree of intersubjectivity established through the knowledge shared by family members based on their common experiences is an important topic in studies of family communication. (Fitzpatrick & Wamboldt, 1990, p. 423)

It is the shared meaning systems, history, and common beliefs and approaches to the social world that set family communication apart from other forms of human communication. The meta-structures that guide communication are likely to have more in common within families than within other groups. It is suggested that a complete theory of family communication has to consider both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of analysis. Intrapersonal concentrates on the individual traits or states to explain communication patterns, while an interpersonal approach focuses on dyads or family groups and examines how communication between the members contributes to change or stability. Such a view would help to reveal the mechanisms that generate intersubjectivity as well as impact.

According to Meadowcroft and Fitzpatrick (1988), communications researchers have largely focused on a single theoretical framework; however, the research could benefit from broadening the approaches to family communications research. Two strains of theory that would be especially relevant to a study of families' use of e-mail are the systems theories, in which relational patterns underlie and define the family system, and the developmental position, which stresses that families are evolving over time, are not static, and that it is important to examine how families adapt to change either within the family or from the world outside the family. Communication researchers have applied a perspective grounded in symbolic interactionism that asks:

> How do life circumstances influence the human mind and the interaction that results from what goes on in that mind?... A key assumption made about the relationship between the human mind and social interaction is that individuals come to define themselves and the world around them

> through interactions with other people. (Meadowcroft & Fitzpatrick, 1988, pp. 260-261)

Alison Alexander (1994) focuses on television in the family context; however, what she writes has relevance for the study of e-mail in the family context. The family is conceptualized as a system, and the research on communication in the family has taken a symbolic interactionist view—that is, that the structures and processes that regulate a family are created through communicative interaction. The research strives to reveal patterns in family communication. Alexander points out that in order to go beyond a limited effects conclusion (media effects on family are complex, mediated, and not very powerful), it is important for research to consider the within-family behaviors that create meaning for the individuals in the family system, such as "the creation of family and individual images, the creation and communication of intimacy, the creation and communication of family roles and types, the creation and communication of power, the management of decisions, and of conflict" (Alexander, 1994, p. 54). She notes that very little research has been done on the concepts of support or encouragement in the family, whereas issues of power and conflict are more frequently studied.

Family systems theory is presented by Yerby (1995) as a model that is not static, but that is evolving. Yerby (1995) "describes the recent thinking about family process that has emerged from the postmodern critique of objective social science and integrates some of these ideas into a framework that includes a systemic view of the family that is grounded in social construction theory and dialectical processes" (p. 341). It is pointed out that criticism of family systems theory problematizes the focus on patterns and stability, while ignoring the fluidity and flux in the family system. The historical systems perspective of the family rests on the view that families are resistant to change and that the goal is to maintain equilibrium. But is stability the norm and change the exception? Or would it be more informative to examine the processes of change since families are in a continual state of change?

"Social constructionists explore how reality is intersubjectively created through communication . . . . Social construction theory . . . emphasizes social, interactive, and performance processes in the creation of reality and meaning" (Yerby, 1995, pp. 347-348). It attempts to get at people's identities and how those identities are influenced by the contexts of their lives (in this case, family). Reality is "co-constructed" through conversation, and knowledge is arrived at by communicating about and sifting through various perspectives. Identity, knowledge, and the stories we tell "are systematically embedded in a vast web of ever-changing social and historical contexts" (p. 349). As Yerby (1995) points out, we want to be able to address "the complexity, contradiction, flux, ambiguity, and sense of incompleteness that usually characterizes human experience" (p. 349).

> Making decisions or choices about how or to what extent a family will adapt to the fluctuations within and around them is one of the central themes of family life. A systems model that shifts the focus from attending to stable patterns in the family to attending to the family's capacity for change emphasizes the tendency for family life to be an evolving ongoing conversation among family members, in which the dialogue has the potentiality for taking new directions. (Lax, cited in Yerby, 1995, p. 353)

The social constructionist approach can be instrumental in providing insight into the processes involved in readjustment that families undergo when relocating and the role that e-mail might play in that readjustment.

Organizations and the Place of the Individual

A bureaucratic model of an organization reduces members to specific functions. The relational concerns between the organization and the member are limited to the member's ability to fill that function and the official or contractual responsibilities the organization expects. Under a bureaucratic model, relocation stresses upon the member or his or her family are largely irrelevant to the organization because they should not have an immediate impact on the utility of the member to contribute to organizational goals. Moreover, the use of organizational facilities to alleviate relocation stresses would generally not be encouraged except for uses clearly predefined as policy or within a specific employment contract.

Under a human relations model, with its roots in Maslow's hierarchical model of human needs, the organization and the member work towards exercising joint responsibility towards satisfying their mutual and respective goals. Members are more functionally flexible and make greater efforts

to serve organizational interests beyond rigidly specified job descriptions. The organization, for its part, presumes that its interests are best served by helping its members fulfill their career goals and experience a sense of social support and security within the organization. As such, relocation stresses become a significant issue for the organization, and in such a model, the organization remains to some degree flexible in the type and degree of support provided to the relocating member and her family.

Whereas the human relations model seems the more caring and accommodating of the two, both systems would need to address the issue of relocation when the organization in question relies on the readiness and ability of its members to move to long-distance work sites. As Miller (1995, p. 214) points out, stressors in the family domain invariably spill over into the work domain.

Organizations characterized as highly bureaucratized and member relocating, such as the U.S. military, provide a wide range of relocating services, including family counseling. In such a system, however, the resources provided for assistance are clearly separate and distinct from those that service the organization's main goals. While the army often finances the renting of a commercially available trailer for relocating servicepersons, it does not permit the use of a military cargo truck for the same purpose.

Organizations that rely heavily on relocating personnel tend to be large. Many of these organizations also rely heavily on sophisticated communication systems in order to organize and coordinate their initiatives. The Internet is a popular communication network choice for international corporations. The Internet is fast, cheap, and efficient for both intraorganizational and interorganizational communication. In fact, the Internet developed as just such a tool for the military-industrial-academic complex. The following section addresses the individual organization member and the Internet.

The Internet and the Organizational Member

As we know, the Internet has evolved into a widely utilized tool for personal communication. This evolution has many organizations, especially industrial corporations, concerned over whether their members are using their organizational access to the Internet responsibly. Physical technological limitations of the Internet exist such that overuse of the network at certain locations can adversely affect information flow at those locations and, in certain circumstances, throughout the network at large. Personal use of the Internet at work is viewed by the management at many organizations as an unnecessary and unwarranted drain on communication resources. Managers are also concerned that access to fascinating Internet-based information resources, many with recreational and entertainment themes, can result in non-work-related Internet "surfing" (i.e., browsing and searching through multimedia Internet documents), which reduces productive work time. For the most part, private, personal electronic mail is considered to be a member benefit for those with organizational access. There are, however, notable exceptions in which organizations have monitored the electronic mail of their members or severely restricted mail usage to in-house or unidirectional modes.

Evaluations and predictions of what using the Internet means for the organizational member have ranged from the euphoric to the qualified to the dire. It is almost universally acknowledged that widely distributed networks increase the overall volume of information available to users. It is also the case, however, that the expectations placed upon information workers have increased, thereby initiating a "Red Queen" spiral named after Lewis Carroll's character whose subjects ran faster and faster only to find themselves slipping further and further behind. The rising popularity of e-mail, in addition to the practically nonexistent per-message cost, makes it easier for correspondents to send messages to one another and to groups of people. In turn, affiliation within a larger network of correspondents means a greater number of incoming messages. Again, the technological development increases expectations, not only on the tool, but on the user as well.

The affordability of computer equipment and the capability of users to access the Internet from literally anyplace with a telephone make it possible for many information workers to perform their jobs outside of a geographically centralized workplace. This concept of "telecommuting" is heralded by some as personally emancipating because the time, expense, and fatigue associated with travel can be minimized. Critical theorists, however, see the possibility of capitalist interests obliterating the temporal and spatial boundaries between work and leisure spheres of a person's life.

In this deliberation, we do not presume that the potential for ubiquitous networked human communication necessarily translates into the nightmare of capitalist excess. It must be remembered that McLuhan's initial concept of technological determinism held that social processes and values determine the application of technology and help determine its course, just as technology simultaneously influences the development of human values. For the purposes of the work in question, we take the phenomenon of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a given and focus on the application of the technology for its potential social benefits.

Media Theory and the Internet

In the early days of media studies, strong effects were presumed and tested. Later, in the forties and fifties, the failure in the verification of strong effects theories led to theories stating that media had minimal effects on human beings. The sixties and seventies, in part because of the pervasive feeling that mass media influenced social phenomena, including the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, came to be known as the era of conditional effects. In other words, under certain conditions, mediated messages have the potential to influence wide-ranging social change. The "uses and gratifications" approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1984; McQuail, 1987) is a conditional effects paradigm.

The theoretical perspective of uses and gratifications holds that different media help individuals to satisfy certain human needs. Whereas previous theory presumed the audience member to be "passive," or easily susceptible to media-based influences, uses and gratifications held that the audience member was "active" in her or his interaction with media artifacts. That is, it presumed that the media audience member was selective about what message he or she exposed him or herself to, how he or she perceived the message, and how he or she retained the message's content. In its original incarnation, the theory polled various populations to determine which media were used for what purposes. A typology of media-based needs presented by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) divides various media uses into categories of diversion (including escape and emotional release), personal relationships (including substitute companionship and social utility), personal identity (including personal reference, reality exploration, and value reinforcement), and environmental surveillance.

A major criticism leveled against this metatheory is that it did not really predict behavioral, attitudinal, or affective change. Moreover, it was inherently tautological since it was impossible to verify that any uses and gratification mechanism was in operation. In response, a modification of the metatheory makes the purported uses and gratification mechanism part of a process that in turn predicts a behavior. Hence the name of the new metatheory, "uses and effects." The uses and effects paradigm starts with a phenomenon of media use, explains or polls the purpose behind the user's motivation, and predicts a behavioral or attitudinal outcome that accompanies the concerted purpose and media usage.

Another criticism of the uses and gratifications approach was the very assumption that individual audience members actively and selectively processed mass-mediated information. Such opposition was understandable given the added dimensions of individual complexity that seriously calls into question the utility of the very concept of a social "mass." In the case of more personal public media, however, individual decision-making and selective-processing activity is not only a presumption but a systemic requirement of the technology's use.

The uses and effects approach allows us to pay close attention to the social context surrounding media use. The uses outlined by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) are, after all, social needs whose relative priority is dictated by the relationship between the individual and the social environment. A uses and gratifications model can help us to understand why families who are relocating use electronic mail and other Internet venues to satisfy various needs. Given the versatility of Internet formats vis-a-vis symbolic manipulation, it is likely that its uses are indeed quite varied and are likely to encroach on the domain of other media. For instance, it is not far-fetched to imagine that many individuals will choose to get their news on demand from CNN's Web site rather than wait for the top of the hour to get their headline information. It is also conceivable that many Internet users who previously wrote letters will choose to carry on their correspondence by e-mail, as long as their co-correspondents are "wired" into the Internet as well.

A uses and effects model can help us predict certain behavioral and affective outcomes when there is a lack of equilibrium between a media-oriented social need and its satisfaction.

Relocation and Internet-Based Support: A Theoretical Model

We have laid out the theoretical concepts of social information processing, family communication processes, the drive to reduce uncertainty, and the uses and effects perspective (which fits well with social evolutionary theory), and we have linked these issues with the phenomenon of relocation. What follows is a proposed theoretical examination of the uses and effects of e-mail upon relocating organizational members and their families.

Our theoretical unit of analysis is the family who is relocating. We begin with the following assumptions:

General Assumptions

- Families who are relocating are moving to a location whose social environment is new to them.
- Family members who are relocating are leaving a social environment in which they enjoyed a strong sense of identity and familiarity.
- Human community-based needs include social interaction/affiliation, social surveillance, social control/power, and social support.

Assumptions of Internet Electronic Mail Users

- Users understand basic functions of electronic mail and other Internet-based interpersonal forums.
- Families who are relocating who use e-mail are logistically able to correspond via e-mail to intimate others.

Theoretical Hypotheses to be Tested

- Characteristics of certain media allow them to better satisfy social communication needs associated with community membership. These characteristics include asynchronicity, interactivity, social network ubiquity, cost, and social presence. Families who are relocating will use e-mail to remain in contact with extended family and intimate others and will send messages on a more frequent basis than those who do not use e-mail.
- Families who are relocating will be more apt than families who are not relocating to adopt the technology as a way of maintaining social network ties with extended family and intimate others.
- When a particular family member has disproportionately more frequent, convenient access to e-mail, and extended family and intimate others have e-mail access, that family member will increasingly serve the function of communicative relationship maintenance.

  Concurrently, people who are "kinkeepers" in families will be motivated to secure e-mail access for use in the service of their kinkeeping functions.
- Applying theoretical principles of social presence and media richness, families who utilize e-mail combined with other channels and formats of interpersonal communication with extended family and intimate others will feel less socially isolated and less distant from the social network they leave behind than those who rely exclusively on any single channel.

Applied Research Methodology

Subject Selection

Our sample population will be limited to those whose relocation is either voluntary or sponsored to some extent by an organization, such as the military or a company. Pair-matching between families who are relocating and those who are not relocating will be utilized to avoid, as much as possible, spurious factors. Example populations include military families (especially in the United States), families of multinational corporate employees, and families of academics. This study is preliminary, and we do not presume that our sample will be comprehensively representative of all or even most families who are relocating. We do hope to develop a more refined model relating relocation with CMC use.

In evaluating our theoretical hypotheses, in both qualitative and quantitative senses, we will need to compare family units under several different conditions:

- Families who relocate and use e-mail for maintaining relational ties with extended family and intimate others left behind.

- Families who relocate and do not use e-mail for maintaining relational ties with extended family and intimate others left behind.
- Families who do not relocate and use e-mail for maintaining relational ties with extended family and intimate others.
- Families who do not relocate and do not use e-mail for maintaining relational ties with extended family and intimate others.

Measurements

Measurement data will be collected by personal interview and questionnaire as well as communication logbooks kept by subjects. Depending on future resources of this project, we hope to be able to actually analyze e-mail records of subjects who provide their informed consent. Measurement data will include the following items:

- Frequency of e-mail use.
- Extent of e-mail use for personal and work-related needs within an overall model of personal communication media use.
- Descriptions of social communication networks, categorized according to communication format and channel.
- Detailed information regarding reasons for the relocation.
- Detailed information regarding familiarity with the new location.
- Quality of Relationships Index (QRI) to measure social support of specific relationships (pre/post).
- Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) to measure properties of the support network (post).
- Measures of feelings of social isolation.
- Organizational members' perceptions of the organization's consent, or lack thereof, for using organizational communication resources for personal reasons.
- Measurements (to be designed) of stresses related to coping in new and unfamiliar social environments.
- Measurements of social network maintenance tasks.
- If appropriate, official policy of sponsoring organization regarding personal e-mail use.
- If appropriate, official policy of sponsoring organization regarding relocation aid.

Conclusion

Our interactions in various social contexts continuously provide us with a sense of identity and security on many levels. And though it might seem that we can keep our different affiliations separate, we are information (and social information) processing animals of limited capacity. When we find it difficult to cope with one aspect of our lives, chances are that the affective stresses associated with the effort and the discouragement influence other aspects of functioning. Geographic relocation has always been a challenging source of stress, in large part because of the separation from networks of kinship and social support. This stress takes its toll on every family who relocates.

The growing trend of relocation has accompanied the development of communication technologies. If we consider the development of long-distance communication network technologies, from the messenger, to postal mail, to telegraph, to telephone and fax, to CMC, a trend towards increased social presence and immediacy emerges. We see the importance of frequency of contact as well as symbolic richness. It is possible to use the telephone to call our loved ones every day, but most of us feel that our immediate social and physical environments should take priority over distant social networks. CMC technology is being redefined as a personal distance communication tool, carving out its niche because of its relatively low drain on resources, its capability for facilitating one-to-one and group communication, its growing symbolic flexibility, and its speed.

Because CMC is a very new personal communication cluster for most of its users, it is important and useful to uncover the benefits and drawbacks for people who may rely on it the most for social and emotional support—the geographically distant members of social networks. Studying the use of new technologies will very likely tell us as much about where we as a networking species are going as it will tell us about where our technology is going.

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