



Market Perspective Whitepaper
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The Devocalized Society

*Electronic communication has altered
our behavior and our relationships*

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Silence and Language

We have more and better tools for communication now than at any other time in human history. Technology, especially the Internet, has erased the old barriers of space and time; we can communicate nearly anything to almost anyone anywhere and do so nearly instantly.

One might think that such technology would allow us to merge our minds into one massive global consciousness, and perhaps it does. But, in what may be a massive case of unexpected consequences, the technology responsible for bringing that global consciousness as close as the nearest PC or handheld device is the same technology that makes it so difficult to simply talk to one another. In brief, we have become a devocalized society in which e-mail and other forms of text-based electronic communication have largely supplanted face-to-face conversation.

But, a devocalized society, while silent, is clearly not speechless. As renowned American author Susan Sontag wrote “Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.”¹ So, what does it mean to live in a devocalized society? What does it look like? What does it sound like? We attempt to answer these questions here and explore the implications, especially for American businesses.

Observed behavior

Imagine a typical office in a typical large American corporation. Work-cubes within an open central area are surrounded by a perimeter of private offices. Every workspace has a networked computer and a telephone. Every worker also carries a personal cell phone. There is some occasional quiet chit-chat at the water cooler, the coffee pot, and the printer (which is also the subject of much displaced rage and cursing). But overall, the place is quiet. Machines make most of the ambient noise.

If we zoom-in a bit from this fly-on-the-wall perspective, we can observe people of every description focusing on the machines in their spaces to the exclusion of nearly everything else. Their eyes are fixed on computer screens and cell phone displays. Hands move rapidly around keyboards; their staccato tapping is the dominant sound.

But, no one speaks.

Zooming-in once more, this time to the electronic interiors of their machines, we finally recognize the activity that consumes them. They are messaging. That is, they are tapping out text-based missives via e-mail, instant messaging and Web-mail and sending them to the very next cubicle just as often as to another office in a distant location.

If we now peer inside the speeding streams of electrons to glimpse the content of those messages, we can observe the full spectrum of human communication. There are office memos, sales inquiries, transaction updates, strategic planning, and all manner of official

correspondence. Then there is the less-than-businesslike communication, personal notes, love letters, jokes, gossip, weather updates, stock tips, party invitations, and—of course—resumes, lots of resumes.

The scenario presented here could describe the scene at just about any office, anywhere, in just about any business.

Converging factors, emerging questions

What we have just observed is the convergence of several critical social and technological factors. The technological factor is the indelibility of electronic messages; they really never go away, no matter how many times you may try to delete them. This indelibility has a number of legal and commercial ramifications. First, electronic communication has become the primary means by which companies lose their intellectual property and other confidential information. Second, e-mail is now the “great engine of truth²” for prosecutors and litigators everywhere.

In contrast to the rather simple cause-and-effect logic of the technological factors, the social factors involved here are far more complex. We can state as a given that electronic communication is impulsive and explain that this condition has led to careless and irresponsible messaging decisions, especially in the business world. It would seem that technology is the cause and devocalized society is the effect. But, why is this so? How has it come to be this way?

From an oral to a mediated society

Prior to the electronic age, humans lived in what was principally an oral society. Of course, there was the written word in the form of letters, newspapers, and books. By the mid-nineteenth century, we also had the telegraph, but that aided publishers more than individuals.

Our current society is mediated. That is, it’s dominated by the technology of the mass media. Most, if not all, of what we know about the world at large—and each other—we learn from the technology of radio, television, and especially the Internet.

What truly distinguishes the oral from the mediated society is face-to-face communication. Specifically, the face-to-face communication that defined oral societies has given way to communication mediated by the technology of the mass media: e-mail, text and instant messaging, blogs, shared videos (the YouTube phenomena), in addition to TV and the telephone. Our relationships have evolved and are now conducted with technology as the go-between. So, not only is the devocalized society silent (that is, non-oral), it is also faceless.

Some scholars have discussed this societal change using the language of German sociology³. The personal community, “gemeinschaft,” has been replaced by “gesellschaft,” the impersonal community. This outlook points to the emergence of a pseudo-society where personal (i.e., face-to-face) interaction is succeeded by words and images in

cyberspace—a virtual society in which virtual reality replaces physical reality (and real faces) and where time and place have little meaning. In fact, distance becomes irrelevant, as does time. Likewise, concepts of accountability and responsibility no longer have any tangible reality.

Technology: mask and influence

“Technologies, created by humans, return the favor; they are involved in creating societies and influencing human affairs.⁴” This statement by cyber-psychology researcher, Alan Canfield, Ph.D., describes perfectly the inevitability of technology changing us while we use it to change our environment. Electronic communication is more than simply a means for transmitting information. It is a powerful force that alters how we behave. But how, exactly, does it alter our behavior.

The cyber-world, being a technological filter through which we conduct our relationships, acts to mask our individual identities. Persons on either end of a mediated conversation (e.g., e-mail or instant messaging) can assume just about any persona they want and do so with such ease that little if any forethought is needed. The result is a communicative environment that is free of most psychological restraints, just as it is free of physical boundaries.

Consequently (perhaps even inevitably) humans are adapting their behavior and actions to fit this new environment. The technologies we have built to improve our lives intrude upon them and become symbolic models for our actions and behavior within the environments they create.

We are left with two key questions. First, how, exactly, have we adapted our actions and behaviors to the cyber-world? And, how does our adaptation alter the nature and practice of business?

Mood and behavior in a devocalized society

Perhaps this inquiry wouldn't be necessary if the Internet was boring and difficult. In fact, it is arguably the most attractive and engaging communicative technology to date. And, it is this very attractiveness that makes electronic communication within cyber-space impossible to resist.

Such psychological magnetism may be behind what social scientists call the cultivation theory⁵. This theory suggests that the more one engages in a particular medium, the more one comes under the influence of that medium. The authors focused on television, but its application to other communicative technologies seems perfectly sensible. If this theory holds true, electronic communication may be the most influential technology yet.

Significantly, the increasing amounts of time devoted to electronic communication, which can be directly related to its attractiveness and influence, replace the time once given face-to-face communication. Less time taken for direct interaction translates into underdeveloped social skills⁶. There simply isn't enough time for full

Electronic communication is a supremely useful and engaging technology, but it is creating an impersonal social order in which individuals can mask their identities and are largely free of the traditional constraints and inhibitions on behavior.

development. Therefore, the speed of electronic communication can cause flawed social skills. Consequently, concepts of right and wrong can be dangerously skewed.

Most interesting and troubling, though, is the phenomenon of disinhibition, in which moods and identities artificially created in cyber-space undermine the inhibitions learned from face-to-face socialization⁷. In fact, the anonymity produced by artificial identities may actually encourage disinhibition, making electronic communication potentially dangerous and toxic. That is, wrongdoing is the behavior most likely to be disinhibited, and the likelihood is that disinhibition will increase in lockstep with the usage of electronic communication.

There are scholars who go so far as to claim that the world of cyber-space (and by extension, electronic communication) is powerful enough and pervasive enough to alter our perception of reality and supplant the pre-cyber social order⁸. As electronic communication changes the social dynamic and the social context, it virtually eliminates the notion of “I would never say that!”

Devocalized and dangerous

More and more, it appears that this is a path leading to danger.

We don’t need to extend the notions of anonymity and disinhibition very far to see how living (and communicating) in a cyber-world can also dissolve ties to countries, nationalities, communities, and companies. Notions of loyalty, fealty, and responsibility to one’s employer become more and more dilute, with less and less personal reality and meaning.

Nearly half a century ago the renowned social critic Marshal McLuhan taught us that “the medium is the message⁹. Accordingly, the message in cyberspace is complex, plural, and contradictory¹⁰. Where the social context is impersonal and does not require accountability or responsibility, the individual may feel empowered to choose messages—and act on those messages—on the basis of convenience, or greed, or ambition, or jealousy, or fear, or spite, or any motivation except sound judgment and the best interests of the organization to which the individual belongs.

Now we can clearly see the potential danger of the devocalized society. According to Iowa State University researcher Michael Bugeja, “communication systems alter values.¹¹” Like it or not, cyber-space and electronic communication are changing us and not always in ways that are productive or beneficial. We need to step back and ask, what values have been altered and what values have been lost?

Controlling our cyber-selves

We often say that e-mail is dangerous because it is both indelible and impulsive. Now we know that behind that impulsiveness lays an even more troubling and potentially dangerous subversion of our identities. Without the application of some benevolent controlling

force, our values, behavior and actions in cyber-space can all too easily be altered in ways that we don't consciously intend and may not be fully aware of.

Without the imposition of boundaries and limitations, our faceless online personas may not think twice about revealing confidential information in an e-mail, harassing a co-worker in an instant message, illegally sharing intellectual property, or bending business laws past the breaking point.

So, the really big question is this: what does this deeply academic discussion mean for American business? The average large company might see more than one million e-mail messages pass through its network on a daily basis, to say nothing of the countless instant messages and blog postings. The Radicati Group estimates that by 2009, nearly 50 billion IM conversations will take place every day, so the stakes are very high indeed¹².

The central issue is trust and how to maintain trusting online relationships in a devocalized society. Since our description of these dangers assumes a lack of rules, boundaries, and limitations, the most direct remedy would appear to be the polar opposite: control. And, that's exactly what we propose here. The business risks inherent in a devocalized society can be largely mitigated by applying electronic communication control, which we'll call ECC.

This is a deceptively simple statement, which often leads to discussions of business and the behavior of those engaged in business in terms of ethics, good governance, and "doing the right thing." More and more, such conversations are moving away from traditional business topics and closer to the social sciences. As you might guess, these topics are largely alien to a business audience.

So, we are left with the irony of finding a technological solution to a set of social problems that have a technological origin. In fact, it seems that all of the effects that ECC software seeks to mitigate have resulted from society's reaction to electronic communication technology.

Ideally, electronic communication control that's effective ought to provide guidance to e-mail senders so they can avoid violating regulations, exposing intellectual property, or betraying the trust of customers and consumers. Of course, there's quite a bit more to it, but that's the basic idea.

ECC applies adaptable, accurate policies in software that upholds corporate standards of behavior in every press of the 'send' button. This approach works with managers and employees in real-time, analyzing every single message as it is created and amending each one before it is sent to be certain it represents values and actions that are consistent with corporate interests.

When deployed correctly, ECC can be applied to all communication channels, from e-mail to Instant Messages, from Web transactions to mobile messaging. This ensures that uncontrolled, unethical, and

potentially dangerous messages won't go undetected, or uncorrected.

Policies are at the heart of ECC. They go far beyond the capabilities of typical keyword lists, taking the rules and sound practices determined by law, regulation, ethics, and good common sense and applying them to messages. A good policy determines who can send what—and say what—to whom, and what happens when there is a violation.

The beginning of the end?

No, this is more likely just the end of the beginning. This is a topic of immense complexity and scope that is evolving rapidly. Researchers in both the business and academic worlds will plumb its depths for decades. The world of cyber-psychology offers rich fields of inquiry, especially on topics like disinhibition, identity morphing, anonymity, transference, and a host of others, all of which bear heavily on the conduct of business.

Now that we have a better understanding of why our values change when most of our communication occurs in cyber-space, it remains for us to deepen that understanding and explore how those changes in values and behavior take place. Eventually, we may be able to develop a predictive model we can use to better protect our businesses and ourselves.

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