

Chapter XXXIII

Terminological Obfuscation in Online Research

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ABSTRACT

Many concepts—such as “computer mediated versus face-to-face interaction,” “virtual versus real,” “flaming,” and “anonymity”—that scholars have used for decades have led to theoretical misunderstandings about online and offline communication. This chapter discusses theoretical problems that standard terms introduce. The goal is not simply to urge more precision by defining terms, but rather to show how concepts and their orienting frameworks complicate scholars’ ability to observe and analyze certain data. Use of ill-defined terms may obscure data that lies outside of an orienting term’s worldview. The chapter analyzes concerns with these terms and concludes with suggestions on how to resist unreflective use of terms that complicates open-ended empirical investigation of communicative phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship in computer mediated communication is at a crossroads, terminologically speaking. Many commonly-accepted concepts originally emerged as insider terms used by specific technical communities or they appeared in popular and scholarly articles discussing new possibilities for and concerns about Internet use. Yet, scholars often use these terms without defining them or acknowledging the theoretical baggage that they convey. Although some scholars argue that terms and concepts such as “the computer,” “the

Internet,” “computer mediated communication (CMC),” “face-to-face communication,” “virtual versus real interaction,” “flaming,” and “anonymity” are convenient shorthand for well understood phenomena, careful examination reveals that the terms are used in vastly different ways by different scholars. They are sometimes not defined at all, and/or are used in ways that are inconsistent with the findings of CMC research. Ironically, the terms are often used in ways that contradict the empirical conclusions of the scholar who uses them. For instance, one scholar states that Internet networks “nullify physical existence.” Yet the

same scholar's findings show that people often integrate information about their personality and technical abilities into online names, indicating linkages between online and offline self-presentation (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). Use of ill-defined, legacy terms frequently reproduces theoretical assumptions that obfuscate deeper insight into online and in person interaction. Importantly, terms not explicitly used may still be implied in the framing and findings of research. Scholars may assume online interaction to be "virtual" (meaning not real or almost real) even if they do not state this assumption, and the conclusions resulting from this assumption may contradict their own and others' empirical data about the realities of mediated interaction.

This chapter discusses problems with using common CMC research terms. The goal is not to unrealistically insist on omitting all convenient terms, nor to simply urge a vague notion of more precision by defining one's terms. This chapter contends that use of the terms themselves creates a world view that limits researchers' ability to see data in alternative ways. Use of the terms often brackets off data in ways that prevent open-ended empirical investigation and meaningful comparison of communicative phenomena. Use of the terms may also lead to false conclusions because of the world view that the terms create for the researcher prior to empirical investigation. As Markham (2005) states, the less we question the metaphors that are inherently laden in Internet-based conceptualizations, "the more these frames exert power over our ability to think differently. We step into and therefore stop seeing the frame" (pp. 260-261). This chapter discusses how certain terms yield flawed frameworks and provides suggestions for overcoming some of the terms' limitations. These suggestions include: (1) eliminating especially obfuscating, out-dated, and/or morally-laden terms; (2) using legacy terms only after defining the term and justifying its use; and (3) avoiding new popular terms that have moral or

other connotations that limit researchers' ability to conduct open-ended investigation.

MONOTHOLIC FRAMEWORKS

Early studies of computer use explored "the computer's effects" on people and social interaction. For example, Turkle (1984) notes that "[the] efforts to capture the impact of the computer on people involve [her] in a long-standing debate about the relationship between technology and culture" (emphasis added; p. 21). The phrase "the computer" continues to be used in scholarly contexts today. A recent symposium (May, 2006) devoted to understanding complexities and changes in computer use in the last decade was titled, "The Computer: The Once and Future Medium for the Social Sciences and the Humanities" (emphasis added). However, if computers are complex and changing, how does it benefit scholarship to characterize these complexities using the phrase "the computer"?

Perhaps it seems innocuous to use this phrase, even when scholars are, ironically, using it to describe computers' complexities. But, as discussed in early works, such as Turkle's (1984) and Levy's (1984), "the computer," was and is not a single entity with specific capabilities that all individuals manipulate, interpret, and use in the same way. Further, the phrase "the computer" in CMC research provides a framework that encourages subsequent monolithic frameworks (such as "the Internet") and artificial binaries (such as CMC versus face-to-face communication and virtual versus real interaction). Frameworks that treat "the computer" and "the Internet" as singular entities that are distinct from other realms potentially smuggle in a researcher's prior assumptions about what these entities connote to them, what capabilities they offer, what limitations they have, and what people experience when using them. If researchers operate with a deeply ingrained and

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