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Brave New Digital Culture

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Many articles on how the internet has changed language are like linguistic versions of the old Innovations catalogue, showcasing the latest strange and exciting products of our brave new digital culture. Yet these formal innovations are merely surface manifestations of a deeper change – a change in our relationship with the written word.

I first started to think about this at some point during the Noughties (the 2000s), after I noticed the odd behaviour of a friend's teenage daughter. She was watching TV, alone and in silence, while her thumbs moved rapidly over the keys of her mobile phone. My friend explained that she was chatting with a classmate: they were not in the same physical space, but they were watching the same programme, and discussing it in a continuous exchange of text messages. What I found strange was not the activity itself. The strange part was the medium: not spoken language, but written text.

In 1997, research conducted for British Telecom found that face-to-face speech accounted for 86 per cent of the average Briton's communications, and telephone speech for 12 per cent. Outside education and the (white-collar or professional) workplace, most adults did little writing. Two decades later, it is probably still true that most of us talk more than we write. But there's no doubt we are making more use of writing, because so many of us now use it in our social interactions. We text, we tweet, we message, we Facebook; we have intense conversations and meaningful relationships with people we have never spoken to.

Writing was not designed to serve this purpose. Its original function was to store information in a form that did not depend on memory for its transmission and preservation. It acquired other functions, of the social kind, among others; but even in the days when "snail mail" was less snail-like (in large cities in the early 1900s there were five postal deliveries a day), "conversations" conducted by letter or postcard fell far short of the rapid back-and-forth that today's technology makes possible.

When a medium acquires new functions, it will need to be adapted by means of creating new forms. Many online innovations are motivated by the need to make written language do a better job of two things in particular: communicating tone, and expressing individual or group identity. The rich resources speech offers for these purposes (such as accent, intonation, voice quality and, in face-to-face contexts, body language) are not reproducible in text-based

communication. But users of digital media have found ways to exploit the resources that are specific to text, such as spelling, punctuation, font and spacing.

These newer conventions have gained traction in part because of the way the internet has developed. As older readers may recall, the internet was once conceptualised as an “information superhighway”, a vast and instantly accessible repository of useful stuff. But the highway was a one-way street: its users were imagined as consumers rather than producers. Web 2.0 changed that. Writers no longer needed permission to publish: they could start a blog, or write fan fiction, without having to get past the established gatekeepers, editors and publishers. And this also freed them to deviate from the linguistic norms that were strictly enforced in print – to experiment or play with grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Might all this be a passing phase? It has been suggested that as the technology improves, many text-based forms of online communication will revert to their more “natural” medium: speech. In some cases this seems plausible. But there are reasons to think that speech will not supplant text in all the new domains that writing has conquered.

Consider my friend’s daughter and her classmate, who chose to text when they could have used their phones to talk. This choice reflected their desire for privacy: your mother cannot listen to a text-based conversation. Students also tell me that they rarely speak on the phone to anyone other than their parents without prearranging it. They see unsolicited voice calls as an imposition; text-based communication is preferable because it does not demand the recipient’s immediate attention. Their guiding principle seems to be: “I communicate with whom I want, when I want, and I respect others’ right to do the same.”

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