CHAPTER 9

Technology and Communication Competence

T echnology has become so much a part of our daily lives that communication cannot easily be separated from it. Canadian English professor Marshall McLuhan (1964, 1967) was the focal point for intense debate over electronic media and their effects when television was still a relatively new invention. Derisively labeled the "Oracle of the Electronic Age," the "High Priest of Pop Culture," and the "Metaphysician of Media," McLuhan gained notoriety partly because of his gift for creating memorable phrases. "The medium is the message," "the medium is the massage," and "the global village" are all McLuhan creations. Despite criticisms of McLuhan's point of view (see especially Davis, 1993)—a view that was essentially optimistic about electronic media and their potential contributions to humankind—McLuhan did shift the debate from a focus on media content to the media themselves.

Meyrowitz (1997) notes, "The spread of printing, radio, television, telephone, computer networks, and other technologies have altered the nature of social interaction in ways that cannot be reduced to the content of the messages communicated through them" (p. 196). Consider a few simple examples. Your partner sits at the breakfast table reading a newspaper while you try to engage him or her in a conversation. Does it matter what your partner is reading, or does the mere act of reading the newspaper interfere with interpersonal connection? Families that eat dinner in front of the television rarely engage in conversation. In fact, conversation during a television program is considered rude and will often provoke a collective "shush" from family members. Does it matter what the family is watching? The mere act of watching television can close off dialogue and opportunities for conversation. When children and parents spend hours alone in front of computer screens, does it matter whether they are playing video games, surfing the Internet, or catching up on office work? The mere use of communication technologies has the power to shape our lives in ways we may not notice.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the many ways communication technologies can influence our communication with others.

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There are three Chapter objectives:

1. to examine trends in communication technologies,
2. to discuss the consequences of these trends on our communication with others, and
3. to offer ways competent communicators can cope with the impact of communication technologies.

The content of messages transmitted via communication technologies does matter. Violent television programming and pornographic images on the Internet are subjects of heated debate and intense concern. You are probably familiar with the controversies surrounding these content issues. What you may not have pondered, however, is how the pervasive use of electronic communication technologies is changing our lives. Although the messages that we communicate electronically cannot be ignored, the emphasis of this chapter will be the opportunities and challenges presented to us by the increasing availability of electronic communication technologies.

...IF YOU'D BOTHERED TO CHECK YOUR E-MAIL YOU'D KNOW WHAT I WANT!...

Trends in Communication Technology

Recognizing trends in communication technologies can help you understand how these technologies affect your relationships with others and whether these effects are likely to continue or even grow more significant. There are two primary trends: (1) the use of electronic communication technology is becoming pervasive, and (2) the bias for speed in electronic communication technology has permeated our society.

Pervasiveness of Communication Technology

Put in its simplest form, a **technology** is a tool to accomplish some purpose, and a *communication* technology is a tool to communicate with others. Not all technologies are readily accepted when they first appear. A century ago, the United States Justice Department seriously advocated a ban on public ownership of automobiles because cars would allow criminals to flee from the scenes of their crimes (Neumann, 1999). The accelerated pace of public acceptance of new communication technologies is therefore remarkable.

See "How-Wired Are You?" survey on CD.

The Center for Policy Analysis notes that new communication technologies are reaching and being used by a significant portion of the U.S. population faster than ever. The telephone took 35 years to reach a quarter of the U.S. population; radio took 22 years, television 26 years, the PC only 16 years, the mobile phone 13 years, and the Internet just 7 years (Reeling in the Years, 1998). Virtually every home in the United

States has at least one television set, a radio, and a phone; most have more than one of each. More than 100 million Americans use cellular phones (Carpenter, 2000).

By the mid-1990s the Internet, hardly recognized by most Americans at the start of the decade, had emerged as a dominant communication system used by people from a variety of backgrounds. Seventy-one percent of all Americans used the Internet in 2002 (Chmielewski, 2003). Half of nonusers plan to go online. Despite concerns about a "digital divide" among races, half of Hispanic adults and 43% of African American adults were using the Internet by 2001 (Ostrom, 2001). Although females once lagged far behind males in computer and Internet use, by the year 2000, gender differences disappeared (Wood & Smith, 2001). Only the elderly seem more inclined to be "computer meek." Fewer than 15% of individuals 65 years or older are online, and Jupiter Communications, a New York technology firm, esti-mated in 2001 that only 17 million seniors would be cruising the Net by 2005, leav-ing 36 million who would not be Internet surfing (Atkins, 2001). Anxiety about dealing with complex technologies is the main reason for the reticence of seniors.

The pervasiveness of communication technologies truly has influenced our lives, and most individuals think it's a positive development. For example, a Gallup poll conducted in February 2000 reported that 72% of respondents believe that the Internet has improved their lives, only 2% believe it has made their lives worse, and 26% report no difference (Americans Say, 2000). This same sample reported that they use the Internet to obtain information (95%), to send and receive e-mail (89%), to shop (45%), and to visit chat rooms (21%).

Bias for Speed

Carrie Fisher, in her *Postcards from the Edge*, remarked, "Instant gratification takes too long." The pace of technological change is accelerating, and with it comes a bias for speed. In the first half of the 20th century a new major communication technol-ogy might have come along once in a decade or two. Now, with the digital world of computers, communication technology arrives more quickly and changes more rap-idly. Bill Seawick of computer software giant Oracle Corporation says, "Technology is coming at such a fantastic pace that people have to learn new technologies every three or four months" (cited in Shenk, 1997, p. 86).

"Digital technology, the basis of today's new media technologies, represents the translation of all forms of content (text, images, audio, video, and other animation) into a form that is easily manipulated by computers. That sentence sums up devel-opments in communication technologies for the last 20 years" (Klopfenstein, 1997, p. 22). The digital world of computers has merged with virtually all communication technologies, creating a communication revolution (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998). There are computer chips in televisions, radios, CD players, telephones, VCRs, DVDs, and fax and copy machines. Digitalization has made possible an integration of commu-nication technologies unparalleled in human history. We now talk of interactive tel-evision, an unprecedented combination of communication technology that would merge cable, television, telephone, and computer technology. The Internet, which merges computer and phone (modems) technology, can be a medium of print, graphics, photography, video, or sound. It can be linear, one-way communication, or it can be interactive with chat rooms and e-mail permitting interchange between users. This technological merging has created an exhilarating but far different world of communication than existed just 2 decades ago.

What this accelerating technological change means to us is that communication competence has never been a bigger challenge. E-mail, Internet Web sites, cell phones, pagers, faxes, and Palm Pilots allow us to access information and connect with individuals all over the globe in ways that would have been difficult to imagine a half-century ago. *All of these technological advances in communication have an inherent bias: Faster is better* (Gleick, 1999).

A message sent in the form of a letter would take an average of 3 days to deliver if sent by standard mail. Regular mail became "snail mail" when Federal Express introduced overnight delivery service, and with the ready availability of e-mail, anything less than speed of light transmission became by comparison excruciatingly slo-o-o-o-o-o-w. James Gleick (1999), in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, notes that the television remote control "in the hands of a quick-reflexed, multitasking, channel-flipping, fast-forwarding citizenry, has caused an acceleration in the pace of films and television commercials" (p. 10). During the 1964 New York World's Fair, thousands of people stood in line at the AT&T pavilion to try Touch Tone dialing for the first time (Gleick, 1999). Dialing a 7-digit number on a rotary phone typically took about 10 seconds. Touch Tone could save about 7 to 8 seconds. Inevitably, the faster-is-better bias gave us the speed-dial button, saving additional precious nanoseconds (although programming it can wipe out any perceived aggregate time savings). Telephone answering machines come equipped with quick-playback buttons that compress speech so messages sound like callers are auctioneers on amphetamines.

Cell phones and pagers make us reachable at almost any instant, and they implicitly demand an instant reply. This is particularly true when the message is task oriented (Walther & Tidwell, 1995). The longer the interval between the initial message sent and the reply, the more excuses we feel compelled to offer for our "tardy" response. An immediate reply signals respect and interest. A delayed response or no response at all signals disrespect and disinterest. The cell phone and the standard phone are different in this aspect. When we call and leave a message on a home answering machine, we don't have the same expectation of an immediate reply. The party that we call is presumed to be away from home (unless we suspect that they are screening their calls). A cell phone, however, is portable. If the party called doesn't

Calvin and Hobbes   by Bill Watterson
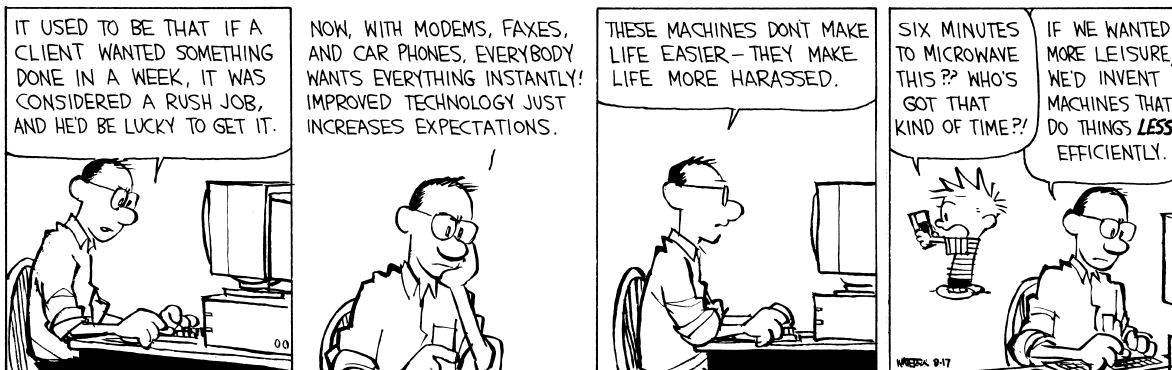
answer, it appears deliberate. When we leave a message on a cell phone that identifies us, we are doubly insulted when the call is "ignored." There, of course, are good reasons individuals turn off their cell phones or do not respond promptly, but the ready availability of cell phones makes excuses for delaying the return call suspicious.

With the bias for speed comes an expectation of speed, which easily morphs into a need for speed (Shenk, 1999). With this need for speed often comes impatience, stress, frustration, and even anger at the relatively slow pace of anything that is less than instantaneous. Who can tolerate the relatively slow speed of the old dot matrix printers, for example, at one time thought to be a miracle of technological advancement, when laser printers can pump out professional looking copies as much as 20 to 30 times faster? As C. Leslie Charles, author of *Why Is Everyone So Cranky?* notes, "This constant accessibility and compulsive use of technology fragments what little time we do have, adding to our sense of urgency, emergency, and overload" (cited in Peterson, 2000, p. 2A). *Multitasking*, a term coined by computer scientists in the 1960s, becomes a necessity because it is the only way of "keeping up" with the increased pace of life. Have you ever sat at a computer terminal, read e-mail, and responded to e-mail while conducting a phone conversation? That's multitasking made possible by electronic communication technologies.

Each of us, of course, can choose the degree of technological immersion we wish to embrace. Many individuals have yet to embrace the cell phone. A study of 2,000 American households by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy's World Internet Project, reported that 16.8% of respondents claimed that they would not purchase a computer at any price. They "don't want to go online because everybody else is online" (Cole et al., 2000). The bias for speed inherent in communication technologies does not render us powerless to resist this bias, but it does make it increasingly difficult, especially as the technologies become ever more pervasive. If you have the option to send a message by writing a letter that requires addressing an envelope and affixing a stamp to the envelope before mailing it or to send the message by e-mail, which would you choose? One does not have to own a computer or learn PowerPoint, but as job announcements increasingly include requirements for computer skills and panels expect PowerPoint demonstrations during the interviewing process, rigidly refusing to become a "slave to technology" can seriously limit one's options. Speed is exhilarating, and humans have trouble resisting its allure (Gleick, 1999). Research can still be conducted the "old fashioned way," in a library searching through the stacks (and sometimes this is the only option). If your research could be conducted in a tenth of the time by hopping on the Internet and accessing the most recent, high-quality information, however, would you eschew the allure of speed for the "purity" of the dusty excursion through often outdated books?

Consequences of Communication Technologies

The history of communication technologies appears to be a simple process of adding new technologies on top of old ones. However, it is far more complicated than this. As Postman (1993) explains,

> A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States
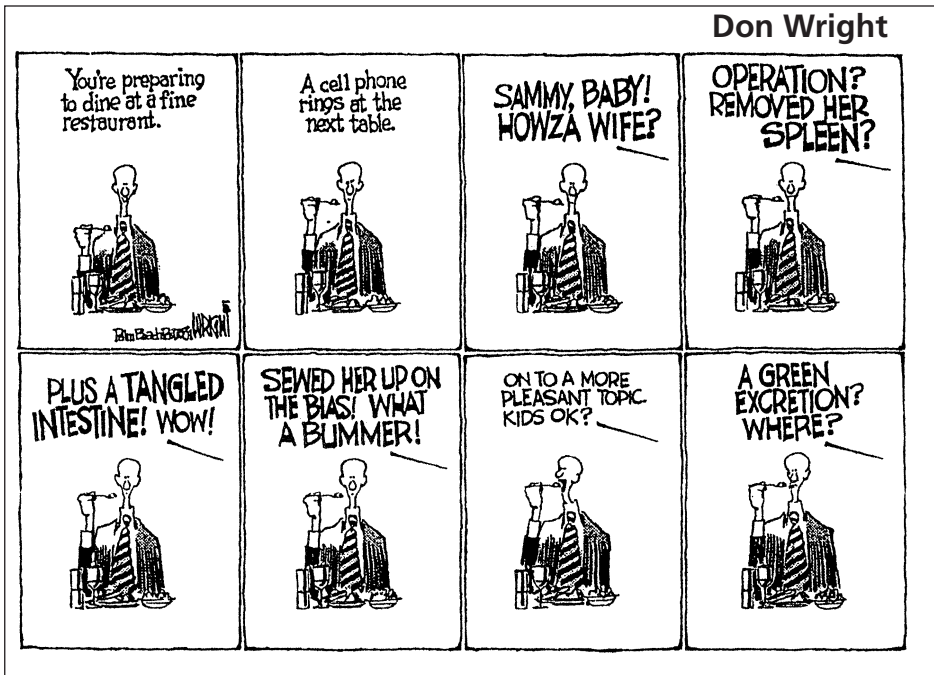
Don Wright

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was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry (p. 18).

Consider what impact the cell phone has had on our lives. The cell phone is an amazing invention capable of connecting us to almost anyone in the world whenever we desire. Parents can keep track of their children more easily with cell phones. If there is a misunderstanding or confusion about children's planned activities, placing a call to their cell phone can remedy the problem quickly. In emergency situations the cell phone can be a lifesaver. Even knowing that you have a cell phone at the ready in case of an emergency can be comforting. Relatives and friends can be notified easily when you are running late for an engagement so they don't become worried or irritated by your tardiness. Parents can "tuck in" their children during a break in a late-night meeting. Business can be conducted more easily with cell phones.

There is a downside to the cell phone, however. In an elegant San Antonio, Texas, nightclub a jazz singer was entertaining the crowd when a cell phone rang. The patron answered the phone and then shushed singer Ken Slavin so the patron could hear the call. In Palo Alto, California, a food fight nearly broke out when one customer complained loudly about eight cell phone calls disrupting his meal. Actor Laurence Fishburne, in the middle of a Broadway play, felt compelled to break character and bellow at an audience member to turn off a cell phone. Solitary cell phone users can conduct conversations with phones pressed to their ears while bouncing off passers-by like balls in a pinball machine, seemingly oblivious to their surroundings. National Public Radio's "Car Talk" show has given away 60,000 "Drive Now, Talk Later" bumper stickers. Restaurants, theaters, and museums from coast to coast have begun creating "cell phone free zones" or banning cell phone conversations entirely by posting "No Cell Phones" signs at entrances. Teachers at all

**www.mhhe
● com/rothwell2**

See cell phone poll on the Online Learning Center, Chapter 9.

Box 9-1 **Sharper Focus**

Cell Phone Etiquette for the Competent Communicator

Cell phone manufacturer Nokia and several Web sites (http://computersathome.com/gsm/etiquette.html; *GetConnected.com*; www.letstalk.com/promo/unclecell/unclecell2.html) offer etiquette advice. Guidelines for using cell phones appropriately include the following:

1. Do not use a cell phone on a date, during a business meeting, or while conducting a face-to-face conversation unless you know that an emergency has arisen. Most people perceive interrupting face-to-face communication to take a cell phone call as rude and insensitive. It appears that your cell phone conversation takes precedence over your face-to-face conversation. That's insulting. Use the phone's caller ID function to screen calls, and let voice mail handle all calls that aren't clearly urgent.
2. Never use a cell phone in a restaurant, in a theater, or during any public performance when such use could disrupt others' enjoyment. If you absolutely must receive a call in such venues, switch to the vibrating ringer and take the call in a more private location.
3. When using a cell phone in public, do not raise your voice. Speak in a normal manner, not a "cell yell." Most individuals do not care to listen to your personal conversations.
4. Avoid using annoying rings such as popular tunes or sound effects. If you forget to turn off your cell phone during a public performance or a college class, the phone jingle merely amplifies the inappropriate ringing.
5. Do not use a cell phone while driving. It's likely to divert your attention from the safe operation of your vehicle. Pull off the road to take a call that seems urgent.

education levels regularly instruct students to turn off cell phones before classes begin. Cell phone etiquette has become a national, even an international issue. In 2001, Hong Kong's 7 million residents had more than 5 million cell phones. In response to complaints about cell phone disruption, the Office of Telecommunications in Hong Kong seriously considered silencing cell phones in select public places by jamming cell phone signals (Luk, 2001).

Cell phones have blurred the line between public and private space. Personal, private conversations formerly relegated to one's home, office, or possibly an enclosed phone booth now regularly take place in crowded restaurants, buses, airport waiting areas, and even public bathrooms. In March 2000, Wirthlin Worldwide conducted a survey and discovered that 39% of those polled would converse on a cell phone while conducting nature's business in a bathroom stall (cited in Carpenter, 2000). Etiquette, our rules of appropriate public communication, has not kept up with technological change (see Box 9-1).

In this section, significant consequences of both the prevalence of electronic communication technologies and their bias for speed will be explored. These consequences include information overload, proliferation of misinformation, and effects on our interpersonal relationships.

Information Overload

The recent cornucopia of information made available by advances in communication technologies, especially the Internet, certainly can be beneficial. Every academic discipline has its own plethora of Web sites, making information on vital and interesting subjects readily available. You can access abstracts and full text articles in scientific and educational journals and magazines on the Internet. Authoritative medical information on several reputable sites can assist you in deciding what action to take when you experience health problems. When you need to research a topic for a speech or term paper, the old excuse "I couldn't find anything on the

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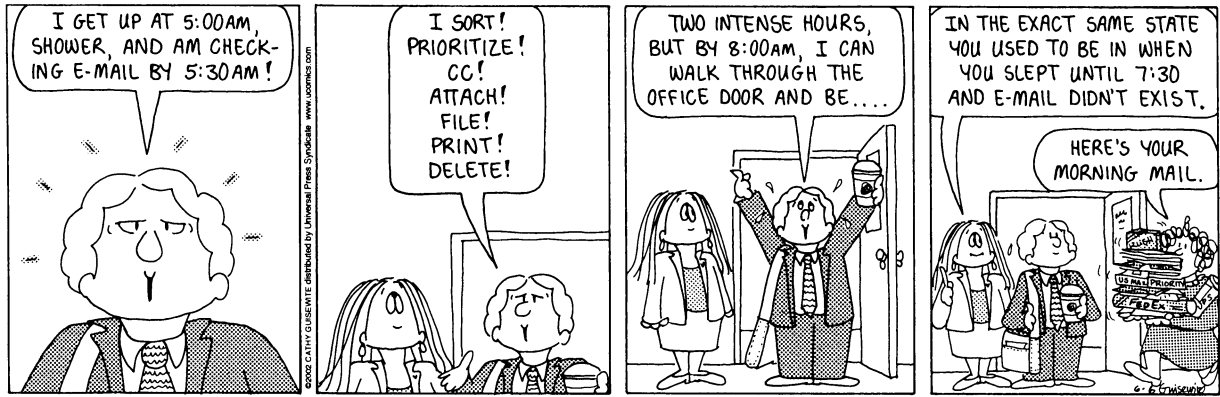
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subject" just won't work anymore. You can send e-mails to individuals of stature and acclaim from around the world, seeking answers to questions. The Internet empowers us by eroding barriers of time and space through speed of light information transmission from almost anywhere on the globe. It is at once exciting and daunting.

New challenges face us now that we all have ready access to this treasure trove of information. The amount of information we are exposed to each day is staggering. A study of more than 1,000 employees of Fortune 1000 companies found that workers send and receive 178 messages on average each day using e-mail, phones, faxes, pagers, and face-to-face communication (Ginsberg, 1997). Americans send 2.2 billion e-mail messages every day; there are 50,000 new books published each year in the United States; there are 12,000 newspapers, 22,000 magazines, and 600 million radios; and 98% of U.S. homes have at least one television set. More than half of the U.S. population has access to the Internet (Baran, 1999; DeFleur & Dennis, 1998; Levy, 2002; Turow, 1999). Add to this millions of fax machines, pagers, copy machines, and cell phones. All this technology pumps out information at a staggering rate. We can produce gigaheaps of data too voluminous for processing. "More information is generated in a 24-hour period than you could take in for the rest of your life. And as more people go online and add information to the Internet, we will rapidly approach a situation in which more information is generated on earth in one hour than you could take in for the rest of your life" (Davidson, 1996, p. 496).

EFFECTS OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD   Several specific consequences result from information overload (Shenk, 1997). These consequences are discussed next.

Affects Health and Relationships   The volume of information created and available to us daily impinges on our physical and interpersonal well-being. A survey of 1,300 business managers from the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Japan, and Singapore by Reuters Business Information found that 43% of senior managers felt that information overload made them ill (Businesspeople Suffering, 1996). Almost two-thirds of these respondents believed that their personal relationships had been diminished because of information overload at work. Another Reuters' study of 1,000 managers in the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Hong Kong, and Singapore reported that 46% of individuals surveyed believed they work longer

hours merely to keep pace with the cascade of information pouring down on them, and 61% believe that they receive too much information to be useful (Veitch, 1997). Information overload at work increases our stress, and this added stress can increase the likelihood of friction in our interpersonal relationships both at home and at work.

Impedes Critical Thinking   Too much information "thwarts skepticism, rendering us less sophisticated as consumers and citizens" (Shenk, 1997, p. 31). In Chapter 7, the importance of developing a healthy skepticism was explored. Our ability to exercise skepticism can be impeded by too much information coming at us too quickly. We simply don't have time to process the pile of information. Buried in an avalanche of data from the myriad communication technologies, we have a difficult time separating the garbage from the good stuff. Students recognize this immediately when they prepare speeches or research papers for class. Finding information on almost any subject these days is not the difficult part. Knowing when to stop searching and begin thinking about the organization of your speech or paper and the points you want to make is the difficult part. You can become so engrossed in finding information that you don't leave yourself enough time to think about the information you have gathered.

Promotes Indecisiveness   "The psychological reaction to such an overabundance of information . . . is to simply avoid coming to conclusions" (Shenk, 1997, p. 93). Bill Clinton was frequently accused of indecisiveness. "To listen to him speak extemporaneously about an issue is to witness a man able to grasp so much data, he frequently becomes engulfed in it" (p. 94). Clinton's seemingly endless hunger for facts and statistics could get him focusing on the trees but not the forest. Journalist Elizabeth Drew (1994, p. 79) noted that White House staffers complained to her that Clinton was fond of delivering "an intense seminar on government minutiae" every chance he got.

The paradox of the new Technological Age is that our world is speeded up enormously, yet our ability to make decisions individually and in groups is slowed down by the easily accessible megamountains of information. It's tough to be decisive when you're never sure if some new fact or statistic available to everyone in an instant will suddenly emerge to invalidate your point of view.

Creates Normalization of Hyperbole   Communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson says that our society is experiencing a "normalization of hyperbole" (cited in Janofsky, 1995). **Hyperbole** is exaggeration for effect that is not meant to be taken literally. As we become evermore swamped in information, gaining the attention of an audience becomes a bigger challenge. Hyperbole is the solution for many. "Extreme measures to grab attention are not only condoned; they're admired. Outrageous behavior by individuals is rewarded with wealth and influence" (Shenk, 1997, p. 104). Dennis Rodman, Madonna, Roseanne, Eminem, Rush Limbaugh, Jerry Springer, and radio shock jocks Howard Stern and Don Imus all "pump up the volume" to get noticed and are amply rewarded. "Historically, discourteousness and vulgarity have always signified a lack of sophistication; garishness was considered tasteless and degrading. In today's attention-deficit society, however, people have learned that churlish behavior is the key to headlines, profit, and power" (Shenk, 1997, p. 104).

If practically everyone is shouting at us, grossly overstating the importance of their messages, and competing for our attention by being outrageous and sensational,

Futurists predicted that electronic communication technologies would create a "paperless society." So much for that fantasy. What has happened is an increasing problem of information overload.

how are we to take seriously any message that truly is urgent? If everything is made to be a crisis, how are we to cope? Regularly I receive junk mail with "URGENT" written repeatedly across the envelope. On the few occasions that I have actually opened the envelope, I was invariably annoyed to find a rather routine message asking me to renew a magazine subscription.

During the Clinton impeachment hearings, "legitimate" journalists anguished about the "tabloidization of journalism" in which sensational stories about political figures' private lives become front-page headlines. "The fast-food part of the modern media diet—conflict, celebrities, and catastrophe—exists in part because of burgeoning technology. To be heard above the din of growing competition, much of journalism today finds itself in tabloid mode, shouting and trivializing to attract attention" (Fulton, 1999, p. 63). Amidst this din, how can voices of rationality and balance be heard? The answer: not easily.

COPING WITH INFORMATION OVERLOAD   Coping with information overload can't be done by turning back the clock. Brian Lamb, founder and chairman of C-SPAN, identifies the problem succinctly: "You can't stop the process. It's the American way. Which part of the library or the Internet do you want to shut down? Let me tell you something: If we can't survive all the information that we're going to develop, then we're in real trouble. Because no one is going to stop writing books. No one is going to stop creating information" (cited in Shenk, 1997, p. 22). Coping with information overload is critically important, and there are several steps a competent communicator can take.

Screen Information   Be in charge of your own information environment. You can choose to ignore much of the flood of information that can drown you in pointless detail. You can screen e-mail automatically or manually. Simply delete messages that are irrelevant or trivial. I regularly delete messages without opening them. On

average, I weed out about 75% of all the e-mail messages I receive simply by look-ing at the title of the message. You can also screen telephone messages. Let the caller leave a message on the message machine; that way you can decide if you want to take the call or ignore it. This puts you in charge, and it screens out telemarketers, so-licitors, and people whose messages intrude on your private time at home. Purchase a readily available device that automatically deletes telemarketers' phone calls.

Break the E-Mail Feedback Loop   You don't want to pile up messages in some-one's e-mail box by sending confirmations that messages were received or by responding with brief courtesy replies such as "Thank you," "You're welcome," or "No problem." In face-to-face or phone conversations such polite terminations of conversations are the norm. E-mail, however, is trickier to end (Cohen, 2002). If you do not respond with confirmation or courtesy replies, how will the sender know for sure that you received the e-mail? Also, you don't want a nonresponse to seem rude or indifferent. Nevertheless, these brief confirmation or courtesy e-mails can double or triple the number of messages received, making e-mail management more diffi-cult. The receiver of the e-mail may respond with a "Got it!" confirmation. The sender of the original message may then respond, "Great!" This may be followed by a "Thanks again" message, then a "You're always welcome," and so on in a seem-ingly endless feedback loop from which there seems to be no escape. Try preempt-ing such e-mail exchanges by finishing a message with NRN (no reply necessary), or when making a request, finish the e-mail with "Thanks in advance." Use FYI (for your information) to indicate that no reply is expected.

Narrow the Search   This is particularly useful advice when researching a speech or paper for class. If you search the Internet without a specific target, you will be overwhelmed. Narrow your search for information by having a clear, specific pur-pose in mind. You can best narrow the search for information by finding relevant patterns. As Klapp (1978) notes, "Once a pattern is perceived, 90 percent of infor-mation becomes irrelevant" (p. 13). **Pattern recognition,** the process of piecing together seemingly unrelated information into a plan, design, or whole picture, nar-rows your search for information. Once you discern a pattern, you know what information is irrelevant and useless and what information is on target. An effective outline for a speech or research paper establishes a pattern, allowing you to weed out the useless from the useful information.

De-Nichify   Strive to be more of a generalist looking at the "big picture" than a specialist lost in an increasingly narrow world of detail. The more specialized we become to cope with information overload, the more limited our world becomes. As we become ever more specialized, we learn more and more about less and less. If everyone moves toward specialization, soon we will have very little to discuss with each other except maybe the weather.

   Niches are specialized segments of an audience. Niche marketing targets a nar-row segment of the total audience by focusing on a select portion of radio and televi-sion channels, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. Shenk (1997) suggests "de-nichifying." Instead of subscribing to many magazines on specialized topics, for example, subscribe to one or two that are broad based. *Time* and *Newsweek*, for exam-ple, are general newsmagazines that provide a general overview of world news and controversial issues of the week. Some specialization is necessary to remain current in your field of endeavor, but balance the specialization with a general knowledge of the

world. This is the philosophy behind most colleges' mandatory general education requirements, which are meant to supplement students' major coursework.

Proliferation of Misinformation

On June 5, 1998, the Associated Press news service and several sources on the Internet announced that comedian Bob Hope had died. The announcement was then brought to the attention of House Majority Leader Dick Armey, who notified Rep. Bob Stump, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. An obituary was read on the House floor. The speech by Stump was telecast live by C-SPAN. Reuters news service issued a bulletin. A national ABC radio report lamented Hope's demise. Presented with this startling piece of "news," the very alive Bob Hope quipped, "They were wrong, weren't they?" (cited in Antonucci, 1998). Mark Twain once remarked that falsehood spreads halfway around the world before truth puts on its boots. In this age of electronic speed-of-light transmission, misinformation spreads more rapidly than Twain could ever have imagined.

COMMUNICATION OF NEWS   A CNN and *Time* story alleging that the U.S. military used lethal nerve gas in a 1970 attack on defectors in a small Laotian village during the Vietnam War was retracted, embarrassing both news organizations (Getlin, 1998). This inaccurate story followed close behind other prominent cases of inaccurate or fabricated stories in reputable news media. Patricia Smith, a *Boston Globe* columnist, was fired for inventing quotes in four of her articles. Stephen Glass, a writer for the *New Republic,* was also fired for fabricating 27 stories. On May 11, 2003, the *New York Times* printed a 14,000-word article on "the widespread fabrication and plagiarism" of Jayson Blair, a *Times* reporter who was subsequently fired for his journalistic misdeeds (Mnookin, 2003).

   Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter (1998) succinctly summarized the causes of this proliferation of misinformation reported to the public: "Hype, cyberspeed, and 24-hour competition are bringing out journalism's worst" (p. 66). Competition comes not just from credible news organizations but also from the more peripheral and questionable outlets, such as Internet sites, tabloid papers, and talk radio. Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., claims that the standard news media use too many unidentified sources and too much hearsay. Reporters aren't checking their facts because of competition to be the first person breaking the story. As Lichter explains, "People are afraid to hold on to every detail for fear that it will show up in the (Internet gossip) Drudge Report or on talk radio" (Antonucci & Quinn, 1998, p. A12).

   Reporters should check facts before writing stories or broadcasting to avoid reporting misinformation. This is an ethical issue. Failure to take necessary precautions to stem the flow of misinformation is irresponsible. Obviously, journalists who fabricate stories and quotations are guilty of dishonesty. The combination of hypercompetitiveness in the news marketplace and the instant accessibility of information from an array of communication technologies, however, has lowered journalistic standards overall. As Ben Bagdikian, former assistant managing editor for the *Washington Post* and professor of mass media at the University of California, Berkeley, explains, "In the past, the degraded standards of non-serious media . . . would get into serious print and serious network news only after going through a careful editorial process. That filtering system has disappeared" (Antonucci & Quinn, 1998, p. A12).

The desire to break a story ahead of competitors has always been a driving force in the world of journalism, but it has taken on a new dimension. The 2000 presidential election circus is an apt example. Networks first announced that Al Gore had won Florida (and thereby the presidency), then retracted the announcement and declared George W. Bush the Florida winner only to be forced to retract again and declare the race "too close to call." An independent report by three journalists drew this scathing conclusion about this "debacle":

> Television news organizations staged a collective drag race on the crowded highway of democracy, recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the country, and their own credibility, all for reasons that may be conceptually flawed and commercially questionable. . . . Their hyper-competition stemmed from a foolish attempt to beat their rivals to the finish line in calling state-by-state winners in the presidential election. . . . Those calls and their retractions constitute a news disaster that damaged democracy and journalism (Excerpts from the Report, 2001, p. A5).

Combine the problems associated with information overload (diminished critical thinking, indecisiveness, and hyperbole) with the hypercompetitiveness in the world of news and you have a formula for the proliferation of misinformation as never before.

INTERNET MISINFORMATION   The proliferation of misinformation is not just a problem in the communication of news. According to the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, about 43% of all Internet users seek medical advice from Internet Web sites (cited in McDermott, 1998). Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), a form of text-based communication in which contributors send messages to a single computer address and the messages are posted so visitors can access the messages at their discretion, are particularly vulnerable to misinformation when used by members of online support groups (Wood & Smith, 2001). Inaccurate, even harmful information can be posted by support group members acting as faux experts. Virtual therapy from nonprofessionals could have disastrous results.

Slick-looking Web sites touting a mixture of bat guano and huckleberry bark or some combination of "natural" herbs as a cure for serious ailments might influence a desperately ill, vulnerable individual to try unproven, even dangerous remedies. Web sites run by hucksters and charlatans can look as professional or more so than sites run by reputable experts and professional organizations. True Believers can proselytize on the Web, spreading misinformation worldwide. At the start of the new millennium, experts estimated that there were 500 hate group Web sites targeting their poisonous misinformation and calls for violence at individuals or groups identified by their ethnicity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, or disability (Etchingham, 2000). By 2001, that number had been revised upward to 600 such groups (Wood & Smith, 2001).

Deceit is also a common form of misinformation discovered in Internet chatroom conversations (Wood & Smith, 1999). Individuals concoct fake personalities and identities and even gender swap online without the knowledge of interactants. Although such deceit can be harmless fun, there are potential dangers. One study of online relationships found that a majority of individuals who established a personal relationship on the Internet eventually pursued the relationship by contacting their partner by telephone, through snail mail, or in face-to-face meetings (Park & Floyd, 1996). Disappointment is probably the mildest outcome of such deceit. (Barnes, 2001). Sexual predators have used Internet chat rooms to lure victims into face-to-face

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meetings. Documented cases of child abusers using online chat rooms to entice kids to meet in person numbered 4,000 in the year 2001 (Camp-Flores, 2002). About 12% of children who meet strangers online follow up with offline in-person encounters. Thirteen-year-old Christina Long met a 25-year-old man at a mall in Danbury, Connecticut, in May 2002. She was strangled to death by her chat-room partner.

COMBATTING MISINFORMATION So what can you do about this spread of misinformation? What you can't do reasonably is slow down the transmission of information, censor the Internet, or reduce competition in the journalistic marketplace. Those are structural changes that bump against constitutional guarantees and consumer choice. The answer lies in becoming a more competent, skeptical consumer of information.

Seek Credible Sources of Information Ignore Web sites from questionable sources and obvious hate groups. Follow advice provided in Chapter 15 on "Cruising the Net Skeptically." Pay no attention to tabloid stories (except perhaps for amusement) unless they have been verified by more reputable news sources.

Question the Reliability of Any Unidentified Sources Reputable media increasingly use such dubious sources as "administrative sources" or "a person high in

the State Department" to compete with peripheral news outlets. Misinformation, however, is easily spread when consumers can't determine the reliability of the information. Unidentified sources should be discounted.

Check Several Reputable Sources   The erroneous story of Bob Hope's death was not reported by all news organizations. CNN didn't report the initial announcement; neither did MSNBC. Reliance on a single source is always shaky. Hate groups regularly twist historical facts and manufacture big lies to further their agenda. Check neutral sources before accepting startling "facts" from any obviously biased source.

Be Extremely Careful About Pursuing Internet Relationships   Do not provide phone numbers, home addresses, or office locations to a chat-room partner. Take a friend along on any in-person meetings (not recommended) and meet in a public location. As a parent, monitor your children's Internet use or block access to chat rooms.
The proliferation of misinformation will continue and perhaps grow worse in the future. Our primary protection from the spread of falsehoods is to exercise skepticism and to be a critical listener as discussed in Chapter 7.

Interpersonal Effects

Communication technologies markedly influence our relationships with others and our lives in general. There are those who argue that e-mail, Internet chat rooms, cell phones, pagers, and fax machines bring us closer together because they increase communication. Others argue that all this technology doesn't create community but disconnection. Let's examine the interpersonal effects of communication technologies.

SOCIAL CONTACT   Time spent on the Internet can be quite productive. You can strengthen relationships, share information, and form groups with shared interests. Faculty members sometimes find that students more readily contribute points of view and ideas through e-mail than in class. Students aren't intimidated by what their peers will think when they are communicating directly with their teachers. When distance prevents physical contact with friends and family, phones and e-mail are useful substitutes. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, people used the Internet to find out if friends and family members living in the New York City area were safe, especially when phone lines became jammed from heavy loads. Almost 18 million Americans telecommute to their jobs, working from their homes with computers, cell phones, and fax machines (Telecommuting, 1999). Potentially, this could save time commuting by car to work, and it offers an opportunity to interact with children and one's partner during lunch and work breaks. Parents sometimes purchase computers and connect to the Internet just to remain in touch with a son or daughter at college. A 3-year study in Sweden, Portugal, Great Britain, and Ireland shows that seniors get a psychological boost from online communication (cited in Marcus, 1999). Family therapist Howard Adelman encourages his older patients to use e-mail to counteract loneliness and depression. "Seniors are often depressed, and with depression comes withdrawal. E-mail brings them back to the world" (Marcus, 1999, p. 62).
Young people also find e-mail particularly useful and engrossing. Most teens have Internet access, and e-mail is their principal online activity (Silver & Perry, 1999). They mostly gossip with friends. Instant messaging is a popular service.

Users compile a list of friends, all of whom can chat online at the same time as their comments appear on screen. Fourteen-year-old Grace Doherty reveals, "I would totally say so many things online I would never say to someone's face" (cited in Silver & Perry, 1999, p. 57). That can be good or bad depending on what is said.

Instant messaging is popular with adults as well as teens. A survey of 50 Fortune 1000 companies found that 36% of employees used instant messaging to connect with other employees (Biggs, 2001). The downside of instant messaging, however, is that senders know that you are logged onto your computer, so if you do not respond quickly, even more so than is true with cell phones, it easily appears that you are purposely ignoring the sender.

Long-distance friendships can also develop over the Internet. One study surveyed Internet newsgroups to find out about personal relationships online (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Although newsgroups compose only about 20% of online participation by Internet users (Wallace, 1999), nearly two-thirds of newsgroup respondents reported that they had formed personal relationships with other newsgroup members. Only 7.9% of these respondents, however, reported romantic relationships from newsgroup participation.

Online support groups can also connect people who face troublesome physical or emotional problems (Barnes, 2001). "These groups are focused on a mutually recognized need for emotional support and feedback. Members offer each other encouragement in dealing with a medical or mental affliction that they share in common with other members of the group" (King, 1995). Individuals with physical limitations that make face-to-face support group participation difficult and individuals who could never get together in person because of geographic distances can meet in virtual support groups. A sense of community between otherwise highly diverse group members can develop online (Tal, 1994).

Using various communication technologies has many benefits, but there are also some serious drawbacks to consider. Most research shows that television watching reduces social contact and involvement (Brody, 1990; Neuman, 1991). The time spent viewing television displaces time spent engaging in social activities with friends and family. Isolation and fragmentation can easily occur when households have more than one TV set. Family members disperse to separate rooms to watch different television programs. Even though television is sometimes viewed in the presence of others, the quality of the social interaction is generally weak (Kraut et al., 1998). Talking during television watching interrupts the viewing. Conversation during commercial breaks invariably gets unplugged once the TV program continues. The social interaction is usually secondary to the television viewing. A similar critique has been launched against the Internet (see Box 9-2).

As previously discussed, cell phones can be highly disruptive when used inappropriately. In addition, phones can be a source of disconnection in ways similar to television and computers. When teens spend hours on the phone with friends, they disassociate themselves from the family. When parents spend a great deal of time on the phone talking business, the time is not spent with children and partners. The time spent using our technological toys is often time spent away from social contact with significant people in our lives. This can strain relationships and produce disconnection with those we count on for support, affection, and love.

Interpersonal relationships are formed online but the depth of these relationships certainly can be questioned, and since there is no physical proximity, you hardly know what is truth and what is fiction. "Love online can be fraught with

Box 9-2 **Focus on Controversy**

Cyberaddiction

On June 27, 1999, Kelli Michetti became enraged with her husband Robert for his excessive use of the Internet, especially his chats with women until 4 a.m. several days in a row. Kelli seized a meat cleaver and began whacking power cords on the computer, and then she started hacking at the computer terminal as her husband struggled with her. Kelli was arrested and charged with domestic violence (Women Angry, 1999).

The case of Sandra Hacker stirred national outrage when she was discovered neglecting her children so she could spend up to 12 hours a day online. She apparently would lock her children in a filthy room while she obsessively used the Internet (Bricking, 1997).

Cyberaddiction has become an issue of popular interest recently. Some evidence suggests that as many as 10% of Internet users in the United States are cyberaddicts. They average 38 hours a week online and about 4 hours of sleep a night (Baran, 1999). A large study claimed that the figure of cyberaddicts is closer to 6%, a smaller figure but still significant (Donn, 1999).

The University of Maryland in College Park began a counseling service for cyberaddicted students called "Caught in the Net." One study at the University of Glasgow in Scotland revealed that 16% of participants admitted they were irritable, restless, depressed, or tense if prevented from going online; 27% felt guilty about the time they spent online; 10% confessed that they neglected a partner, child, or a project at work because of their addiction (cited in Locke, 1998). Kraut and his associates (1998) found that, like television viewing, the Internet displaces time that could have been spent with family members and friends in conversation and social activities. This time displacement is particularly serious when Internet use becomes excessive. The Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society reported that, of the respondents who spent 5 or more hours per week on the Internet, 13% spent less time with family and friends, 26% talked less often with them on the telephone, and 8% attended fewer social events because of excessive Internet use (Stanford, 2000).

Some surveys, however, challenge whether Internet addiction even exists, and if it does whether it is a significant problem. The UCLA Internet study (Chmielewski, 2003) found that Internet use sacrifices time in front of the television, not social contact with friends and family members. Internet users reported that they watch 30%

less television than nonusers. A 2000 Pew Internet survey of 3,500 adults found that 72% of Internet users had visited a friend or relative the previous day compared to 61% of non-Internet subscribers.

Whether Internet addiction is a real psychological disorder is open to question, even though the American Psychological Association has recognized it (Wood & Smith, 2001). The APA issued a press release in 1996 entitled "Internet Can Be as Addicting as Alcohol, Drugs, and Gambling, Says New Research." Dr. Kimberly Young (1996) conducted this new research. She studied 496 heavy users of the Internet. When she compared these subjects' Internet use to clinical criteria used to classify pathological gambling, she assessed 396 of the 496 subjects as Internet dependent.

Are there individuals who spend excessive time on the Internet at the expense of their interpersonal relationships? Undoubtedly there are (Barnes, 2001). Even those who spend less time watching television when they use the Internet may still ignore interpersonal relationships because of excessive Internet usage. The Stanford Institute study (Stanford, 2000) found that 59% of Internet users spend less time watching television, but 13% also spend less time with family and friends. Heavy Internet usage may bite into both time spent watching television *and* contact with friends and family. The Pew Internet survey also measured visits to friends and relatives as an operational indicator of social contact, but it merely compared Internet users and nonusers. It did not separate respondents according to degree of Internet usage. Heavy users may be much more prone to diminished social contact with family members and friends than are light users. The pervasiveness of Internet addiction is debatable, but "it is clear that there are negative effects associated with people who use the Internet disproportionately" (Wood & Smith, 2001, p. 104).

Questions for Thought

1. Do you think that Internet addiction is a serious problem? Have you ever spent excessive amounts of time on the Internet at the expense of your interpersonal relationships?
2. Is it likely that some Internet addicts spend large amounts of time developing interpersonal relationships online, not ignoring important relationships?

hazards. . . . People who are socially reticent are particularly vulnerable to false electronic proposals. Receiving numerous virtual accolades can make one ignore the risks of dealing with strangers" (Barnes, 2001, p. 145). Unlike the appealing romance portrayed in the movie *You've Got Mail*, there is little to recommend online romance. "Falling in love with a digital fantasy, rather than the real person that lives and breathes behind the monitor, is a common pitfall of net-inspired affairs" (Tamosaitis, 1995, p. 46). Love is a flesh and blood attraction between people, not a disembodied electronic fantasy.

Pagers, cell phones, fax machines, e-mail, and other electronic gadgets can be wonderful communication technologies if kept under control. The cell phone and pagers working in tandem, for example, can be an electronic lasso that binds a family together. Communication technologies, however, can also be what Shenk calls "electronic leashes" if we can never escape their intrusiveness. They can definitely reduce the amount of uninterrupted quiet time available to us where we pause from the daily routine of processing information and making decisions. A vacation can be transformed from relaxing time spent with one's partner or family into a "working vacation" with its stress and hustle if we are always connected to our jobs by pagers, cell phones, and e-mail.

CONFLICT   "E-mail, and now the Internet and the World Wide Web, are creating networks of human connection unthinkable even a few years ago. But at the same time that technologically enhanced communication enables previously impossible loving contact, it also enhances hostile and distressing communication" (Tannen, 1998, p. 239). A British study of more than 1,000 office workers found that 46% had reduced their face-to-face communication at work by using e-mail. Thirty-six percent sent messages by e-mail purposely to avoid face-to-face communication (cited in Locke, 1998). Using e-mail to avoid direct interpersonal contact may produce conflict.

Messages communicated by e-mail easily can be misinterpreted. Sarcasm, for instance, or teasing without the requisite tone of voice, facial expressions, and physical cues that signal how the message should be interpreted can be mistaken for serious personal attacks. **Emoticons,** graphic notations that indicate emotional information, can help in this regard. Emoticons for a smile ☺ or a frown ☹ can indicate a proper tone for a message (see Figure 9-1). Men, however, especially when conducting business by e-mail, may resist using emoticons because they are more closely associated with female communication patterns, and they may seem unprofessional. Emoticons also don't produce understanding if receivers are unfamiliar with them.

E-mail also reduces the natural constraints on incivility and hostility that come from facing a person directly. **Flaming** is a cyberterm for an abusive, attacking e-mail message. The same British study just cited found that 51% of the respondents

Emoticons			
;-)	Wink	:-/	Skeptical
:-P	Sticking out one's tongue	:)	Happy
:-O	Screaming in fright; hair standing on end	:(	Sad
:-(	Frown	:((	Very Sad
:'-(	Crying	l-o	Yawning
%-)	Tired	:-x	One's lips are sealed

FIGURE 9-1 Emoticons
Emoticons act as social cues about online messages, substituting for vocal intonations and facial expressions. Here are some examples. For a more extensive list see www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html

had received flames, 31% had responded with a flame of their own, and 18% revealed that their relationships with fellow workers had disintegrated permanently after the exchange of flaming e-mail messages. The absence of normal constraints on incivility and hostility that come with in-person transactions (such as implicit rules against ugly public displays of anger), coupled with the ease and swiftness of e-mail, often lead to the detriment of relationships (Wallace, 1999). As Brin (1998) explains,

> Electronic conversations seem especially prone to misinterpretation, suddenly and rapidly escalating hostility between participants, or else triggering episodes of sulking silence. When flame wars erupt, normally docile people can behave like mental patients. . . . Typing furiously, they send impulsive text messages blurting out the first vituperation that comes to mind, abandoning the editing process of common courtesy that civilization took millennia to acquire (p. 166) .

Flaming is competitive, defensive communication. Those given to flaming often experience sender's regret—they wish they hadn't sent the angry, emotionally damaging message in the heat of the moment. Once it is sent, however, the damage is done. In September 2000, Qualcomm released its 5.0 version of the software Eudora with an enhancement called MoodWatch to address this concern. This new feature automatically signals e-mail composers when a potential flame occurs. When the e-mail composer is writing a message, a tiny ice cube icon remains in the window indicating that no flame has been detected. The moment the e-mail composer slips into potential flame territory, however, a chili pepper icon pops onto the user's screen. The most incendiary messages receive three chilies, and an author who attempts to send such a flame is warned, "Your message is the sort of thing that might get your keyboard washed out with soap" (Weber, 2000). Many business organizations have software that automatically censors potentially offensive words. Such approaches to flames, however, are only partial solutions, and they can be highly controversial (Yaukey, 2000).

So what can you do if using communication technologies severely reduces important social contact with others and increases hostile conflict? Here are two suggestions.

1. *Use communication technologies selectively*. If you find that communication technologies have become more of a leash than a lasso, plan for times during each day when you will have no access to any of these technologies. Turn off the pager or put it away. Shut off the computer, switch off the cell phone, and turn off the television set. Try simple conversation with another person with no technological distractions. Play a game, have a cup of coffee with a friend, take a walk, exercise, hike, shoot hoops, or just relax in a hot tub of water. Sometimes there simply is no substitute for personal, face-to-face contact, as anyone who has tried to conduct a long-distance relationship can attest. You can't hug, caress, or kiss a partner by e-mail, fax, or cell phone.
2. *Delay sending any e-mail message that has strong emotional content*. If you want to avoid sender's regret, delay sending any e-mail message you've written in the heat of the moment. I make it a standard practice never to send an angry message to anyone until I have reconsidered it at least overnight. I reread the message the next day before deciding to send, edit, or delete it entirely. Usually, upon reflection, I choose to delete the message. Flaming e-mail messages should always be put aside overnight. Never send an angry response to

Box 9-3 ## Sharper Focus

Netiquette

The competent communicator wishes to function within the social norms of a specific community. Certain communication norms specify appropriate behavior on the Internet. Barnes (2001) offers several guidelines for **netiquette,** etiquette on the Internet:

1. *Be brief.* Lengthy messages make e-mail management difficult and can be irksome. Get to the point.
2. *Flame off.* Common courtesy is expected of all netizens.
3. *Observe good form.* Observe grammar, spelling, and capitalization rules, and accepted spacing between words and paragraphs. Take the same care in composing e-mails that you would writing a standard letter. Such care demonstrates respect for the reader.

4. *Avoid spamming.* **Spamming** is sending unsolicited e-mail, especially advertisements for products or activities. Spamming clutters one's e-mail box.
5. *Assume publicity.* When composing e-mails, assume that anything written could be published on the front page of the local newspaper. If you'd be embarrassed if what you've written were published for all to see, consider carefully whether you should write it at all. Deletion of messages does not wipe out any trace of e-mails.

Although you can find exceptions to each of these guidelines, in most communication you should follow the guidelines carefully.

someone else's flame until you have had time to cool down. If an immediate response is required, simply ask for time to reflect on what was said and the way it was said.
3. *Do not use e-mail to fire or to reprimand an employee, to offer negative work appraisals, or to tender resignations.* These are highly personal matters and should be conducted face to face.
4. *Exercise etiquette on the Net.* See Box 9-3 for details.

Cultural Effects

In 1991, I visited Holland. After a long plane ride and a trip through Customs, I was anxious to find my hotel and relax. Once I found my hotel room and put away some of my things, I switched on the television set. I was surprised to see an episode of *Cheers* playing with Dutch subtitles. I switched channels. CNN was reporting the news in English.

Probably the biggest impact communication technologies have had on diverse cultures is a steady erosion of cultural integrity. It is difficult to maintain cultural values and viewpoints when an unending barrage of information and images is being transmitted from other cultures. This is sometimes referred to as **cultural imperialism**—"the invasion of an indigenous people's culture by powerful foreign countries through mass media" (Baran, 1999, p. 469). Cultures are expressing concern that their cultural identity is eroding.

CNN transmits to 800 million people in 60 countries. The 1991 Gulf War, NATO's conflict in Yugoslavia in 1999, and the dismantling of the Taliban in Afghanistan by the United States and its allies in 2001 were viewed all over the world on CNN. The BBC broadcasts all over the world in 40 languages. Radio Beijing from China does likewise. American movies and television programs are available worldwide. The proliferation of American films and programs concerns many cultures bothered by the heavy diet of violence and sex in most U.S. movies and TV series.

Box 9-4 **Sharper Focus**

China and the Internet

China traditionally has been closed off from the outside world. Anxious to protect its cultural values and way of life, China has severely restricted access to information from both outside and within China. With the development of the Internet, however, China faces a new challenge. Recognizing the growing connection between the Information Age and economic vitality, China has gone online with enthusiasm. About 50 million Chinese have access to the Internet, and the Chinese government is investing $54 billion in the expansion of its telecommunications system (Rubin, 1999).

Chinese officials hope to join the information revolution while controlling access to information that challenges cultural values and political points of view. Security officials block Web sites of foreign media or dissident Chinese groups outside the country. A Chinese citizen who wishes to access a foreign Web site must register and pledge not to read or disseminate information that imperils state security (Rubin, 1999). Cyberpolice read e-mail and block Web sites in most large cities in China.

These attempts to interrupt the free flow of information on the Internet are only partly successful (Platt, 2000). Banned material can be acquired from within China by accessing "proxy servers," computers located outside of China. Dissident materials can be e-mailed out of the country to proxies who can then send them back to Internet users inside China. At the moment, there is no imminent peril of government collapse from the Internet. In a decade, however, about 100 million Chinese will have access to the Internet. According to Minxin Pei, a scholar at the Carnegie Institute, "Party control of information will totally collapse. There will be a critical mass of informed people penetrating all segments of society, not just the elite. There will be a popularization of the Internet, more communication between groups. Popular resentment will grow" (cited in Rubin, 1999, p. P7).

What this will mean for China is difficult to predict. What it illustrates, however, is that the expansion and intrusion of communication technologies clearly disrupt cultural stability and the status quo. In a clear case of collectivist values, many other Asian countries have also attempted to control the Internet at the expense of individual freedom to use this technology as one sees fit (McDonald, 2001). The clash of cultures is apparent when the Internet makes all countries part of the global village. You may not be aware that almost half of all Internet users globally reside in the United States, with but a small percentage residing in South Asia (Wood & Smith, 2001). Our individualist values embrace easy access to communication technologies. Other cultures are more hesitant.

Consider just one commonplace example that illustrates the concern other cultures have regarding the ubiquity of the media invasion from the United States. American TV crime programs such as "Law & Order" and "NYPD Blue" apparently are affecting French citizens' perception of proper courtroom procedure. According to a poll in France, most French people think a judge should be addressed as "Your Honor" instead of the customary French form of address, "Mr. President." Many are also demanding warrants when police try to search their homes, even though no warrant is required under French law. These findings prompted a French official to exclaim, "It's a cultural catastrophe! French citizens don't even understand their own legal system anymore" (cited in France, 1997, p. 156).

Most countries impose quotas on media content from foreign countries. In 1989, for instance, the European Union mandated that 50% of all programming on European television had to be produced in Europe (Baran, 1999). Restrictions in China, Singapore, and a host of non-Western countries are even more rigid (Box 9-4).

Whether the global village will ultimately prove to be a boon or a bust for the people of the world remains to be seen. Unquestionably, our world will be a very different place as communication technologies become even more widely dispersed and utilized.

Cultural imperialism, the invasion of an indigenous people's culture by powerful foreign countries through mass media, is a real concern of nations worldwide. The Goddess of Liberty statue, remarkably similar to the Statue of Liberty, was made during a student protest in China in 1989. It shows the effect one culture can have on another when information is so readily available.

Summary

There are two primary trends in communication technologies: the pervasiveness of these technologies and the bias for speed. The consequences of these trends are far-reaching. Information overload has become a serious problem. The proliferation of misinformation has become widespread. Our relationships with others have been affected in both positive and negative ways, and cultural integrity has become an issue. The competent communicator still has control over technology. Control requires monitoring your use of communication technologies and understanding how these technologies influence your daily life. Communication technologies can solve problems or create new ones. It is up to us to choose.

Quizzes Without Consequences

Go to Quizzes Without Consequences at the book's Online Learning Center at **www.mhhe.com/rothwell2** or access the CD-ROM for *In the Company of Others*.

www.mhhe
● com**/rothwell2**

Key Terms

See Audio Flashcards
Study Aid.

www.mhhe
● com/**rothwell2**
See Crossword Puzzle
Study Aid.

cultural imperialism
emoticons
flaming

hyperbole
netiquette
niches

pattern recognition
spamming
technology

Suggested Readings

Brin, D. (1998). *The transparent society: Will technology force us to choose between privacy and freedom?* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. This is an interesting book on how communication technologies have diminished our privacy.

Locke, J. (1998). *The de-voicing of society: Why we don't talk to each other anymore.* New York: Simon & Schuster. The author shows the marked impact communication technologies have had on society and individuals.

Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business.* New York: Viking Penguin. This is a provocative book on the nature of television and its impact on U.S. society. Postman has a definite point of view.

Shenk, D. (1997). *Data smog: Surviving the data glut.* New York: HarperCollins. This is the best work on information overload and its consequences.

Film School

EdTV (1999). Comedy/Drama; PG-13 ★★★✦
The effects of technology on interpersonal relations is depicted well in this Ron Howard film. Analyze the intrusive nature of technology and how it specifically intrudes on a developing romantic relationship.

You've Got Mail (1998). Romantic Comedy; PG ★★★★
Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks play two people who develop a romance via e-mail without having met each other in person. Explore the pitfalls and potential of an Internet romantic relationship.