Problematizing “New Media”: Culturally Based Perceptions of Cell Phones, Computers, and the Internet among United States Latinos

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Recent studies of new communication technologies have shown that broad terms such as “new media” are problematic. This study expands previous research by exploring how first-generation, working class United States Latino participants perceive and use new communication technologies in relation to their cultural values. Discussions generated across seven focus group sessions (N = 78) about three common new communication technologies, 1) cell phones, 2) computers, and 3) the internet, showed that United States Latinos positioned the perceived usefulness of each communication technology differently, based upon their cultural values regarding good communication. In particular, participants discussed how cell phones provide an effective way to make interpersonal contact whereas computers and the internet were viewed as damaging to the communication necessary for good social relations. The findings show that this group of United States Latinos did not view new media as a homogeneous category, but instead had very distinct perceptions and ideas about the expected uses of cell phones, computers, and the internet in relation to their cultural values regarding communication.

Technologies that enhance daily communication practices, including cellular phones, video conferencing, text messaging, computers, personal digital assistants, and the internet, are often grouped together under headings such as “new media,” “information and communication technologies” (ICTs), or “communication media.” The tendency broadly to classify distinct communication technologies under an umbrella term has recently been challenged by communication scholars who argue that each technology is fundamentally different in the way it is socially constructed by its users (Edge, 1995; Jackson, 1996; Starbuck, 1996). In spite of such protest, broad categorization continues in daily discourse about new communication technologies, as well as in scholarly research (Hokanson & Hooper, 2000; Morris & Naughton, 1999).
The problem with grouping distinct technologies together is not so much one of naming, but rather the ease with which we do it. Led by advertising and marketing efforts directed at convincing consumers that new media unilaterally improve communication, we often unproblematically homogenize technologies even though they support many different uses (Barnett, 1997; Radovan, 2001). As students of communication we broadly categorize in our research when we study usage of one specific technology and impose our findings on other similar technologies. One possible way to combat this tendency is to problematize technology by examining how communication practices shape uses of it. The purpose of this essay is to do just that. As students of communication we would intuit that one can distinguish one technology from another by the communication practices we use when engaging them. Recognizing that technologies are always understood in cultural contexts (Leonardi, 2002), perhaps looking at communication as it socially constructs technology in an under-studied culture may help us to see just how problematic it is to group disparate technologies together. Therefore, this study examines how the communication practices of United States Latinos help to distinguish among three distinct technologies: cell phones, computers, and the internet.

A number of scholars (Marin, Gamba, & Marin, 1992; Martin, Hammer, & Bradford, 1994; Subervi-Vélez, 1999) have issued a call to arms to those in the field of communication to study Latino communication patterns; although Latinos comprise one of the two largest minority groups in the United States, there has been little study of their reactions to new communication technologies. With this in mind, this essay has two goals. The first is to problematize our discourse about technology by taking communication practices seriously. The second is to examine the uses and perceptions of technology in a cultural group largely under-represented in communication technology scholarship.

I begin by drawing upon two bodies of literature to provide a theoretical basis for this investigation. The first looks at communication technologies as social constructions in which social practices and communication norms play a key role in determining the use and structure of the technology. The second examines the collectivist cultural practices of communication generally representative of working class United States Latinos.

**Technology and Socially Constructed Use**

As social constructionist ideas are appropriated by students of communication technology, researchers have begun to show how behavioral patterns regarding technology are shared among members of a culture. From a communication perspective, thinking about technology in this sense provides a way to place communication in a position of importance rather than regarding it as ancillary to and shaped by technology. Decentering technology at the interactional site allows it to be reconstructed as a social practice wherein technologies are posited as social entities. Taking seriously the communication practices that help to construct certain technologies, Jackson, Poole, and Kuhn (2002) encourage the promotion of communication as an “object of interest itself, rather than keying only to characteristics of
communication that seem derivable from technology" (p. 237). Hence, communication should be the focal point of all study of the interaction with communication technology (Fulk, 1993).

An adaptive structuration approach (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990) to the social construction of technology attempts to position technology as interactionally constructed through interplay with various groups. Central to this idea is the argument that the communication acts engendered by a given technology are highly unpredictable. The frequent occurrence of unanticipated uses of communication technologies (Rogers, 1995; Scott, Quinn, Timmerman, & Garrett, 1998) suggests that technology use is often influenced by social practices. Not only do groups construct peoples’ meaning of technology, but they also continually define and reposition it throughout changing contexts (Barley, 1986, 1990). Social constructionist thinking extends past the mere implications of technological implementation to elucidate an understanding of how social interaction with technology constructs perceptions of the important functions of a given technology. The social influence model of technology use (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1990; Fulk & Boyd, 1991) proposes that the communicative framework behind media perception accounts for the effect of information on group perceptions and attitudes toward technology, resulting in the adaptation of communication task requirements and communication technology use and behavior (Fulk et al., 1990).

Extending these premises to cultural analyses, Widman, Jasko, and Pilotta (1988) argue that no technology inherently makes sense for a given cultural system and, therefore, a technology’s sociocultural fit should be examined. In short, varying social communication practices warrant different technological usage. What the extant literature has failed to examine, however, are the cultural elements in communication practices that are often at odds with the use of particular technologies. To understand and refocus on the importance of such thinking, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the cultural communication practices of those who use new communication technologies.

**Latino Culture**

United States Latinos come from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Although the cultural characteristics of each Latin American country are distinct, many scholars suggest that communication practices among individuals from various Latin American countries feature some substantive similarities, and that they become increasingly similar when those individuals immigrate to the United States (Gracia, 2000; Morales, 2002; Ramos, 2002). When attempting to understand the cultural practices of United States Latinos, scholars have long turned to the individualism–collectivism distinction, the major dimension of cultural variability identified by theorists (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Briefly defined, individualism is characterized by an emotional independence from certain groups and organizations to which one might belong, whereas collectivism is related to solidarity and integration with others, placing the needs of the in-group over the needs of the self.

Although United States Latino culture is generally viewed as a collectivist
culture (Marin & Triandis, 1985; Shkodrani & Gibbons, 1995), collectivism for United States Latinos in particular takes on certain special characteristics affected largely by cultural heritage and history. In Latino culture, pride is a defining characteristic (Gracia, 2000; Morales, 2002). Due to a long history of conquest and diaspora, Latinos have developed a sense of pride, or orgullo, for the accomplishments of their people. Moreover, because Latino culture has long been judged second-rate by many so-called modern cultures (such as the United States), United States Latinos experience increased levels of pride for that which they can call their own (Rodriguez, 1988). Another notable Latino cultural quality is the high value placed on simpatía, or behaviors that promote smooth and harmonious relationships (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998; Guarnaccia & Rodriguez, 1996). For non-Latinos, the concept of simpatía is often encountered when seeking to establish friendships or business relations with members of a Latino culture. More important than the respect individuals show to each other is the way in which relationships are formed. Only over long periods of time do Latinos feel valuable relations can be established that will be healthy for all individuals involved. Bradford, Meyers, and Kane (1999) suggest that the combination of simpatía and high power distance (respect for and loyalty to one’s superiors) in Latino culture may influence Latinos’ communication behavior. Another quality of Latino collectivist culture is the high value placed on familial relationships (Dávila, 2001; Flores Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, & Rodriguez, 1999). Interactions among family members in Latino culture tend to be much tighter and tradition-bound than in Anglo cultures. Credit for this lies in longstanding cultural traditions and for United States Latinos, in particular, an initial estrangement from their homeland and introduction into a foreign United States culture. In addition, Lindsley (1999) finds that the cultural symbols of stability and trust established in Latino home life produce good communication, as defined culturally, among members of the culture.

United States Latinos are different from Latinos in Latin America because, as Stavans (1995) suggests, the former “live in the hyphen,” or the intersection of two very different cultures. Feelings of “otherness” often characterize the United States Latino experience and influence much of the group’s behavior (Gonzalez, 1990; Ramos, 2002); this behavior is often identified as maintenance of Latino cultural values, with an incorporation of United States norms and practices. Latinos who migrate to the United States have a tendency to acculturate rather than assimilate to new cultures (Korzenny, 1999; Korzenny & Abrawanvel, 1998). In other words, United States Latinos tend to incorporate important elements of United States culture into their lives, while retaining nearly the entirety of their own cultural heritage. Moreover, researchers have shown that strong relations with the culture of origin remain with United States Latinos for two generations; it is the third generation that begins to resemble the typical profile of United States culture (Buriel, 1993; Der-Karabetian & Ruiz, 1997). Such analysis shows that acculturation is not necessarily associated with the loss of native culture, and that identification with one’s own ethnic group does not mean the rejection of mainstream culture. Therefore, United States Latinos
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should not be viewed with regard to how Americanized they have become, but rather how bicultural they are (Birman, 1998; Korzenny, 1999).

Although there are a number of studies that examine the effects of mass media on Latino culture (Greenberg, Burgoon, Burgoon, & Korzenny, 1983; Jackson Turner & Allen, 1997; Olivarez, 1998; Rodriguez, 1996; Waisbord, 1998), there is currently no literature examining cultural factors pertaining to working class United States Latino usage of new communication technologies. Several related studies, however, suggest that the function of certain technologies might be at odds with the values of the members of this particular culture. Roscoe (1999) observes that the effects of both technological development and social formation around new communication technologies, such as the internet, exist in complex reciprocal relationships. For United States Latinos, one such complex relationship concerns the incongruity of the qualities of collectivism and the individualistic nature of new communication technologies. Studies have shown, for instance, that increased use of such communication technologies promotes the possible displacement of interpersonal networks (Baym, 2001; Kayany & Yelsma, 2000), often resulting in more attention paid to the self rather than the in-group. Another variable in the relationship between Latinos and new communication technologies is the perceived ability of individuals of Latino origin to use new communication technologies. Issues of education and literacy have been raised in this debate; some researchers suggest that Latinos tend to rely less on print and more on broadcast media (Kargoonkar, Larson, & Lund, 2001) whereas others argue that print is used just as widely (Greenberg et al., 1983). Regardless of United States Latino preference, Scott and Rockwell (1997) concluded that writing and reading competencies are not strongly related to new technologies and, therefore, should not interfere with such usage. They argued, instead, that communication apprehension is more strongly correlated with likelihood not to use new technologies. Combating the possibility of such opposition, Roach and Olaniran (2001) found Latinos to have quite high levels of willingness to communicate and low levels of communication apprehension after several years in the United States.

The intersection of the two reviewed bodies of literature leads to the following research questions about working class United States Latinos' perceptions and uses of communication technologies.

RQ1: Do first-generation working class Latinos in the United States perceive and use each of three new media – cell phones, computers, and the internet – in distinct ways?

RQ2: Can the reasons United States working class Latinos give for use/non-use be related to distinctions between technologies based on Latino cultural values of what constitutes good communication?

**Methods**

**Participants**

In all, 78 first-generation working class Latino immigrants, all of whom now reside permanently in the United States, participated in this study. Participants were members of a housekeeping staff at a large university in
the western United States who were responsible for the daily cleaning and upkeep of the university's residence halls. Staff members who self-identified as United States Latino were invited to participate in the study. Approval for this study was granted by the University of Colorado's Human Research Committee and all participants gave explicit informed consent to participate. Spanish was the native language of all participants. The Latin American countries from which they emigrated were diverse, as illustrated in Table 1. The average age of participants was 34 and the average length of residency in the United States was 13 years.

This particular staff was selected for this study for two reasons. First, as Rodriguez-Alvez (1999) noted, much of the research on Latino use of the internet and other new communication technologies has focused on English-speaking upper class individuals in Latin America. Such a population is not representative of most United States Latinos. Therefore, first-generation, Spanish-speaking, working class Latinos in the United States were chosen to provide insight into a population largely under-represented in scholarly literature. Second, Reeves and Nass (1996) have shown that people's feelings about communication technologies change with increased usage. To elicit perceptions of technology unaffected by familiarity with it, such a participant pool proved ideal for this study. An initial survey of new communication technology usage provided insight into the depth of the participants' familiarity with the individual technologies surveyed in this study (see Table 2).

Focus Group Sessions

Krueger (1994) notes that focus groups conducted among peers can usually foster comfortable environments for participants and tend to elicit in-depth comments and responses. To achieve a comfortable group ideally requires six to 10 participants per group; to achieve productive results three to five groups per project are needed (Morgan, 1997). Further, Bradford et al. (1999) suggest that focus group interviews may serve to increase the level of disclosure from Latino participants by reducing typically high power distance and affording participants the opportunity to speak freely without fear of reproach.

For this study, seven focus groups were conducted with an average of 11 participants in each. Each focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half and was held in a staff lounge on the university campus so that participants would feel comfortable in a familiar setting. Participants were first

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<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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<td>Panama</td>
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asked to discuss their general impressions of new technologies, both good and bad, and then were asked more specific questions about their uses of and perceptions of the effects of cellular phones, computers, and the internet. All participants were encouraged to share both personal experiences and stories they had heard about each of the three communication technologies, and to comment whenever they felt it appropriate. The focus group sessions were conducted entirely in Spanish by the author, a fluent Spanish speaker. Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions translated from Spanish into English.

The data were analyzed for themes, patterns, and positions built on cultural orientation. Particular attention was given both to comments or stories that made claims about the purpose of a certain technology as well as its benefits and hindrances, and to the way in which participants framed their knowledge about the specific communication technologies. Looking at in-depth reactions to different communication technologies highlights not only cultural orientation, but distinctions in perceptions and uses among the technologies.

Moving from data collection in Spanish to reporting in English raises several concerns. The first issue is that of the level of translation appropriate for this particular study. Because I am interested in the ways in which participants position their knowledge about specific communication technologies through their speech, I felt it important to translate colloquially. Therefore, equivalent vernacular expressions can be found in the English translation. The second issue is how foreign language data are to be presented in a research study. Out of respect for the native language of participants, and the cultural focus of this study, whenever data are referenced herein both the original Spanish and the translated English are included. I hope that in this way the study is sensitive to the cultural differences that constitute its effectiveness.

**Findings**

Working class United States Latino participants in this study used and perceived cell phones, computers, and the internet in terms of how each technology promoted their own cultural values of good communication. For the most part, participants thought and talked about computers and the internet in the same way, seeing them as similar. The distinction in perception and use of cellular phones and computers and the internet, however, was great, and often conflicting. The following results reflect participants’ perceptions and uses of cell phones, and

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<th>Technology use (at least once)</th>
<th>Technology ownership</th>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell phone</td>
<td>72 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>31 40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet*</td>
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*Used either at home, work, or a public library.
computers and the internet. The positioning of these two types of technology distinctly in line with Latino cultural values is then explored.

**Cell Phones**

Participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that cell phone use was an important tool for communication in their everyday lives. In fact, most participants saw cell phone use as being generally expected from most people in United States society. More than a luxury allowing for instantaneous communication, participants noted that cell phones are a necessity in an increasingly hectic and unpredictable world. As one participant, Rosario, noted:

Excerpt 1: Session 2

R: ¡Esto es! El teléfono, como dice Ud., el teléfono no es un lujo. Es una necesidad porque les sacan a uno de muchos problemas ... de emergencias.

R: That's it! The phone, like you said, the phone's not a luxury. It's a necessity because it can get a person out of a lot of problems ... of emergencies.

Several participants also described using cell phones for a number of reasons other than emergencies. The reasons given included: cell phones are often cheaper than regular land lines, and one can reach someone at any time if land lines are busy. Participants remarked that it is simply not good enough to give up trying to contact someone. For example, Esteban said:

Excerpt 2: Session 6

E: Cuando está la línea ocupada, la línea regular, hay que usar los celulares.

E: When the line is busy, the regular line, you have to use a cell phone.

Several participants mentioned that their children even use cell phones to call them from another room in the house to ask what is being prepared for dinner. Rather than viewing cell phones as a useful but avoidable tool for enhancing communication, such activities in both Anglo and Latino cultures have helped to instantiate cell phones as a necessary tool for communication. Moreover, 96% of those who did not currently have a cell phone noted that they planned to purchase one within the next year. The major obstacle to acquisition was cost.

In their discussions about the necessity of cell phones, many participants revealed deep and pervasive knowledge about the functions and limitations of that particular technology. On a simple level, operating platforms in both English and Spanish available on nearly all cell phones enabled participants to gain functional command of the types of tasks of which the cell phone was capable. On a deeper level, most participants were quite familiar with not just the functions of the device but also the mechanical limitations of the larger technology itself:

Excerpt 3: Session 1

N: Pues, la mía no funciona aquí [en el sótano].

O: Aquí abajo no funcionan.

A: Tiene que irse afuera.

P: Y adentro de las montañas tampoco funciona.

N: Well, mine doesn't work here [in the basement].

O: They just don't work down here.

A: You have to go outside.

P: And when you're in the mountains it doesn't work either.
Participants were thus aware that cell phones have certain functional limitations. Even those who did not own cell phones, such as Oscar and Patri above, were aware that users could not obtain a signal in a basement or in mountainous areas. Understanding a technology's mechanical limitations shows a substantial level of familiarity and respect for it. In addition, participants were clearly aware of the ongoing issues surrounding the use of cell phones, such as privacy, that have pervaded trade publications of late (Rezendes Khirallah, 2001; Schwartz, 2000). The particular questions surrounding cell phone use usually addressed the problem of having one's calls listened to by other users:

Excerpt 4: Session 3

S: En las conversaciones privadas no debe de usar los celulares.
C: Sí, me preocupo todo eso los teléfonos celulares.
S: Los teléfonos regulares son mejores por eso porque así no se escucha nadie.

S: For private conversation you shouldn't use cell phones.
C: Yeah, all that worries me about cell phones.
S: Regular phones are better for that because no one can listen in.

Thus, in general, participants were confident in their awareness of the limitations of and preoccupations occasioned by cell phones.

Another important aspect of understanding technology use is the comprehension of its function in relation to other modes of communication. In addition to their knowledge of what cell phones can and cannot do mechanically, participants expressed that cell phones become a necessity due to their ability to facilitate information transfer. Understanding the role of cell phone as social agent, all participants were aware of how to use cell phones as a means of communication rather than as an end. The ability to accomplish daily tasks is greatly aided by the invocation of the cell phone; from any locale one can access information by making a simple and quick call. When asked to recount how they find information they need in their daily lives, two participants responded:

Excerpt 5: Session 4

M: Muchas veces la consigo por el teléfono celular.
D: Por ejemplo, en el periódico también viene mucha información. Casi la mayoría de las tiendas lo tiene. Luego tienes que llamarlos.

M: A lot of times I get it with the cell phone.
D: For example, a lot of information comes in the newspaper. It has almost all the stores. Then you just have to call them.

Several participants also noted that they not only find information on their cell phones but store it as well.

Excerpt 6: Session 2

H: Oh, en los teléfonos ahí se guardan [cosas importantes] ya. Los pone en el teléfono y se quedan guardados.
H: Oh, the phones can store [important things] now. You put them in the phone and they stay saved there.

Cell phones are seen as a positive and necessary technology. A heightened awareness of the function and limitations of both the immediate device and the larger technology shows how easily working class United States
Latinos have embraced and accepted cell phones into their lives, coming to view them as a necessary tool for effective communication.

The next section examines perceptions and uses of computers and the internet.

**Computers and the Internet**

As mentioned earlier, most participants positioned their uses and perceptions of computers and the internet very similarly, drawing almost no distinction between the functions of these two technologies. In fact, there was a strong tendency to equate computers with the internet, blending their perceived uses and purposes. In the following example, participants were asked to discuss what they knew, thought, or had heard computers can do:

**Excerpt 7: Session 3**

L: Es muy bien para recordar cosas, y grabar cosas.
E: Puede hacer compras y hacer otras cosas así.
M: Puede comprar cosas por el internet.
F: Puede buscar precios; no tiene que ir a la tienda.

L: It's a good way to remember things, and store things.
E: You can shop and do other things like that.
M: You can buy things on the internet.
F: You can look for prices; you don't have to go to the store.

Participants used the terms "computer" and "internet" relatively interchangeably, collapsing their functions. Also interesting are the ways in which participants described the functions of these technologies. They were very clear as to what individuals can indeed do with computers and the internet; most of these examples point to speed and efficiency:

**Excerpt 8: Session 7**

F: Por ejemplo, los hijos ponen en un campo en la computadora si hay una dirección que no conocen, y rápido con la computadora sacan el mapa … cómo van a llegar también.

F: For example, the kids go to a site on the computer if there is an address they don't know; and with the computer they get a map quickly ... how they're gonna get there too.

In their discourse, participants identified many of the main functions of computers and the internet, and elsewhere in the sessions they noted a user's ability to chat, participate in video conferencing, download songs, listen to the radio, use a web phone, and operate a search engine. Computers and the internet were largely recognized as providing positive services.

Although they emphasized the positive services provided by computers and the internet, participants perceived the operation of such technologies to be difficult. Even those who didn't know much about computers had heard or seen that they are difficult to learn.

**Excerpt 9: Session 5**

N: Pues, yo no más he oído que la computadora, que la computadora es muy, muy difícil aprender.

N: Well, I've just heard that the computer, the computer is very, very difficult to learn.

Although participants understood the ways in which computers and the internet can ease everyday activities,
they believed that both technologies are so difficult to learn to use properly that the time invested in acquisition of the necessary skills would not amount to the time saved by using the technology.

Excerpt 10: Session 1

R: Para mí es demasiado difícil aprender, pero es cómodo porque mi hijo lo hace.
A: No es tan difícil. Todo se aprende. ¿Cómo aprender limpiar los baños?
V: Dándole, dándole.
R: Pero tarda tiempo y lo que pasa es uno llega a la casa, llega de barrando y lavando y ya cuando viene ...
A: Pero si das tu tiempo ...
C: ¿Pero cuando hay tiempo?
R: It's too hard for me to learn, but it isn't so bad because my son does it.
A: It's not that difficult. You can learn anything. How did you learn to clean bathrooms?
V: Doing it, doing it.
R: But it takes time and what happens is you get home, you come from sweeping and washing and when you get there ...
A: But if you spend some time ...
C: But when is there time?

However, participants did not feel that learning how to operate computers and the internet was beyond their capabilities. The constant invocation of time constraints and the perceived difficulty of learning how to access these new technologies were the impeding factors.

This perception of difficulty of operation played a key role in participants' lack of affinity for computers and the internet. Much of this sensitivity came from a belief in the intractable nature of these technologies. Participants were very clear that the technology would do various things over which they had no control. The technology clearly was placed in a role of superiority over the user. Those who either had experience with computers and the internet, or had heard stories of people who used them, were convinced the technology had a mind of its own. Participants felt their actions were subordinate to the function of the technology.

Excerpt 11: Session 2

J: Sí, tiene muchas ventajas también. Si lo ves por este lado de agarrar la, las cosas positivas, tiene mucho.
A: Pero cuando se meten cosas malas ...
O: Estos sí son las cosas malas. Si [mis niños] están en línea y se meten por la pornografía, se meten por la pornografía. Nadie les puede parar, ¿y tú?
A: Pero no más se aplaste una tecla, y olvidese.
O: Ay, la tecla equivocada, ¡Dios, He equivocado!
J: Yeah, it has a lot of advantages. If you see it as a way of getting the, the positive things, it has a lot.
A: But when bad things get in there ...
O: Yes, those are bad things. If [my kids] are online and they get into pornography, they get into pornography. There's nothing anyone can do to stop them, can you?
A: But all you have to do is hit one wrong key, and forget about it,
O: Yup, the wrong key, God, it's all over!

In this short passage, the participants make claims about the intractability of computers and the internet on various levels. The first two speakers discuss how users do not have a choice about
whether they access good or bad things on the internet but, rather, in tandem with a willingness to use the technology to aid their daily activities, users must be willing to be exposed to things they would like not to be. Similarly, the third speaker notes that neither she nor anyone else, including children themselves, has control over the things children will see on the internet. Finally, the last two speakers express concern that by accidentally hitting an unintended key they may be exposed to unspecified harm. Participants clearly felt that computers and the internet had many good and bad things to offer, but that the voyage could never be determined by the user alone, for the technology had just as much or more to say in the experience.

Excerpt 12: Session 4

S: Muchas veces cualquier uno se mete ahí … uno pegado a atención ¿pero en un segundo de descuido cuántas cosas pasan?

S: A lot of times anyone who’s on … someone who’s paying attention, but in one second of inattention how many things can happen?

Computers and the internet were believed to be very difficult to learn about, for a user not only had to acquire technical knowledge but also had to deal with the possibility that the technology would take them on a wild ride.

Through their discussions, participants showed different levels of comfort with and affinity for cell phones, and computers and the internet. Although both technologies provided many advantages to the user, cell phones were much easier to operate and could be controlled entirely by the user, while computers and the internet were extremely difficult in part due to their intractability.

The final section examines how participants position cell phones and computers and the internet in terms of Latino cultural values.

Cell Phones vs. Computers and the Internet

Whether using cell phones or computers and the internet, participants were adamant that communication augmentation should be the main function. Although cellular phones, computers and the internet are clearly capable of more than providing a medium for communication, participants saw each type of technology as either positive or negative on the basis of its ability to help them communicate with others. From this viewpoint, participants found cell phones to have only positive qualities because the technology enabled communication at any place and at any time.
Excerpt 14: Session 6

I: Gracias a Dios que podemos [mantener contacto con familiares] por teléfono.

I: Thank God we can [keep in touch with family] over the phone.

Although a cell phone user is temporarily disengaged from interpersonal communication acts with those around him/her, this cultural communication problem is offset by the ability to bridge the relational gap often caused by distance.

When discussing whether cell phones had any negative impacts on the user or the community the only issues raised by participants were those of use at dangerous or inappropriate times, such as while driving or in church. Otherwise, cell phones were never mentioned as anything other than positive, due to the ways they keep people connected.

In contrast, participants did not view computers and the internet as technologies that helped to keep people connected. The primary function of such technologies was seen as facilitating information collection and transfer. In fact, use of computers and the internet was viewed by participants as having a negative impact on interpersonal relationships, especially within the family.

Excerpt 15: Session 3

L: Yo digo que la gente se emociona mucho y se olviden hasta la familia cuando está con la computadora. Esto, puede ser malo.

B: Yo creo que ha arruinado un poco a la familia, estar tanto en la computadora.

L: Pues, depende de cada persona, pero si esta persona no esta pasando con la familia, pienso que sí.

D: Sí, puede estar más en la computadora que con la familia. Eso no es bueno.

D: Yeah, you can be on the computer more than with the family. That’s not good.

As might be expected, language also played a small but important role in the preference of one technology over another. Virtually all cell phones come in a multilingual format, easing use for those who do not speak English. Although Spanish platforms are available for computers, they are not readily accessible on all computers, as they are on cell phones. Also, only 1.5–2% of all internet content is in Spanish (Gómez, 2000; Rodríguez-Alvez, 1999), vastly limiting the number of pages to which Spanish speakers may have access. Not only is a simple language barrier a problem but axio-
logically the question then becomes one of pride. Must the user forgo the use of his/her native language in order to access a new technology?

Excerpt 17: Session 2

P: Yo creo que en la computadora vienen muchas … casi necesitas dejar el español para entrar. En los teléfonos celulares no, [pausa] no es una decisión tan difícil.

P: I think that on the computer a lot of things come in… you almost have to leave Spanish behind to enter. With cell phones it's not, [pause] not such a difficult decision.

Participants spoke of the decisions they make about when to defend the use of their language and when to concede to using English in their everyday lives. Computers and the internet provide two more venues in which a difficult choice has to be made. Overall, however, participants did not see the language barrier as insurmountable when accessing computers and the internet. Rather, it was the difficulty of deciding whether to accept the use of a new language, coupled with a lack of knowledge of how to operate the technology, that proved troublesome.

Although the learning curve seemed great, participants were unanimous in their desire to learn how to use computers and the internet. The reasons they wished to learn how to use such technologies do not, however, align with communicative cultural values, for, as explained earlier, they feel that as tools for communication computers and the internet do not adequately accomplish this task. Participants felt that although it was not necessary to learn to use the technology to communicate effectively, they did realize that their unfamiliarity with computers and the internet excluded them from being a part of a larger community of users. As United States culture is largely dependent today on computers and the internet for daily activities, participants noted that they were beginning to feel inferior to those who know how to use them:

Excerpt 18: Session 4

N: Bueno, yo sí siento, ¿verdad? Por ejemplo, yo que no sé usar la computadora nada. Sí, me gustaría aprender porque siento que me estoy quedando atrás.

D: Así me siento yo, igual.

N: Porque mis hijas, una tiene 12 años, y la otra tiene 10 años, usarlas. Y yo no sé nada de eso y sí siento que me estoy quedando muy atrás porque ahorita puede todo el mundo usar la computadora. Soy una persona que no sabe.

F: Así me siento yo precisamente, siento que me estoy quedando atrás, que no estoy aprendiendo lo bueno de la tecnología. Que me está avanzando y me voy huyendo para atrás.

N: OK, it really gets to me, right? For example, I don't know how to use the computer at all. Yes, I would like to learn because I feel like I am falling behind.

D: That's exactly how I feel.

N: Because my daughters, one is 12 and the other is 10, use them. And I don't know anything about that and I feel like I am falling way behind because now everyone can use the computer. I'm someone who doesn't know how.

F: That's precisely how I feel. I feel like I am falling behind, that I am
not learning the good things about the technology. I feel like it is passing me by and I keep falling farther behind.

Participants were conscious of the digital divide in the United States and felt that being computer illiterate placed them at a disadvantage relative to those who were computer savvy, including many Anglos.

Excerpt 19: Session 7

J: Pienso que la gente de aquí, ¿verdad? Son los que saben usar [computadoras y el internet]. Son adaptados a hacerlo. Nosotros, los Latinos, son un poco más atrás.

J: I think that the people here, right? They're the ones that know how to use [computers and the internet]. They're adapted to do it. We, the Latinos, are a little bit behind.

Although most participants did not currently own a computer or have access to the internet, 67% hoped to purchase a computer sometime within the next three years.

These findings show how the uses and perceptions of cell phones and the internet are shaped by cultural values of communication. Reasons given for future computer and internet acquisition are not for better communication purposes, but rather to ensure that the digital divide, between those who have access to technology and those who don’t, would not leave Latinos in an inferior position to those in mainstream United States culture. The decision to use distinct communication technologies had as much to do with perceived ability to familiarize oneself with them as it did with ensuring sustained interpersonal contact.

Discussion

Through the use of focused group discussions this study examined how working class United State Latinos' collectivist cultural orientation affected their perceptions and uses of cell phones, computers, and the internet. The findings showed that cultural values of good communication affected working class United States Latino views of the three technologies, generally viewed by mainstream United States culture as enhancing communication. All participants in this study identified cell phones as a medium that promotes cultural communicative values, whereas computers and the internet were viewed as media that impede those values.

The function of cell phones worked well with the communication goals of these participants. They viewed cell phones as a means by which to maintain interpersonal relations with people both near and far. Consistent with research suggesting that Latinos value consistent, close interpersonal contact, participants expressed that cell phones were beneficial for a variety of reasons. In times of emergency, distress, or simply with the rise of unexpected events, users can maintain contact with friends and loved ones. Most participants also found the technology easy to use. Cell phones were seen as an effective way to communicate, but also an efficient means of storing information. Participants felt very comfortable with the technology, understood its advantages, and were aware of the limitations of the device itself as well as the larger framework in which it operated. They were confident in their ability to use and control the technology and saw it as a resource with which to communicate more effectively. More than just a luxury,
participants commented that cell phones were a necessity.

Most United States Latinos who articulated their opinions in this study made few or no distinctions between computers and the internet; the lack of differentiation between these two technologies was consistent with their cultural orientation. Participants viewed computers and the internet in the same way because they did not see the internet as a communication medium. Each time participants discussed the role of the internet, they referred to it as a tool with which to obtain information. Save for a few mentions of chat rooms, participants rarely focused on the internet's ability to connect people through such media as message boards, instant messaging, and email. Instead, access to information such as store schedules and restaurant guides, the ability to make purchases such as airline tickets and hotel reservations, and a view of the internet as a place for entertainment, pervaded their conception of the function of this technology. Given their understanding of the internet as this type of resource, it makes sense that they would view computers and the internet similarly. Thus, they did not find the internet, or computers for that matter, to be a necessity but instead a time saver that facilitated the apprehension of information that could equally be found by investing a little more time in traditional methods.

Although computers and the internet were seen as important to participants, they also were seen as inhibiting participation and active membership in the family and other important groups. Durham (1989) suggests that the one-to-one encounters fostered by some new communication technologies might be at odds with cultures that value turn taking and social participation. Accordingly, participants felt that the individualistic nature of computers and the internet encouraged individuals to break away from social groups and not take active membership roles in them. Although researchers suggest that immigrants and members of minority groups with similar interests and backgrounds can often find a sense of belonging and commonality in cyberspace (Mitra, 2001), participants in this study have not come to utilize the internet in that way.

Even though they were unaware of the communicative functions of computers and the internet, the vast majority of participants had a great desire to learn how to use these technologies. Apart from the lack of recognition that computers and the internet could indeed be used as media for communication, participants were very knowledgeable about other important functions of these media such as information retrieval, purchase power, and data archiving. As members of the United States culture, most of the bilingual Latinos in this study felt the pressure of the digital divide. They were quite concerned about falling behind in the rapid acquisition of technological know-how, and they felt inadequate when put in situations which required interaction with computers and the internet, which they were unable to provide.

The findings reported herein show that this group of working class United States Latinos did not view new media as a homogeneous category. Instead, most participants had very distinct perceptions and ideas about the expected uses of cell phones and computers and the internet in relation to cultural values of good communication. While further research is needed to see if these results pertain to
a broader range of occupations and regions, it is clear that if we are to further understand and promote the fit between technologies and culture, substantial additional research is needed into the uses made of communication technologies by Latinos and other cultures.

These findings show that, in line with social constructionist thinking, it is presumptuous and disadvantageous to the study of new communication technology to group individual technologies *a priori* into broad categories and treat them as engendering relatively equal effects and occasioning relatively similar usage. In doing this, we essentialize technology, abstracting it from our own communication practices and treating it as a relatively autonomous occurrence (Winner, 1977). Instead, our categories should be constructed on the basis of social uses and perceptions of the technology. If we do not do this, we deny ourselves power in our interactions with technology. When we say “the computer won’t let me do what I want,” and we believe it, we grant technologies undue agency. Although by itself this may not seem entirely problematic, when coupled with a second danger – separating technology from context – its hazards are compounded. Jackson (1996) reminds us that the functionality of a given technology, “the ability of an artifact to be used to accomplish a social task – is the primary requirement of technology, prior to the material and social definitions of the artifact” (p. 255).

That is to say, the communication goals of a particular group of users always play a crucial role in their uses and perceptions of technology. If we forget this, we may blindly adopt technologies because we believe they are a sign of progress (Banks & Tankel, 1990; Smith, 1994), without making sure that they help us progress. Paying attention to the cultural fit between technologies and communication practices helps us to be critical users of technology and to adopt only those technologies that assist us in achieving our communication goals. The implications of the findings of the present study, then, extend to any subgroup or organization using new communication technologies. Technologies, in general, should not be implemented because they are believed to enhance communication for everyone; rather, particular technologies should be adopted based on their specific abilities to augment culturally defined qualities of good communication for specific groups – qualities that are continually changing.

**Note**

1 Over the last two decades researchers and critics have vacillated between the use of the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” when referring to Spanish-speaking people of Latin American heritage. Though each word has a long history and etymology, modern connotations are the source of current debate. The term “Hispanic” was invoked by the United States government in its need to count the ever-increasing number of Spanish speaking people who could not be identified as a single race, and thus refers to individuals of Spanish-speaking cultural decent. The term “Latino” has come to represent those who identify with a Latin American culture. Many users of this term find it to be a positive alternative to the term “Hispanic,” which some believe attempts to homogenize Spanish-speakers of different races. Clearly, there is no correct term and the debate over nomenclature will continue. I feel the best way for researchers to deal with this issue is to evaluate each project individually, taking both the aim of the study and the preference of the participants into consideration.
Because this study is interested in the cultural qualities of participants, I tend to lean toward the term "Latino" as the more culturally representative of the two. However, it seemed to me that the most appropriate way to decide the use of a term for this specific study was to ask these specific participants how they would prefer to be referenced. Though most participants said that either term was acceptable, the majority (62%) felt that the term “Latino” slightly better represented their cultural heritage. Therefore, in this study I refer to participants as United States Latinos.

References


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