Chapter 20
Instant Messaging and Texting

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contains an examination of the research into texting and instant messaging. Instant messaging and texting are shown to be powerful technologies for maintaining relationships, building identities, and functioning within an information based society. The author raises questions about the implications of these social practices for those individuals who remain on the digital margins. The chapter provides an overview of the research, including a brief history of the technology and a theoretical framing of the terms used to discuss the phenomenon. A discussion of who uses instant messaging and why, and what the research has found regarding the conventions of use associated with instant messaging and texting follows. The chapter ends with a discussion of the current issues in the field, locates gaps in the research, and identifies implications and recommendations for education, civic engagement, social practice, and policy.

INSTANT MESSAGING AND TEXTING

A close friend lives on the opposite coast of the United States from me. We used to call each other infrequently, but now we converse several times a week. The reason for this shift is that our conversations take place via a combination of Facebook Messenger and text messaging rather than by voice. We no longer have to coordinate across time zones or personal schedules. If one of us thinks of something to say, we can send a message. Sometimes our messages are quick check-ins, but there are other times when we will have extended conversations that take place over the course of days. Sometimes our conversations happen in real-time and other times there are long gaps of time between messages. She uses her mobile telephone for all her online communication, and I switch between my smartphone, personal laptop, and office computer depending on where I am and what my schedule demands. My friend and I have become part of the “always on” (Baron, 2008) community made possible by the advent of the Internet, mobile telephony, and media convergence as exemplified by smartphones and a growing number of mobile applications (apps).
Our exchanges also exemplify the changing social practices that are emerging out of a constantly connected world.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fox & Rainie, 2014), 87% of Americans use the Internet, and of those, 67% say online communication has strengthened relationships with friends and family. Along with the penetration of the Internet into daily life, mobile telephones have become a ubiquitous aspect of 21st century living within both developed and developing countries (Ling & Baron, 2013). Mobile telephones are owned by 90% of American adults, 58% of adults own smartphones (Pew Internet Research Project, 2014a), and 23% of American youth own smartphones (Lenhart, 2012b). These technological shifts are important when considering the nature of online communication practices such as instant messaging and texting.

In this chapter, I focus on instant messaging and text messaging as forms of one-to-one communication that are afforded by easy access to Internet connected computers and mobile telephones. I consider the implications of these technologies especially for those who continue to be disengaged from digital technology. Specifically, I strive to understand what the implications are for not using these technologies.

The chapter begins with an overview of the research. This overview includes a brief history of the technologies followed by a theoretical framing of the terms associated with instant messaging and texting. I then explore the question of whether it matters that people do or do not use instant messaging and texting. The second section of this chapter explores the literature into the nature of people’s engagement in instant messaging and texting. The review of the literature is followed by a discussion of the current issues in the field raised by the research, and directions for future research are identified. The chapter ends with recommendations and implications for education, social practice, civic engagement, and policy.

**OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH**

In the late 1990s, when I first became interested in instant messaging practices among youth and what it means for literacy development, there were few studies on the phenomena. Most of the computer mediated communication (CMC) research was into chat (originally Internet Relay Chat or IRC), which became popular in the early 1990s when America Online was launched. Chat involved a group of individuals communicating simultaneously (synchronously) within “rooms” based around a specific topic. It was within the chat environment that many of the conventions now associated with instant messaging and texting were developed: abbreviations (cuz for because), initialisms (LOL), and short, rapid exchanges. Instant messaging and text messaging users adopted these conventions even though the functionalities and purposes differ. For example, instant messaging and texting were designed for one-to-one communication; however, multiple instant messaging and texting conversations can occur simultaneously and texts can be sent to groups of individuals. As such, social practices unique to each mode of communication also developed.

**A BRIEF HISTORY**

According to Baron (2013), instant messaging began in the 1980s with the ability to message one another through mainframe computers. Instant messaging, as we know it today, became a social phenomenon with the introduction of ICQ in 1996 and AIM (America Online Instant Messenger). A number of similar services were available during the heyday of instant messaging, but AIM was the primary platform for most users in the United States. In 2004, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Shui & Lenhart, 2004) reported that instant messaging was replacing email as the dominant form of online communication; however,