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ABSTRACT

The computer user has played an active part in uncovering changes brought on with microcomputer technology. Electronic mail (or "E-mail"), which enables users to send and receive messages through bulletin board services ("BBSs"), is often considered one innovation of the computer revolution. A BBS provides opportunities for both "live," real-time exchanges with the BBS host or a fellow user and "asynchronous" message exchanges. BBS telecommunication differs from other forms of computer-controlled communication in that it occurs in a non-task-oriented, active environment. Play theory, which examines the relationship of a medium user to the medium, may explain why computer users choose to employ the BBS. According to play theory, "communication play" is a form of self-expression that takes advantage of a medium in promoting a feeling of individuality. Computer-mediated telecommunication is an example of what has been called "participatory play," which occurs when communicators are free to alter interaction to achieve goals. Analysis of computer-mediated telecommunication must consider both the decision to use the medium and the unique features of the medium that provide content cues of communication play. A network analysis (examining who talks to whom about what) might also shed light on the influence of play communication. (Fourteen references are attached.) (SG)

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A Play Theory Analysis of Computer-Mediated
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One estimate says that over 19 million people have become micro-computer users since 1981 (PC Computing, 1987). Few people would argue with the contention that micro-computers have produced a revolution in the way people conduct business and in the way many spend their leisure time. Since the early 1980's scholars have scrambled to provide interpretations of the effects of the new machines on their users. Some have concentrated on global social effects (Williams, 1987; Wilson, 1988; Perrolle, 1987), others on the changes that are occurring in organizations (Allen and Hauptman, 1987) and another category deals with the effects on learning (Hiltz, 1986). Most of these social interpretations place an "effect" squarely on the shoulder of the technology.

However, it seems pertinent to ask: What is the role of the computer user in uncovering changes brought on with computer technology? It seems improbable that the technology itself is responsible for creating an information society and that users are somehow passive agents transformed by technology they can not control. This essay will explore a theoretical avenue that can provide a set of hueristics to uncover the role of the

user in defining the effects of computer technology on communication behavior.

Bulletin Board Conferencing: An example of Computer-Mediated Telecommunication

Electronic mail is often considered one innovation of the computer revolution. With E-mail, computer users can send messages through networks, and read them on their computers. While the ability to do this on a mainframe computer has been around since the 1960's, micro-computer users have introduced innovations with broad implications for communicators. Micro-computers provided an inexpensive means to set up and operate a bulletin board service (BBS) within one's own home. With the aid of a modem and telephone line, a "personal" computer could become an "interpersonal" computer, providing the hub for a groundswell of communication activity. The use of the computer to communicate at a distance can be referred to as computer-mediated telecommunication.

BBS's sprouted up soon after micro-computers arrived on the scene. One of the first was set up in 1978 to provide connections for members of a Chicago based computer club (Bowen & Peyton, 1988). The number of BBS's grew as the number of micro-computer users grew. BBS's became a populist form of computer

support, often public domain and/or "shareware" programs were provided for distribution to those who connected to BBS's. Today it is estimated that there are over five thousand BBS's operating around the country.

To become a member of a BBS is relatively simple. Dial the number with a modem and answer some subscriber information. Most BBS's are free, but some are beginning to charge member fees. BBS's are used for a variety of purposes. In addition to privately run systems, some are set up by schools (Alifrangis, 1988), others are set up by businesses (especially those that deal with computer products), and private organizations use BBS's to support the activities of their members.

The communication opportunities provided by BBS's fall into two categories: 1) "live" real time interaction with a BBS host or fellow user, or 2) "asynchronous" e-mail type exchange of messages. "Real time" interaction is often limited by the number of phone lines (and thus the number of simultaneous users of a system). On most micro-computer systems, "real time" interaction occurs only between a caller and the host. However, larger computer services provide conferencing capabilities between many users. Comuserve is the largest and best known of these

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