

## REVIEW OF *COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: HUMAN-TO-HUMAN COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE INTERNET*

### Computer-Mediated Communication: Human-to-Human Communication across the Internet

Susan B. Barnes

2003

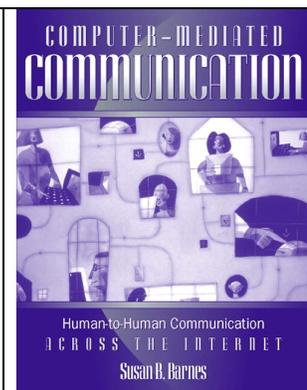
ISBN 0-205-32145-3

US \$44.00

347 pp.

Allyn & Bacon Publishers

<http://www.ablongman.com/>



#### Review by Gillian Lord, University of Florida

In the introduction to her book, Susan B. Barnes notes that the first step in the process of global citizenship is "learning how to use [Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)] as an effective method for human communication" (p. xiii). Although, of course, there are other important aspects of global citizenship -- political, social and economic aspects, for example -- the claim that globalized human communication is necessary cannot be denied. Nor would it be by the readers of this journal. Barnes' book, although on the surface claiming to deal with CMC, is really an "everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-computerized-society-but-didn't-even-know-how-to-ask" volume that discusses all aspects of our Internet-obsessed world. The text is aimed at the undergraduate college student and is suited, ideally, for anyone studying communications, journalism, or mass media. It is not directed toward language teachers or learners, per se, as its general goals are to develop the reader's understanding of how CMC is used in society today and to offer new ways of thinking about CMC's role in communication and relationship-building.

That said, the book is not a necessary tool for language teachers, nor would it be a suitable text in any language or even methodology class, at least not in its entirety. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly a fascinating and informative history of computers and their role in and relationship to society and provides excellent, easy reading for anyone interested in learning more about these topics. Or, for that matter, anyone interested in learning more about how the first "internet" was developed or who coined the phrase "cyberspace" (Gibson, 1984), or how to draw an ASCII rose (@}-',-`,-), or how the smiley face emoticons in the US :-)) are different in Japan (^\_^) (Pollack, 1996), and so forth. The combination of this type of trivia facts along with scientific studies and observations makes the text an enjoyable one. It is also a valuable resource for those who may be contemplating incorporating CMC into a language program and provides the spark necessary to generate many new classroom ideas and potential research projects.

The other strengths of this book include the chapter summaries, glossaries, and bibliographies, as well as the questions and exercises provided at the end of each chapter. In this way, each chapter (or unit) can stand alone and could provide valuable supplemental reading to students or faculty interested in developing their CMC use. Although the concluding chapter exercises sometimes reduce the student tasks to mere information searches, they often provide excellent application activities for the reader/student to carry out in the real world. Some of these exercises, such as evaluating a Web site or investigating discourse in online discussion board forums, could easily be adapted to a language class or to a teaching

methodology course. These and other potential language-learning related applications are discussed on a chapter-by-chapter basis below. While there is an accompanying Web page ([http://wps.ablongman.com/ab\\_barnes\\_cmc\\_1](http://wps.ablongman.com/ab_barnes_cmc_1)), little new information is presented on this page; instead, it summarizes the content of each chapter and provides the links mentioned there. What is helpful are the "Update" sections of the page, which provide further references and studies that appeared in print after the publication of the book itself.

Some of the drawbacks of the book, however, should be addressed up front. Unfortunately, there are a number of typos and formatting inconsistencies that, while they do not detract from the content of the book, they certainly do distract. Also, there are a remarkable number of figures that accompany each chapter, although often they are only tangentially related to the chapter theme and rarely discussed in the text itself. The figures more often than not end up at least a page or two after the reference is made in the text and in general are relatively easy to skip right over. Although there are a number of interesting facts and figures presented, there is also a tendency to make a claim or suggestion without providing evidence or references to back it up. In many cases, this results in what appears to be a very superficial treatment of the subject matter that often fails to fully analyze and develop the theme and its implications to the overall thesis of the project. Unfortunately, this problem is compounded by the repetition of the same examples in chapter after chapter, so that they are not only outdated but repetitive. Finally, some of the examples referred to also seem out of date (for example, all cell phones made now have the capacity for voice recognition, not just Sprint, p. 55), and a number of the links were not active or available at the time of this writing. The latter drawback is, of course, probably inevitable in a field such as this one, but it is frustrating nonetheless. Although these shortcomings may prove disturbing, they should not deter the reader from continuing through the book, as most sections do offer interesting insights, many of which are applicable for language teachers as well.

The chapters in Part I of the book provide a general overview of CMC (chapter 1), including the characteristics of CMC (chapter 2) in its various venues, from chats to discussion boards to e-mail and even to Web pages. Here Barnes begins to develop one of the primary themes that will continue throughout the book: the alteration of time and space and how this alteration affects our construction of identity and communicative interactions. Chapter 3 discusses the theory and practice of human-computer interaction (HCI), in other words, ways in which we interact and communicate with machines, rather than using the machine to interact with other humans. This section deals primarily with the developing technologies of voice recognition, text-to-speech, the presence of "bots" in discussion rooms and so forth. The last chapter of the section (chapter 4) discusses the Web and its history and primary characteristics. There is a discussion of interaction and transition through the Web, which explains how the Web is being included in a book about CMC. Also, the relationship between mass media and communications and the Web is explored. Useful strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of a given Web site are presented (pp. 80-82), and these are strategies that we could all use on a regular basis.

In Part II, Barnes deals with the theme of developing relationships and interacting through CMC. This is a huge topic that the author breaks down neatly into logical and manageable subcategories. Chapter 5 considers the role of language as an essential element of human communication, and how the presence of the Internet has altered this role. Orality and literacy are discussed, and the idea of a "secondary orality" (Ong, 1982) is presented to explain the blurred distinction between writing and speaking in forums such as email and chatrooms. The latter portion of the chapter brings in theoretical models of gendered discourse and speech-acts to begin an analysis of how language is used through the Internet. Unfortunately, as the purpose of the text is to provide communication students with an overview, there is less detail in this section than a language teacher and researcher would hope for, although some interesting ideas are introduced. In chapters 6 and 7, the topics of presenting oneself online and interacting with others online are discussed. Barnes broaches philosophical topics such as the concept of self, the construction of identity and characteristics of human interaction. A study by Karetnick (2001) is

described, in which the investigator analyzes the use of communication terms in a MUD discussion; this kind of study could easily be adapted to a language-learning environment and would provide interesting insight into our continuing understanding of language learning through technology.

The next four chapters of the book form the third section, which deals with CMC and group communication. The contexts in which CMC occurs are shown to influence the ways in which participants communicate and understand messages. Chapter 8 discusses the use of CMC in the business world, and how CMC developments have modified working environments, for better and worse. It also mentions some of the research carried out in organizational CMC studies. Chapter 9 provides a fascinating look at the world of online gaming, which begins with a brief history of computer games, MUDs and MOOs, and goes on to discuss social implications and reverberations of these.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 10 introduces the educational contexts of CMC, including a discussion of computers in education, digital and information literacy and other issues in academic settings, such as cyberplagiarism and the potentially changing roles of students and teachers in a CMC-enhanced classroom. The author claims that although there are benefits of CMC in education, teachers must be aware of the potential for plagiarism and the lower quality of research carried out on the Internet, although these claims are not developed nor are they supported with research. No mention of language learning is made, though, so we must take these complaints with a grain of salt, knowing as we do that the powers of CMC to bridge the distance between language learners and native speakers of the language can potentially outweigh some of the other problematic issues discussed. Finally, chapter 11 discusses the development of virtual communities and how this development mirrors that of "live" communities, as they are based on trust, social rules, communication building, and group history. CMC is changing the concept of what makes up a community, and this change is also going to be relevant in our classrooms.

The last section of the book places CMC into society and discusses broader issues related to the use of CMC in terms of human relationships, civic communication, political agendas and global concerns. Chapter 12 introduces us to the seedy world of disruptive online behavior, such as spamming, flaming, hate speech, pornography, and hacking, while chapter 13 discusses anonymity and privacy online. Both chapters provide informative overviews of the key concepts and are of interest to anyone who owns or uses a computer. Chapter 14 articulates the role of the Internet and CMC in politics and how information that lacks its visual face-to-face counterpart is shared, while questioning the relationship between "democracy" and the Web. The chapter also touches briefly on the need to develop a system of government for the Web itself. Finally, the last chapter of the book, entitled "Communicating in the Global Village," explores topics such as the global marketplace, the use of English on the Internet, the globalization of mass media and theories about the relationship between technology and society. Of particular interest to language teachers -- those of us who use the Internet precisely to find a variety of languages represented -- is the section on English in this global village and the concept of cultural imperialism (pp. 320-1).<sup>2</sup>

What should be clear from this brief summary is the vast wealth of material covered in this one book. As I mentioned above, it is agreeable reading for anyone interested in CMC and can provide valuable insight into the ways in which computers are altering our lives. These insights may not be directly relevant to language learning theories and practice, but are undoubtedly important. A greater understanding of CMC in particular and of developing technologies in general will provide any language teacher with a greater understanding of the role that technology plays in every part of our society, which in turn can only help us to incorporate CMC into our classes in the most productive and effective ways.

**NOTES**

1. Although not discussed here, many of the case studies mentioned reminded me of a fascinating article by Elizabeth Kolbert from *The New Yorker* (May 2001), which describes how an online society can "go bad," much the way a real society can. The interested reader is referred to the References section of this review, where full bibliographic information, as well as a URL, are provided.
2. It is worth pointing out here that the author refers to the usefulness of freely available Web-translators, but does not point out their incredible lack of reliability at producing accurate translations. Again, this is due most likely to the fact that her specialty is communication and media, and the likelihood that she has not had to correct a machine-translated composition turned in by a student in as his/her own work.

**ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

Gillian Lord is an Assistant Professor at University of Florida in the department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Her research focuses on SLA and L2 phonology, and also on technology in foreign language education.

E-mail: [glord@rll.ufl.edu](mailto:glord@rll.ufl.edu)

**REFERENCES**

- Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.
- Karethnick, R. D. (2001). Constructing the self through modification of convention in computer-mediated environments. *The New Jersey Journal of Communication*, 9(1), 88-102.
- Kolbert, E. (2001, May 28). Pimps and dragons: How an online world survived a social breakdown. *The New Yorker*. Available online at [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?010528fa\\_FACT](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?010528fa_FACT).
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen.
- Pollack, A. (1996, August 12). Happy in the East (^\_^) or smiling in the West :-). *The New York Times*, p. D5.