

Presence and Absence in Communication

“Presence is the state or fact of being present; current existence or occurrence and the immediate proximity in time and space. Absence is the state of being away or withdrawn from a place; the time during which one is away” --- American Heritage Dictionary

Presence can be presumed as the original state observed in the eye at the first gaze at that moment. All aspects of experience and/or existence are relegated to a moment of presence, but the ideal of presence always implies more than one moment, the second moment can be called as absence. When we relate the presence and absence to time and space, something that is extremely significant in a given moment is very much present in that moment, but can lose its presence and be absent to someone the moment it loses its importance somehow and becomes insignificant. The significance that is not present in the last moment can be present in the present moment.

Human being is a social entity. His need to make his presence felt to himself and others has always been core to his existence because of the different roles that he plays in life. He registers his presence to himself by acknowledging his form via his senses of sight and touch, by his intuitive instincts and by the others' feedback to him. To make his presence felt to the others, over time, he has resorted to communicating with the help of his physical form as well as various other media.

Motivations to communicate evolved as the world started converging and man moved outward from his home place. His curiosity about the world around led to explorations and discoveries of new places. As time progressed, man migrated from place to place in search of trade, livelihood and occupation. The modern world is a global village, connected extensively with efficient modes of transportation. As man moved around the world and away from his place of birth, he became physically absent from his home and the need arose to device ways to be present in his absence in some form or the other by maintaining communication links with family and friends and home community.

Communication modes continuously evolved as well along with the motivations to communicate. The need to communicate arose from the fact that man had to be present at different space points at different times as he played various roles. To establish a sense of shared presence or shared space among separated members of a group, he started to develop new communication technologies. He used speech as the first communication medium to make his presence felt more... and then came alphabets and scripts and text which lent communication a new form. Industrial revolution brought in mechanical communication techniques. And these days digital techniques are revolutionizing the concept of communication again.

The evolutions in motivations to communicate as well as modes of communication have in turn changed the concept of presence and absence in the minds of human beings. Today, people no longer think of this world in terms of geographical boundaries for the most part. Instead they think of it as a small town where you can get in touch with anyone and everyone instantaneously.

This essay explores how these evolving communication techniques changed the concept and perception of presence and absence.

Language has been the binding force for our civilization. For Derrida, "the presence and absence in terms of language is deeply embedded thought as a whole". Language filled in the absence of a medium to express his thoughts and feelings to other people and made it very much present. It has been human's primary medium of communication. With a system of signs, gestures and rules, man

was able to formulate a language for communication. Language is what separates humans from other living beings. He used language extensively with all the communication techniques. It helped him communicate knowledge and information to the others. It is language because of which he doesn't have to discover or invent again and again, and through language he was able to record the information and communicate it to other people.

Initially, with language and speech, man was able to communicate only with physical presence. However, with the invention of writing and text, he was able to communicate with other communities and his own community even without his presence there. As he moved around the world and migrated away from homeland, he replaced the absence of his physical presence with non-physical presence in the form of writing. The loss of oral communication was replaced by writing communication, by writing letters and post. The art of writing added another dimension to communication - the visual dimension, which helped man 'store' communication. It helped him communicate his knowledge and information to future generations.

In 1450, Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press, which made the mass publication and communication of the literature more easier and faster. Before the invention of the printing press, multiple copies of the manuscript had to be produced by hand, which is a tedious and time-consuming process. The advent of printing press made communication of information faster only in a limited space.

In due time, telegraph was invented. Telegraph brought the presence of signal communication, which was absent before in the written communication. Samuel Morse on May 24, 1844 sent the first message "What hath God Wrought?" officially from the old supreme court chamber in Washington D.C to Baltimore and that marked the entry of the telegraph. Not until 1851, the Postal Telegraph System entered the field for economic reasons, and merged with Western Union in 1869 and marked the beginning of transcontinental telegraph system. The early telegraph system produced a paper copy with raised dots and dashes, which were translated later by an operator.

With the telegraph system entering the postal system, it became possible to send and receive messages quickly over the continents. Man replaced presence of natural sensory in the hand-written letters with typed telegraphs for faster and easier communication.

Thus as man traveled far and wide, he was still able to make his presence felt via written communication to his people back at home. Writing brought in the visual power with it, but there was the absence of quick and spontaneous reaction or feedback from the receivers, and complete absence of vocal communication until the invention of telephone in 1876.

Until 1876, all rapid long-distance communication depended upon the telegraph. That year, a rival technology developed that would again change the face of communication -- the telephone. The first fully intelligible telephone call occurred on March 6, 1876, when Bell, in one room, called to his assistant in another room. "Come here, Watson, I want you." The first telephone system, known as an exchange, which is a practical means of individual communication between many people who have telephones, was installed in Hartford, Connecticut in 1877, and the first ex-change linking two major cities was established between New York and Boston in 1883. The telephone demands complete participation. With the telephone, there occurs the extension of ear and voice and verbal communication by electric signals. The advent of the telephone thus made it easier for people to communicate with each other verbally, but it did not fill in the physical absence thus keeping the recipient in dark regarding the non-verbal dimensions of the communication process.

The invention of radio by Marconi further extended the use of sound in making a presence felt even as one was physically absent in the mass communication. It facilitated the distribution of a generic message to the masses. Radio works on the assumption that every individual interprets a message

the same way and hence there is only one generic message, but however every person interprets things differently and radio fails to take that in to consideration. Radio has standardized the communication process for the most part in many societies, however in so doing it has completely taken away the personal aspect of communication. Standardization in communication failed to take into consideration the uniqueness and the individuality of a person. Two people may listen to the exact same message on the radio at the exact same time and both will react differently to it, not because the message wasn't standardized but because the unique nature of each individual caused him to interpret the message differently.

Telephone and radio made verbal communication possible. It was possible to communicate verbally without actually being present there, but there was still total absence of nonverbal dimension of communication. The visual presence was still lacking and there was complete absence of person's body language or facial gestures.

The arrival of the Cinema and Television brought in the participation of sight, sound and motion with it in the mass communication and the same goes for Video conferencing in the Individual communication. In 1895, the Frenchman Louis Lumiere invented the first portable motion picture camera, film processing unit and projector called the Cinematographe, three functions covered in one invention. In 1927, Philo T. Farnsworth marked the invention of the television and in 1939 at New York World's Fair, the commercial television was launched for the public communication.

Cinema and Television's ability to communicate sight, sound, motion and emotion makes it the most compelling and influential form of communication. Audiences across various sub-cultures are able to assimilate and respond to the motion communication with relative ease and readiness because it is a moving and visual medium, but as of in the case of radio, cinema and television were limited to communication in one dimension.

The individual video conferencing was possible only after the invention of the computers. In 1936 British mathematician Alan Turing proposed the idea of a machine that could process equations without human direction. The machine (now known as a Turing machine) resembled an automatic typewriter that used symbols for math and logic instead of letters. Turing intended the device to be used as a "universal machine" that could be programmed to duplicate the function of any other existing machine. Turing's machine was the theoretical precursor to the modern digital computer. With the computer networks and local area network becoming popular in 1970's videoconferencing has become necessary in various kinds of communication such as a business forum and entertainment. As John Richmond quotes "First the image reflects reality, then it masks it, then it hides the absence of it."; The image was able to fill in the visual presence and the person's body language, but still there was the absence as the intangibility of the soul. Human being was able to communicate visually, sound and motion bi-directionally, but there was still the absence of personal aspect. However the importance was not so much on communication, but on dispersing information and it was perfectly fine to use videoconferencing for such an occasion.

With the evolution of Internet in 1983, the communication process took a complete change. The Internet is a worldwide network of thousands of computers and computer networks "The design of Internet was done in 1973 and published in 1974. There ensued about 10 years of hard work, resulting in the roll out of Internet in 1983. People were able to send letters faster by e-mails. The introduction of voice mails has given a new dimension to the mailing system, where the individual hears to the mail instead of reading it. The chat has brought the mass communication and the individual communication together. In the chat rooms you can communicate with a group of people and in Instant Messaging, you can communicate individually and the exchange of information is instantaneous. The chat has instantaneously done something which man couldn't do for ages.

The internet chat has separated man from his actual physical being and a person can totally separate

himself from his body while chatting. The chat has given the person the ability to exploit couple of his strong traits and enhanced his imagination. They can imagine whatever form they want to assume or whatever person they want to be and be that person. The person can be a pimply old man, and yet on chat he can be a 18 year old stud and if they have good voice but not a good figure they can exploit the voice without being watched on webcam and hence the chat has given the person the ability to almost escape from their physical being.

In the early chat, chatters used icons and emotes extensively to communicate their emotions and changed the perception of pursuing the others' feelings. The icons and emotes enable them to perceive whatever they said from a subjective viewpoint. So in essence they are really perceiving their feelings at the moment they see the icon, but they aren't perceiving the other person's feeling. For example, one can use a curse word and put after it a laughing icon, and the other person depending on how they are feeling that day might take that to mean that the other person is just joking or he might think that the other person is cursing him and making fun of him. The chat involves complete participation of our senses with the voice and webcams added to the chat and it has become a complete and a multi-directional communication system.

Purpose of communication is to understand something about the other person or make the other person understand something or solicit some sort of an action from the other person. All communication has a purpose and the perception of absence and presence in communication has changed with arrival of every new media communications. As the world went from being really really big from pre 21st century to being a small town in post 21st century, the communication has become more present, easier, fast and instant. With every new media, the communication changed from just physical presence to letters (alphabets and scripts) to voice (telephone) to image and voice (video conferencing) and then to text, image and voice (internet chat).

Human being made all technological advances with the aim in mind that he had to bring back the physical presence in communication with his physical absence in the location of communication. He is trying to transport one person from his location to another location through a series of wires and ports etc., and has done a good job of recreating the image of himself in a different location than from his original location. However they will soon realize that it can not be done with technology as there is a big difference between being present somewhere physically or being there in an image form.

Technology facilitates dispersion of messages in a timely manner. However no advancement of technology can replace the actual physical presence of a person. The aura that a person carries with himself and the very physical proximity that enables touch and instant reaching out cannot be matched. Consequently sometimes communication in absence still cannot make up for the physical difference, can even create indifference in minds and lead to misunderstandings that arise due to assumptions made that might not have been made had the person been physically present. In face to face communication with both being physically present, it is easier to perceive misunderstandings as people involved can interpret verbal and non-verbal communication much better, express sincerity towards other with a look in the eye or a touch of a hand and thus resolution of conflicts happens much faster.

With the improving technology, the communication has become multi-direction, but the communication process isn't a true communication process anymore. The real persons are becoming imaginary people by creating a personality and hiding behind it, and thus not really reaching out to others as themselves, but as personas that they would like to be viewed as. Human beings have always had the tendency to be conscious of the image that they project to the others since they crave to be accepted and admired by the society in general. Technically advanced communication techniques provide an outlet to this trait of man and thus in a way diminish the soul or the real self. People don't communicate with technology, they merely disperse information that they would like

the others to have.

* All the invention dates used in this essay are obtained from the site

<http://www.sanatan.org/en/glossary/d.htm#dvaparyug>

<http://www.uta.edu/english/cgb/aud/simsim/disappearance.html>

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/derriduction2.htm>

http://www.ideafinder.com/history/of_inventions.htm