A Longitudinal Exploration into Computer-Mediated Communication Use (CMC) and Relationship Change between 2005-2018

Authors : Laurie Dempsey

Abstract : Relationships are considered to be beneficial for emotional wellbeing, happiness and physical health. However, they are also complicated: individuals engage in a multitude of complex and volatile relationships during their lifetime, where the change to or ending of these dynamics can be deeply disruptive. As the internet is further integrated into everyday life and relationships are increasingly mediated, Media Studies' and Sociology's research interests intersect and converge. This study longitudinally explores how relationship change over time corresponds with the developing UK technological landscape between 2005-2018. Since the early 2000s, the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the UK has dramatically reshaped interaction. Its use has compelled individuals to renegotiate how they consider their relationships: some argue it has allowed for vast networks to be accumulated and strengthened; others contend that it has eradicated the core values and norms associated with communication, damaging relationships. This research collaborated with UK media regulator Ofcom, utilising the longitudinal dataset from their Adult Media Lives study to explore how relationships and CMC use developed over time. This is a unique qualitative dataset covering 2005-2018, where the same 18 participants partook in annual in-home filmed depth interviews. The interviews' raw video footage was examined year-on-year to consider how the same people changed their reported behaviour and outlooks towards their relationships, and how this coincided with CMC featuring more prominently in their everyday lives. Each interview was transcribed, thematically analysed and coded using NVivo 11 software. This study allowed for a comprehensive exploration into these individuals' changing relationships over time, as participants grew older, experienced marriages or divorces, conceived and raised children, or lost loved ones. It found that as technology developed between 2005-2018, everyday CMC use was increasingly normalised and incorporated into relationship maintenance. It played a crucial role in altering relationship dynamics, even factoring in the breakdown of several ties. Three key relationships were identified as being shaped by CMC use: parent-child; extended family; and friendships. Over the years there were substantial instances of relationship conflict: for parents renegotiating their dynamic with their child as they tried to both restrict and encourage their child's technology use; for estranged family members 'forced' together in the online sphere; and for friendships compelled to publicly display their relationship on social media, for fear of social exclusion. However, it was also evident that CMC acted as a crucial lifeline for these participants, providing opportunities to strengthen and maintain their bonds via previously unachievable means, both over time and distance. A longitudinal study of this length and nature utilising the same participants does not currently exist, thus provides crucial insight into how and why relationship dynamics alter over time. This unique and topical piece of research draws together Sociology and Media Studies, illustrating how the UK's changing technological landscape can reshape one of the most basic human compulsions. This collaboration with Ofcom allows for insight that can be utilised in both academia and policymaking alike, making this research relevant and impactful across a range of academic fields and industries.

Keywords : computer mediated communication, longitudinal research, personal relationships, qualitative data

Conference Title : ICDSDA 2020 : International Conference on Digital Sociology and Data Analysis
Conference Location : Rome, Italy
Conference Dates : February 17-18, 2020