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The Study of Gender Differences in Communication Technology Use

Abstract

The wide array of communication hardware and software available today provides us with more ways to communicate than ever before. While the study of communication technology hardware is interesting, my research has always focused on the way people use these technologies to interact with others. This short essay will describe the origin of one of my central research themes—gender differences in the use of communication technologies—and provide an example of the benefits of qualitative inquiry. Although I have studied other topics, gender differences in communication technology use was my first major research topic and it continues to be a key part of my ongoing research.

Key Words：　Information and communication technology, gender communication, qualitative research

Introduction

We live in an era with more ways to communicate than ever before; yesterday's options of letters and land-line phone calls have been supplemented with email, social networks, and real-time messages that can reach hundreds if not millions of readers in an instant. My research—and in turn my students' research—has always focused on the way people use these various technologies to communicate. This short essay will describe a central theme of the research on information and communication technologies (ICT) that has come out of Scott Lab (a somewhat inaccurate, if commonly-used term), since it began in 2001.

Focus on Mobile Communications

I came to Waseda's School of Human Sciences from Michigan State University in April, 2001. Among the differences I encountered was that all Waseda students in my classes had mobile phones and relied on them heavily for day-to-day communication. When I was at an American university, empirically perhaps only a quarter of American students had mobile phones. This large gap in communication technology use set me on a course of research that I still follow. In the following sections, I will describe my past research on the use of communication technologies focusing on gender differences. While this is not my only research topic, it is perhaps the oldest and most enduring one I have studied.

After a series of pilot studies, my first full study as a Waseda professor was on the use of video-equipped mobile phones by Japanese college students (Scott 2008). While the key finding will be described in the next section, this study was important as it 1) used qualitative data collection methods such as participant-generated communication logs and interviews, 2) brought then-cutting-edge technology into the Lab for my students and I to experience and study, and 3) became the topic of many of our seminar class sessions.

Gender Differences in ICT Use

In this study, my seven seminar students used video-equipped mobile phones (generously donated by NTT DoCoMo) for one month. They were allowed to use the phones as much as they liked with the provision that they keep a log of every call—voice and video—they made. At the end of the one month study period, the logs were collected and analyzed. Interviews and small group discussion were also conducted although those results are not presented here.

When the data were analyzed, the most striking results were several clear examples of differences in men's and women's use of communication technologies and their engagement with

Table 1　Log Entries Soried by Total Words

NAME	GENDER	LOG ENTRIES	TOTAL WORDS	AVG WORDS PER ENTRY
Miss Aoki	F	25	1938	77.52
Miss Ota	F	12	1366	113.83
Miss Araki	F	17	1000	58.82
Mr. Ito	M	12	362	30.17
Mr. Imai	M	6	164	27.33
Mr. Ono	M	4	146	36.50
Mr. Seki	M	16	62	3.88

the data collection instruments. One example of these results is shown in Table 1 (sorted differently than in Scott 2008) which emphasizes the total number of words each student wrote in their communication log.

According to the table, Mr. Ito (all names are pseudonyms), the man who wrote the most of the four men, wrote slightly more than one-third of the total words of Miss Araki, the woman who wrote the least of the three women. All students received the same instructions, but those instructions were carried out differently by the men and the women. This straightforward numerical example illustrates the kinds of gender differences found in other, more subjective, results, for instance that the women's log entries tended to show greater richness and variety than the men's entries.

These gender differences were surprising as they were not the original focus or goal of this research project. Such surprising results are a good example of how qualitative inquiry can change focus as the data are analyzed. These results increased my interest in researching how men and women use communication technologies which became a common theme in later studies.

While gender differences in ICT use is an important theme, I like to include cross-cultural comparisons as I did in a 2009 study (Scott, Kato, and Kato) that examined American and Japanese college students' use of informal mobile phone text messages. Another research topic, emotional transmission and reception in text-based communications (see for example Kato, Scott, and Kato 2010), produced numerous presentations and article, and while I no longer research this topic, it is a good example of the wide variety of topics that are conducted in the area information and communication technology research.

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