Foreword

When I began studying CMC in 1991, it was a novel topic of research in most academic disciplines and by no means generally recognized as legitimate. Computer-mediated communication back then consisted mainly of email and asynchronous discussion groups—newsgroups, listservs, and privately-hosted BBS. Internet Relay Chat, invented a few years before, had not yet attracted much attention; there was no World Wide Web; and blogs, instant messaging, text messaging, online virtual worlds, and Internet telephony had yet to be introduced. Impoverished as this state of affairs may seem to present generations of digital media users, to early adopters and researchers, CMC appeared rich with possibilities. In attempting to come to grips with a profoundly new set of technologies, some of my contemporaries focused on the positive and others on the negative aspects, but few remained unmoved. The potential of CMC to bring about change attracted passionate speculation and debate and stimulated empirical studies across the disciplinary spectrum.

My generation was not the first. In 1978, Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff published *The Network Nation*, in which they made foundational observations about communication in an experimental computer network, back when the Internet was the ARPAnet. Their book, along with a 1984 article by Sara Kiesler and her colleagues titled "Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication," were my earliest sources of inspiration when I began investigating gender differences in CMC in 1991. Later, after I had made the decision to make CMC my main research focus, I undertook to read everything that had ever been published about CMC—it was almost possible to do so, back then—and came to know a number of other pioneering studies from the 1980s, including communication research by Ronald Rice; linguistic studies by Denise Murray; and applications to teaching composition by Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe. These scholars were the real pioneers. Yet my generation had something in common with them, which was that we worked outside the mainstream in our respective disciplines—CMC was still a novelty topic of research in the early 1990s.

That started to change in the mid-1990s, with the impact of the World Wide Web and the rise in popularity and diversification of CMC systems. Researchers rushed to characterize and analyze the latest developments, which included virtual communities, virtual teams, e-commerce, and online relationship formation, along with less desirable developments such as deception, cyberstalking, and spam. In the process, they published more of their work online, where it would reach audiences faster. The *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* was created in 1995 to publish CMC research in an online format. Yet while many CMC researchers found appreciative audiences and were sought out for interviews by the mass media, they sometimes still encountered difficulties in getting their work taken seriously by university tenure and promotion committees. Ultimately, however, the momentum proved irresistable: By the turn of the millenium, only the most conservative holdouts could deny that a new digital era was at hand, and that the Internet and other new digital media had significantly altered communication, publication, and many other personal and professional landscapes.

Today, it has become imperative to understand and manage these effects; no one questions the legitimacy of conducting research on CMC anymore. Moreover, the body of research that CMC researchers have produced has grown so large that no one could read all of it. True to its origins, this body of research is broadly interdisciplinary and encompasses theoretical, empirical, and applied perspectives. The publication of the present *Handbook of Computer-Mediated Communication* is further evidence that CMC research has attained a mature state: A substantial body of knowledge has accumulated and calls out to be surveyed, summarized, and critiqued. This handbook has set itself this task: to digest the recently emerged field of CMC studies, bringing together in a single format its key issues and research findings.

It is fitting that the chapters in this collection address both familiar (discussion lists, chat) and newer (SMS, agents and avatars, podcasting) phenomena. The definition of computer-mediated communication itself has changed over the years, from the exchange of textual messages between indivduals typing on the keyboards and reading the screens of networked computers, to any digitally-mediated communication. For example, although HTML documents were often considered a separate phenomenon in the past, in contrast to reciprocally interactive forms of online communication, there is no longer any question that Web communication is CMC. Blogs, wikis, and social network sites have blurred the boundary, together with the ongoing tendency for older CMC modes such as email and chat to be integrated into Web browser interfaces. Mobile telephony has also come to be included in the definition of CMC, largely because of the resemblances between SMS (Short Message Service, or text messaging on mobile phones) and traditional modes of CMC such as Internet Relay Chat and instant messaging. The contents of this handbook reflect this expanded, contemporary definition of CMC.

It is also appropriate that the handbook covers a range of professional contexts in which CMC plays an important role, such as distance education, organizations, libraries, psychotherapy, and human-computer interface design. Context shapes the forms and functions of CMC, and online and offline activities increasingly blend, making research focused on specific contexts of use of both scholarly and practical interest. The handbook also includes chapters on culture and CMC and CMC systems for people with disabilities, and the roster of contributing authors is international, again fittingly, given the rapid global spread of CMC since the mid-1990s and its adoption by different groups to serve their particular needs. What started in the United States as the ARPAnet in the 1960s has today become a truly global Internet, with human communication as its primary use.

The future will see an even more widespread use of CMC. At the same time, it is probable that CMC will increasingly be taken for granted, as it already is by younger generations who have grown up with the Internet and digital technologies, and for whom they are as much a fact of life as the telephone and television were for my generation. This handbook is thus historically situated at a transition point, where both the novelty of CMC and its acceptedness and ordinariness can be observed. How far we have come in a few brief decades.

-- Susan C. Herring