

Communication Interactivity: A Sign of the Times
Frances Forde Plude

My own personal media journey and its faith witness took a dramatic turn two decades ago. At that time I was producing television programs and had a weekly TV show of my own in the Boston market. It was grace that helped me perceive at that point what has become, I believe, one of the “signs of the time.”

Because twenty years ago I realized that **bold new communication technologies would re-design our environment and, to a degree, our personhood**. At that time, the excitement was about communication satellites and cable TV. Computers were still mainframes, the personal computer market was undeveloped, and the term Internet was not in use.

In dialogue with several colleagues, however, I began to realize that huge amounts of money would be made as these newer telecommunication tools developed. And I began to worry about who would advocate for the nonprofit sector – for schools, hospitals, social welfare groups, for developing nations, for women and children.

Directly as a result of this concern, my husband, who was still alive then, took a second job and I took three years off to do doctoral studies in telecommunications and public policy at Harvard University, with accompanying studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

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One of the most important things I learned at Harvard was that *the telephone (instead of mass media) would be the cornerstone of the Information Age*. As a result of this insight my passion for **interactivity** began. I read Ithiel de Sola Pool's work *The Social Uses of the Telephone*. (1) I saw evidence all around me that people spend a lot of time conducting personal and business matters on the phone. I knew even then that we would become a mediated world.

I did not know computer networks would be the infrastructure. I did not know it would be called the Internet or the World Wide Web. I did not know about URLs or agents or push technology. But I knew that if people could communicate easily with one another there would be no stopping them! The telephone had already demonstrated that for over one hundred years.

Once I saw the power of network interaction, the increasing ease of dialogue, the attraction of talking-back, I knew this was a genie that could never be put back into the bottle.

Premise and Key Principles

The premise I will develop here is this: *the foundation of our media studies as we move into a new millennium should be on the process of interactivity in media*. I see the Internet as a mass medium *and* an interactive one-on-one *and* an

interactive small-group medium. However, interactivity is one source of its power and a major reason for its popularity with humanity.

Some have spoken of the *liminal* quality of cyberspace – providing a powerful pull toward Internet use. This recalls the communication-and-culture writings of analyst James Carey (2) who says our studies are moving from the “transportation” model (of sending messages) to a *ritual* model of communication. Instead of processing messages, often aimed at manipulation (as in advertising), communication becomes shared beliefs, sign and symbol. (One can see how this latter communication theory is demonstrated in *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* cultures.)

Another clearly-interactive culture is the electronic game industry which had industry sales of \$5.5 billion in the U.S. in 1998, according to *Time* magazine (May 10, 1999, p. 50). Video games are the most popular form of entertainment after TV.

Current research suggests that even in a broadcast or cable TV program, certainly in film, the real power of any narrative is that audiences do meaning-making as they *interact* with these stories. George Gerbner, another communication analyst, suggests that media have replaced institutionalized religion as the locale where humans process meaning in their lives.

Lilly has sponsored research underway at the University of Colorado, Boulder, directed by Dr. Stewart Hoover and his associate Dr. Lynn Schofield

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Clark. (3) The project involves a field study of sixty households interviewed in depth, with group and individual follow-ups. A different interview instrument is used for youth. The study is “mapping” the material and visual culture in each household. A basic question is: how do people use media resources to *process* cultural and religious identity and meaning?

Each family is unique, of course, but the researchers are finding some are *suffused by* media; they use various media a lot and their lives are permeated by conversations about media events and stories. Some families, however, are *differentiated from* the media; these families feel they should control their use of media because there is much that is bad within the media sphere. (My own guess is that similar differences would be found if Internet families and individual users were mapped). The Boulder researchers are interested in how gender, age, economic, and educational level affect media reception and attitudes.

There are some tentative concepts emerging. There appears to be evidence that media and religion are converging. What each sphere contains is *meaning*. Media seem to inform and reinforce shared beliefs (e.g., belief in angels, aliens, the supernatural, existence of evil, etc.) And media artifacts seem to have an important

function as objects that *ground* identity; they help people define themselves and converse about their world.

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This research can be accessed at <jmcommunications.com> the site of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture. Professor Hoover has served as Chair of this ecumenical think tank which links scholars and practitioners globally around these three intersecting areas of study.

With assistance from the field of anthropology and the cultural-studies approach to communication, we are beginning to see a more interactive communication process at work, even among viewers of movies and TV.

Other media have their interactive dimension also. People are able to take charge of their media experiences by time-shifting with a telephone-answering system and by recording TV programs and renting video movies. These latter media have been extremely popular because they allow people to interact with them – to manage these media in their own way. Another very popular media tool that allows user interaction is the TV remote control which has made “zapping” or muting a part of video viewing.

One of my own special areas of work for a decade has been the interaction of theology and communication studies. As these two fields interact we will have a new integrated body of thought – Communication Theology – replicating the

integration of social science theory and theology which has already given birth to Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology.

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My goal in this paper is to highlight four aspects of the interactivity challenge:

1. why interactivity is a “sign of the times” issue;
2. the potential impact of this two-way process on our sense of the self;
3. the role of interactivity in the formation of community; and
4. equity issues in a global interactive infrastructure

After raising these issues, I will cite some specific examples of interactivity or dialogue-in-action. And I will conclude with several specific recommendations.

I have found two female scholars especially helpful as I reflect upon the Internet and these four issues: Sherry Turkle, at MIT, (4) and Margaret Wertheim, author of the highly acclaimed new book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. (5)

Incidentally, I am, frankly, chagrined at the lack of female voices asked to participate when communication and religion issues are discussed. I have spoken at two media conferences recently (here and in Salamanca, Spain) where a very small percentage of the speakers happen to be female. I know of a U.S. technology and church conference sponsored by the Catholic Church where there was a deliberate exclusion of female participants.

For me this is not primarily an issue of justice for women or an issue of political correctness. The fact is the challenges facing us – in cyberspace for example – are so great that this will demand the best (and the most innovative) talent we have available. As women around the world become educated and

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liberated they have both the experience and the fresh viewpoints to resolve telecommunication issues by helping us to “think outside of the box.”

We are impoverished in our analysis if we do not include voices such as those I’ve mentioned. Others include Deborah Tannen, (6) the late Mary Parker Follett’s work, (7) Kathleen Hall Jamieson, (8) Lynn Schofield Clark, (9) and Jessica Lipnack (10) – to mention just a few. These experts can enhance your own reading and should be noted as some of the female scholars available for anyone planning future communication conferences. It would be helpful, actually, if we could gather background summaries of such experts at a Web site so they could become more active in our analysis of communication and interactivity.

Interactive Issues as Signs of the Times

I was asked to address the questions: Why witness? For what purpose?
What are the revelations of faith and communication?

I have spoken of this topic in terms of the “signs of the times.” We are all blessed to be living and laboring in interesting times. My own energy and

enthusiasm are fueled by two major events which have unfolded in my own lifetime: the Second Vatican Council and the growth of the computer network. Both events offer extraordinary gifts. Each also presents many challenges as we struggle to implement these gifts.

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So I am not the only one who was called (two decades ago); you have all been called too – to invest your own communication and technological (and theological) gifts to building the kingdom that is to come, the one we pray for every time we say “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

I have always been intrigued personally by medieval culture – a time of Christendom when cathedrals and Christian art flourished, when the entire societal infrastructure was Christian, even with its bad judgment calls on the Crusades, and, later, on Galileo and Joan of Arc, among others. However God did not call us forth into medieval culture. God apparently wants us to work for the Kingdom of God in the age of the computer, in a postmodern culture when religious belief is under siege, in an age of liberation movements. We don't have a choice about this; it's the hand we were dealt in this card game! (Incidentally, Margaret Wertheim sees interesting parallels between cyberspace and the world of Dante; we certainly don't have to abandon our Christian perspective when we become interactive cybernauts.)

We can easily establish the fact that dialogic networks permeate our culture. If we mention code words like Y2K or the Melissa virus we all quake. Or we can reflect, as a *Time* magazine cover story did recently in the wake of the Colorado school tragedy, that every day 14 million U.S. teenagers head off to school and

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40% of these teens will daily log on to the Internet. This number has doubled in the last two years alone. (May 10, 1999, p. 38)

Without submitting to excessive hype we must acknowledge that the growth of the Internet seems to indicate that it is meeting human needs – personal, social, economic.

A May 1999 *Harvard Magazine* cover story entitled “Society On-line” cites repercussions:

- . the impact of the Internet’s modular construction (decentralized)
- . a massive shift of power from sellers to buyers
- . people spending a lot of time on-line are more depressed than average
- . the interconnectivity (with others) is what is new
- . there is a need to be guided through cyberspace (like a helpful librarian)
- . technology is popular if it helps us achieve values (reaching our children)
- . a major shift is occurring in channels of distribution

The Internet and Our Sense of Self

I have long been interested in the impact of interactivity on community, but it seems practical to examine *the self* in relation to computer interaction first; then one can reflect upon the self-in-communion-with-others.

The MIT scholar Sherry Turkle has been studying the relationship of computers and children and adults for several decades. Turkle is a licensed clinical psychologist and she offers sophisticated data on the impact of the computer network on the sense of self. Her earlier book, *The Second Self*, dealt with humans

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interacting with the computer itself; her more recent study, *Life on the Screen*, examines scientifically, the impact of *network interaction* on the self.

Turkle's social science training has included graduate work in sociology, anthropology, and personality psychology. She has been a practicing psychotherapist for two decades. She has studied the impact of the computer on children in the U.S., in Great Britain, and in Russia. In 1992 her studies turned almost exclusively to the study of the impact of the Internet on self-identity and *Life on the Screen* examines aspects of self such as the discontents of virtuality, gender troubles, and the identity crisis in the age of the Internet.

This is a good place to admit that it is probably too early to really know what impact the computer network is having on us as individuals and as society. However, people like Turkle who spend decades in gathering data through

personal interviews and ethnological field studies can guide us. I recommend that religious institutions invest time and resources in this kind of analysis if we are to be pastoral in an age of interactive communication.

There are numerous insights in Turkle's book. I'd like to focus on two: the impact on self-identity when one "lives" for extended periods in the simulated interactive environment of the Internet and, secondly, the issue of power versus responsibility in cyberspace.

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According to Turkle, we are negotiating new boundaries of human existence as we move easily in and out of cyberspace. Working with children, whom she says are "harbingers of our cultural mindset," she notes that a decade ago children psychologized the machine as they questioned whether the machine was "alive."

A decade later she notes that children now know that computers are not alive, that they are just machines. The boundary line between computers and humans is clear to them. However, now they are comfortable with the idea that these inanimate objects can both think and have a personality. Therefore the computer (and its world) seem fitting partners for dialogue and relationship (perhaps like dolls and toy soldiers have been for previous generations).

Now there is a growing comfort with this alternative "existence." Cycling through cyberspace is impacting the way we see ourselves – rapid alternatives in

identity, changing lifestyle (even gender) as we relate to others. Eliza Doolittle's character convinced us that you can become what you pretend to be. The simulated environment can become a medium for working with the materials of a person's life.

This is quite a different "discourse" with self! This kind of interaction has psychological (and pastoral) implications. It's the stuff of fantasy, which has long been a part of human existence, but this fantasy is so real!

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Turkle notes the relationship of this new sense-of-self to the writings of Robert Lifton in *The Protean Self*. A unitary view of self is possible in traditional cultures with stable symbols. But this has broken down. Lifton says we can react in several ways. We can insist dogmatically on unity. (This is a current challenge for the Catholic Church, for example, in a world of diversity where 70% of all Catholics now reside outside of Europe and North America, and many "local theologies" are emerging).

Or, says Lifton, we can return to systems of belief which can lead to fundamentalism, or embrace the idea of the fragmented self, with fluidity, "with no moral content and sustainable form." (Turkle worries that this is rampant in cyberspace).

However, Lifton sees another alternative – the Protean self – named after the god Proteus. This self is multiple but integrated, healthy, grounded in coherence and moral outlook. Turkle notes that “a more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity.” (p. 261) I wonder if this fluid sense of self may eventually facilitate the breakdown of global patriarchal power.

Of course, as humans move into cyberspace they bring their humanity with them – even if they simulate a new persona. So there are many battles on the Internet, extending the conflict that is at the heart of most video games and much of

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real life. Indeed, some research indicates that some who move into simulated environments in cyberspace are lonely and feel powerless. The search for connection can be expressed in positive or negative ways. This keeps many females away from such environments. Rage against women often erupts there, but at the same time, as somewhat-shy people interact with females online or even impersonate them, they can begin to understand what being a woman involves in a patriarchal world.

Turkle notes “the challenge is to integrate some meaningful personal responsibility in virtual environments” instead of using virtuality as an excuse for irresponsibility or excessively aggressive behavior.

I find the concluding thoughts of Turkle very rich:

As we stand on the boundary between the real and the virtual, our experience recalls what the anthropologist Victor Turner termed a liminal moment, a moment of passage when new cultural symbols and meanings can emerge. Liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity. In our time, we are simultaneously flooded with predictions of doom and predictions of imminent utopia. We live in a crucible of contradictory experience. When Turner talked about liminality, he understood it as a transitional state – but living with flux may no longer be temporary. (p. 268)

She adds: “Our need for a practical philosophy of self-knowledge has never been greater as we struggle to make meaning from our lives on the screen.” (p. 269)

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Interactivity and the Formation of Community

Next we consider the impact of interactive networks on building community. Establishing the Kingdom of God probably requires building healthy communities – in families, among different ethnic and religious groups, among nations.

One recent highly-praised and thoughtful analysis of the Internet is Margaret Wertheim’s book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. Wertheim traces theories of space through various ages and cultures, including our own. Her basic premise is that Dante was the “first cartographer to draw the map of soul-space” but the Enlightenment and the development of modern science have contributed to our

current age of materiality and consumerism – where, some analysts note, even religion has become commodified.

Wertheim worries that, unlike Dante’s vision, there is a lack of directionality in cyberspace. “This limitless freedom of movement is a prime fantasy of late twentieth-century cosmology.” (p. 187)

She is also concerned about other aspects of techno-utopian space: that many cyberspace areas emphasize invention, discovery, new frontiers (like NASA’s space community, for example) in contrast to the growing awareness that these have often fed imperialism and colonialism in past eras. Cyberspace can offer interaction and communities where one can demand (or design) perks, but the individual can still

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remain free from responsibility for their own actions or their interaction with the larger group. This may be a tendency of religion-on-line groups, for example – “feel-good” spirituality without real-world obligation or constraint.

She notes, realistically, that we can over-state the potential of the Internet in forming community. In fact many of the groups on the Internet are exclusive, even somewhat imperialistic. Like 17th century coffeehouses, cybergroups start out allowing varied individuals to share ideas, but they can become exclusive. Like

these earlier coffeehouses, women are not welcome in some groups and, in fact, are sometimes abused.

Then how can the Internet contribute to the global community we long for and that interactive technology seems to offer? Certainly millions are linked daily through E-mail messages, and chat rooms and newsgroups. And at any moment thousands of individuals are “residing” in multi-user domains (MUDs) or simulated environments they have created.

Wertheim looks beyond the utopian view of cyberspace to a deeper value – **the notion of cyberspace as a network of relationships**. She adds that

“cyberspace can serve as a metaphor for community, because human communities also are bound together by networks of relationships: the kinship networks of our families, the social networks of our friends, and the professional networks of our

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work associates. Within any modern community there are also networks of interrelated businesses, networks of social services, networks of churches, networks of health care providers, and so on.” (p. 301)

I might add, incidentally, that the relational aspect of interactive communication is one of the reasons I have found this concept so empowering – for individuals and for faith communities. I do not consider it a coincidence that this relational aspect is especially valued by two analysts who happen to be female.

I have explored in my own earlier writings the significance of the dialogic in the ecclesiology of Vatican II (11) and some specific examples of interactive teleconferencing in the U.S. Catholic Church. (12) Recently at a conference at the University of Salamanca in Spain I explored the impact of interactivity on communication flows and organizational structures, including religious organizations. (13) Some of these writings are available at <www.religion-online.org>

I have been engaged in many workshops with church leadership of various denominations as we think together about being pastoral in a dialogic age. None of this is easy.

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We need a philosophy of discourse. We need to implement the theology of dialogue called for by the bishops at Vatican II (GS #92). Church groups (and the media) should commit to the dialogic/interactive/participative task. We should provide the leadership and the tools so the next millennium will have an architecture and an aesthetic of dialogue – just as cathedrals stand as symbols of the way earlier centuries spoke of their faith and their communal commitment.

The communication scholar, Deborah Tannen of Georgetown University recently published a book entitled *The Argument Culture*. Professor Tannen notes that our public squares are full of discordant, argumentative voices. Will the Internet facilitate dialogue or will it consist mostly of robotic space wars and spamming?

Another major challenge is that of equity. It is certainly possible to address this issue systematically. In the U.S. as telephone usage spread a policy decision was made that all citizens had a right to telephone access, not just the wealthy or those living in big cities. Our telephony economic infrastructure was constructed so that expensive outreach to rural areas was subsidized by telephone profits in other market sectors. We need to guarantee access to information and computer skills in an age when this is required for most people to earn a living.

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Practical Examples and Recommendations

I want to mention just a few practical examples of what is being done to facilitate dialogue and interactivity. When I interviewed telecommunication ministers of all the European Union countries I found that – even in the competitive telecommunications sector – these nations were in dialogue and were collaborating. (14) For example, they pool resources for very expensive

telecommunications “pre-competitive” research and development. As this R & D leads to specific products various nations and corporations can put on competitive gloves and battle it out in the marketplace. And there is much dialogue on technical standards. (14)

In the U.S., the late Cardinal Bernardin envisioned a project that could seek “common ground” among Catholics and this project has moved forward. (15) It has developed communication tools (study guides, videos) that can facilitate dialogue at the parish level.

In the U.S. Commerce Department I have helped to evaluate proposals in a program called the Telecommunications Information Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP) where over \$100 million have been invested in projects in five areas: community networking, education, culture and lifelong learning; health; public safety; and public services. These government grants facilitate interactive network development and are matched by local grants.

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The good news is that decades of theoretical work has already been done on the dialogic. This is based on research in negotiation theory which grew out of earlier work in game theory. (16) We know that to promote dialogue does not necessarily mean that groups must reach consensus. We should, as media leaders and people of faith, “spread the good news” of dialogic success stories. We

need to accumulate case studies and help our civic and religious leaders learn the dialogic and interactive way.

This is not easy. Most of us have been educated in a linear and top-down intellectual cultural system. For those who hold power, it will not be easy to move from “power over” to the more interactive and dialogic “power with.” (17) And the hyperlink world of the Internet seems irrational, chaotic. Yet, like chaos theory in the sciences, we will see patterns in the chaos.

We are finding that many dialogic tools like the fax, the cell phone and the E-mail message are increasing the speed and pace of our lives, shortening the turnaround time expected in our tasks. We need to learn how to use these tools to make us more effective and collaborative, instead of just fast. We can foster respect for Wisdom instead of simply promoting the continual accumulation of information. I have found that in a hyperspeed world I need to insure my own quiet space. This may explain the growing attraction of what Trappist monk Thomas Keating calls

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centering prayer (which has its own Contemplative Outreach Web site, incidentally, already visited by 30,000 seekers).

My prejudice is that I believe education is the solution to most problems. We need to organize experiential and informational materials for parents, for

parishes, for communities, for political and economic leaders so we can use our dialogic tools and culture to be informed and open to new ideas, to negotiate in “win-win” ways and to use cyberspace with wisdom.

Church leaders need to study *internal* interactive communication flows and see what cyberspace networks can teach us about being a more participative church community (*Intranets*, as well as the *Internet*).

Then we can pray *in dialogue*: Thy Kingdom come!