

# Tweeting is not revolutionary, Humphreys says

July 24 2013, by Byrebecca Harrison

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Users of Twitter and other social media receive criticism for broadcasting mundane things about their lives, but a Cornell researcher says the idea of chronicling everyday life for a broader audience is not novel – though some risks inherent in the technology may be.

Lee Humphreys, assistant professor of communication, detailed the relationship between historical and contemporary media in a July 17 lecture on campus.

"To submit a message on Twitter, it has to be under 140 characters," Humphreys said. "These are not paragraphs; these are barely even sentences ... I was really interested in who does this and why do they do it, as well as what it means to be communicating in this way."

Humphreys has explored blogging as a means of expressing one's self, and eventually found herself studying traditional diaries, which had a similar purpose.

"I had it in my mind that diaries are those little pink notebooks with a little lock ... and you keep them under your pillow and you confess your soul to them," Humphreys said. "I was wrong."

Diaries, particularly prior to the 19th century, she discovered, were social: People shared their diaries to document family and community events.

According to Humphreys, diaries afforded, or invited, us to use them in different ways. Diaries became dramatically smaller over time – 2 by 3 inches in size. "People loved the idea of having that technological constraint. They took that affordance as an invitation to write less," she said.

"There are clear analogue examples that helped me to understand why someone would opt into 140 characters ... Twitter users took that invitation to limit their text [opposed to other social media outlets], and found it, in fact, very liberating," Humphreys explained.

In comparison to diaries, however, social media differs in its audience, the speed of interactivity and the networked environment. To explore these differences, Humphreys and undergraduate student Seth Shapiro conducted an in-depth analysis of military blogs and Civil War diaries and letters.

"We chose two soldiers: 'Dadmanly,' a blogging soldier from the war in Iraq, and the diary and letters of 'CharlieMac,' a union soldier in the Civil War."

Both men relied on technological systems for their communication with home – the Internet and the postal system. Both men wrote of their frustration created from malfunctioning networks and the anxiety they knew their loved ones would experience with slower communication. Both systems afforded broader audiences, and both media had therapeutic value.

"It is not surprising that this hasn't changed," Humphreys said.

This suggests, Humphreys explained, that rather than contemporary social media being seen as a revolution, we have a long history of peer-to-peer sharing.

"In these mundane details we share our lives with those we love. We see this being done historically ... with diaries and letters, and today with [social media](#)," Humphreys said.

But, Humphreys concluded, "It's complicated."

Privacy in the new, vastly networked environment becomes a real question. Humphreys suggested the need for further understanding of these technologies, their norms and how people are utilizing them to better understand and establish privacy.

Humphreys spoke as part of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions lecture series.

Provided by Cornell University

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