Toward the end of the interview, just as the thirty-something Olivier and I began to say our good-byes, he told me that in the end, it was the way his wife (soon to be ex-wife) kept e-mailing his work account that was particularly distressing. They were dissolving a marriage, and this disentangling required discussion, most of which was taking place by e-mail. He was forced to create a personal folder for all the e-mails she sent to his work account, the only personal folder he had in this particular e-mail account. No matter how often he e-mailed her personal e-mail account, no matter how often he sent messages from his own personal e-mail account, she insisted on using the accounts they had both set aside for their professional lives. And when she sent these e-mails, she always sent them when she was at work. He could tell from the time attached to each e-mail. The boundaries were clear—he was no longer allowed to contact her personal account or interact with her during her personal time.

Of course this probably wasn’t what bothered Olivier the most about the whole process. He was getting a divorce because his wife had sent him an e-mail out of the blue asking for a divorce and offering no reasons while he was away on a business trip. It turned out to be a nonnegotiable decision. After the two-line e-mail announcing that she wanted a divorce, she would communicate with him only by e-mail and occasional angry phone calls. She closed their joint bank accounts while he was gone, so he returned to no money and no place to stay. For weeks he had no explanation that made sense of why she wanted a divorce, although gradually he learned of another man, someone she had met at work. All the communication he had with her gave him no clear insights into why she was doing what she was doing. Knowing another man existed did not seem to explain enough for him.

She was violating all the shared order that they carefully, or even perhaps accidentally, created together—when they spoke in French or English together, when they sent e-mails to their friends from their joint e-mail account, or when they would e-mail someone from their individual personal accounts. The more Olivier detailed how divorce was affecting how he and his wife/ex-wife were using media to communicate, the more apparent it became that the couple had developed a system for indicating that some messages were formal, some informal, some professional, and some intimate. They used e-mail accounts, phones, and different languages all to create intertwined ways of adding information to the message—a message from their joint e-mail account would signal something different than if that same message had been sent from their individual e-mail accounts. In e-mailing his work account, his wife/ex-wife was rejecting all the years of chosen habits that they had created together just through how they e-mailed. So the unseemly disorder that Olivier experienced with these e-mails to his work account—these weekly, sometimes daily, reminders of how her decisions at every level had transformed his life’s plans into unwelcome chaos—captured the misery of this dissolution. Since the moment she e-mailed him to demand a divorce, Olivier explained that he felt none of his wishes were respected; sending
messages only to his work e-mail was a small example that seemed to reverberate and point to all the others, beginning with the e-mail requesting a divorce.

Olivier had been using the possibilities made available by e-mail—multiple accounts—to sort his communication. His wife/ex-wife was refusing to accede to this system of classifying communication. In short, she was sending information through her choice of medium (e-mail and work account) as much as by the content of her messages. This double communication in the message is possible only because of Olivier’s, or anyone’s, media ideologies. As mentioned in the introduction, people’s *media ideologies*—their beliefs about how a medium communicates and structures communication—makes a personal e-mail account different from a work e-mail account, or a text message different from a phone call. The difference often lies not in the actual message, but in people’s understandings of the media. Media ideologies are responsible for the ways in which second-order information works (see chapter 4). Second-order information refers to the information that can guide you into understanding how particular words and statements should be interpreted.¹ One never sends a message without the message being accompanied by second-order information; that is, without indications about how the sender would like the message received.

**You Can’t Text Message Breakup**

*Media*含有第二秩序信息因为人们的媒体理想，人们关于如何使用电子邮件，电话，即时消息（IM），和其他媒体添加重要的信息到消息。让我给你一个具体例子时，当一个媒体的理想能够在理解的工具，消息的严肃性。这是一个故事，哈勒是一个研究生，告诉我向那个结束的采访，当她突然记住另外的故事关于短信。哈勒和道格已经为了一段时间。他们是同在一个课程，他们两者也成为了朋友与瑞安娜。瑞安娜总是打击哈勒作为一点，她是一个那些谁总是说可以说说一些稍微出乎意料且尴尬，一些事情使其他人停止在对话中交谈，他们开始疑虑。作为哈勒和道格开始一起，他们开始开玩笑有关瑞安娜的社交无礼—大部分的通过短信消息。经过一段时间，哈勒开始开玩笑道格，因他秘密地对瑞安娜感到厌倦。这次玩笑在做了一个几周。然后道格发短信给哈勒，告诉她他必须与她一起分手，因为他真的在爱与瑞安娜。这是通过短信，一中媒体，哈勒总是使用开玩笑。短信是从来没有一种媒体，哈勒用来传达严肃的信息，如“我正在快和你分手。”所以她理解不到信息的第一。在一方面，这是一个完全的惊喜：没有立即的谈话，信息可能被谈到。在另一方面，只有他们有过的谈判通过文本，瑞安娜是关于开玩笑谈到的。她回复了道格，虽然道格还在开玩笑。他发短信给她，他说的不是，他说的是他完全严肃的。哈勒叙述了：

So then he texts me out of the blue: “I am bad at life.” Which is how he talks, so I wrote back: “I know, but why?”

“Because I wasn’t kidding about Rianna this whole time.”
And I was like "yeh, right, hahaha."  
And he says: "no really, I wasn't kidding."  
[Halle interrupts recounting the texts to point out] These are all text messages.  
[He continues] "No really, I really like her."  
I was like—wait, are we still kidding? That is what I said, "Are we still kidding?"  
And he said, "No, I talked to one of my best girlfriends from home, and she said that it's not fair to keep seeing you the whole time I am thinking about her."  
And I am like—what is going on? These are text messages about something that we have been joking about, and I have no idea what is going on. I am completely out of the loop.... So that was it. I haven't talked to him since.

The second-order communication—what Halle understands it means to communicate this kind of information by text—seems to her to be at odds with what the words of the text message were about. For Halle, the medium was at odds with the message. She had to do some follow-up investigation by asking him if he was kidding so that she could decide what interpretation she should finally give to the messages they were exchanging. In the end, Halle decided that he had behaved badly by communicating this to her by text, so badly that she stopped communicating with him entirely.

How Halle understands texting as a medium shapes the ways in which she responds to Doug's message. The texting was supposed to give second-order disclaimers to the message—carried along with the message was this imaginary additional frame urging the receiver to understand that nothing said in this medium is serious because texting is not a serious medium. Halle feels that Doug violates this tacit assumption—he says serious things in a medium that she considers appropriate only for the most casual and joking of conversations. Let's not forget that Doug tells Halle that he wants to break up with her for Rianna, a woman she doesn't respect and finds off-putting. This too is part of the story. But it is Halle's media ideology that in her own account affects how she decides to treat Doug afterward. She decides not to keep communicating with someone who texts this kind of information, and thus in her mind behaves badly. When Doug tried to get back together repeatedly (by texting, not through face-to-face communication), she turned him down. I am not saying Halle was wrong or right. Instead, I am pointing to how important media ideologies can be in shaping how people actually interpret the messages they receive. Content isn't everything; media ideologies matter.

Sometimes when people talk about ideologies, they talk about beliefs that mystify, that keep someone from understanding how things truly are. The term ideology does not have that connotation for me. Media ideologies are not true or false. An e-mail conversation is not, in its essence, more formal than an instant-message conversation—or less honest or spontaneous, or more calculated. But some people believe that e-mail is more formal, more dishonest, and more calculated, and this affects the ways they send and interpret e-mail messages. Understanding people's media ideologies can give insights into how utterances are received, and why people choose to reply in particular ways. But studying media ideologies will not give insights into what is really being communicated as opposed to what people believe is being communicated. It is not an analytical tool for discerning truth or reality; instead, it is but one analytical tool for understanding the ways in which all communication is socially constructed and socially interpreted. Understanding media ideologies is central to understanding how communication happens, especially now when there are so many possible media from which to choose.
The "How" of Breaking Up

Why do people talk about the medium of a breakup? In my interviews, I learned about people's media ideologies from their emotionally charged stories about endings. I was finding out about how they thought the media that were used affected the communication when the conversations were all about love or desire and its loss. People were talking about appropriateness all the time, about why one medium might be appropriate or inappropriate for ending a relationship. Sometimes I talked to people about how certain technologies had contributed to ending relationships; for example, how sharing passwords had, in retrospect, become the first step in destroying a relationship. I talked to college students about ending friendships as well, about the differences between ending romantic relationships and ending friendships. What I now know about people's media ideologies is intimately linked to what they said about different media as a means for communicating about ending relationships.

Talking about how people choose to end a relationship may be a common American way to talk about breakups. When I was discussing this project with another anthropologist, Ray McDermott, in a tea shop in Palo Alto, he recalled when he and his students had interviewed Americans about being in a family in the early 1980s. He said that when people talked about divorce, many focused on how things were said, what words were used. At the time, there weren't so many media to choose from—people would talk in person, call on a landline or write a letter. Ray said that people tended to describe their sense of outrage, injustice, and grievance in terms of how someone had ended the relationship, not that the relationship was ending. The resentment that people were willing to voice about ending relationships all revolved around the form of the ending. When they would narrate how the relationship ended, they would focus on what was said. In my interviews, this held true as well. Turning to the media used is just an extension of a U.S. tendency to discuss breakups by describing the way breakups took place.

When people focus on the "how" of a breakup, particular aspects of a medium become important—whether it is too formal or too informal, whether it allows for intonation, conversational turn-taking, circulation of the breakup text, explanation, and so on. In my interviews, some media were generally acknowledged to be deficient in one way or another. When people explained to me the problems with texting, as I mentioned in the introduction, they often focused on how brief text messages had to be. Breakups should ideally be adequately explained, and how much can one actually say in 160 characters? In addition, some people insisted, text messages were for deciding only the most casual of arrangements such as when one should meet for dinner or who else might want to go to the movies. For these people, text messaging is too informal for something as serious or important as a breakup.

Formality and Informality: Assessing Media

The formality or informality of a medium depends on people's media ideologies; there is nothing inherent in a medium to make it more formal or informal than any other medium. The kind of informality people agree to attribute to a particular medium, such as texting, will shape when it is appropriate to use that medium. While text messages might be too informal for a breakup, they often had the right level of informality for starting to flirt with someone. Women insisted to me that if they met someone who was interested in them, they would exchange phone numbers, but
only to text each other. Calling would express too much interest; calling would be too forward a move. But texting was considered to carry low enough stakes that one could begin an exchange with the right level of ambiguity, unclear whether the exchange is about friendship or desire. As Summer suggested in her interview, discussing the text message she saved that a cute man had sent her a half hour after their first conversation: “The good thing about texting is that it’s that nice in-between between calling and not doing anything. It’s not so desperate.”

It is this very casualness that makes texting a problematic medium for breaking up. One connects to someone initially using texting because people presume that texting reveals so little about the depth or seriousness of one’s emotions. As a result, it is hardly appropriate as a medium for breaking up. What is caution in one’s choice of media in the initial contact becomes cowardice at the end.

Texting’s brevity and informality also affects the ways texting is actually used in a breakup. Here I want to distinguish between media ideology and practice. When people told me about their media ideologies of texting, they would stress how inappropriate texting was as a medium for breaking up.2 Sometimes, however, when they talked about how text messages actually played a role in their breakups, I got a different sense of how text messages functioned. People would tell me about choosing to start text-message fights on purpose, ones that sometimes, but not always, led to breakups. People would prefer text-message fights because, as Rose explained to me,

2. Even the one person I interviewed who thought I was clearly very old-fashioned for suggesting that texting was not acceptable as a breakup medium also told me in detail about how casual many of her relationships were. In this case, part of what seemed to help texting be so acceptable was the ways in which its informality helped to emphasize her relationships’ casualness.
a problem. Only one person told me about being dumped by letter—and this on cream stationery written with what she suspected was a quill pen. In this case, it was the very formality of the letter that bothered Eleanor. She knew the breakup was probably coming. They had lived in the same dorm, and as long as they primarily communicated face-to-face, all seemed to go well. He wouldn’t text her and when she texted him, his phone was often turned off. For the most part, there was no reason to communicate any other way but face to face—they lived in the same place. But when they went home for the summer, four hours away from each other, their communication started to go sour. They kept arguing by phone. So Eleanor thought a breakup was likely, but did not expect it by cream stationery. She described in detail, with a mixture of horror and amusement, the seriousness of tone, the surprise of getting such a formal document in the mail. “Who does that anymore?” she kept asking. She would have much preferred a phone call.

Cream stationery aside, the medium that most undergraduates described to me as formal was e-mail. As I mentioned in my introduction, people’s media ideologies about e-mail reveal a generation gap in the ways people understand technology. Even undergraduates who were unhappy with the ways in which new media were changing people’s communication, would describe e-mail as the closest regular form of communication that they had to letters; that is, to more traditional forms of communication. By contrast with all the other media they used regularly, e-mail seemed the most formal, used to communicate with employers, professors, parents, and grandparents. One student, who wanted the pseudonym Gunslinger, chatted with me about what he thought about e-mail, distinguishing between handwritten letters and e-mail:

(\text{Gunslinger,} chatted with me about what he thought about e-mail, 
\text{distinguishing between handwritten letters and e-mail:})

\text{\subsection{In e-mail} Every letter looks the same, they are identical. I push the button, but it wasn’t my hand making the note. But it is incredibly helpful and it’s shrinking the world, and it is so much easier to communicate, blah blah blah, all those wonderful things. So in that sense, e-mail is the best tool. You can clearly think out what you are trying to say as long as you don’t write an angry e-mail. But you could just as easily write an angry letter. And as soon as you send it, you regret it, and you try to jam your hand into the blue box, but you can’t get it, just like you can’t send an e-mail. So those two, in that vein they are very similar, in that they both still have their problems, but since we have been writing letters as long as we have been around, we know how to approach them better. Whereas instant messaging, and texting, they are fairly new technologies so there really is no etiquette.} \text{\subsection{For the Gunslinger, e-mail and letters gradually became almost interchangeable as he thought about the etiquette challenges each presented. Other people his age with whom I spoke would also quickly equate letters and e-mails, viewing them as interchangeably formal.}}

\text{Older people, by contrast, viewed e-mail as informal and described the way its informality affected communication. Noah, a professor of physics in his forties at my university, shared his perspective that e-mail was not similar to letters at all but far more linked to spoken communication:} \text{\subsection{Because e-mail is so connected to oral communication, we feel like we are saying something quite well when we type it out. And then you can go back to it a day later and you realize—oh, this really wasn’t nearly as well-written as I thought it would be, which is not as much an experience I have with sort of conventional typing. The ways}}
I know it is linked to oral communications is (a) I notice how often I am saying things out loud as I type them on e-mail, which is not something I do with normal word-processing and (b) the number of times I make phonetic spelling errors. What did I do just a couple days ago? It would have been potentially embarrassing, I spelled out the word that sounded like what I was saying, but I really meant a different word entirely. I don’t know if it was “through” or “threw.” The fact that I have seen those kinds of errors written by brilliant scholars makes me realize that this is something about e-mail. People make grammatical and spelling errors in e-mail that they would never make on a memo they were typing on the exact same keyboard.

E-mail is a medium in which media ideologies are most sharply differentiated along generational lines, with people of Noah’s generation viewing e-mail as informal and people of the Gunslinger’s generation seeing e-mail almost as formal a medium as one can have, second only to a letter.

Up until now, I have been describing how people’s media ideologies determine the formality of medium. There is nothing intrinsically formal or informal about a particular medium; it all depends on what its users decide is formal or informal. However, the relative formality of a medium is but one small aspect of how media ideologies affect people’s breakup experiences. Breakups make people focus on other ways different media might affect communication as well. For example, while people’s e-mail ideologies tend to center around the ways in which they compare e-mail to letters, people’s instant-messaging ideology, by contrast, centers around the way instant messaging resembles face-to-face conversations.

Is It Like Face-to-Face Conversation?

People are constantly developing their media ideologies through comparison, attributing certain qualities to one medium because they are tacitly contrasting it to other media. Thus when people compared texting with instant messaging, they would talk about how texting was ever-present and too informal, while instant messaging could offer a textual representation of spoken conversation. When faced with a hypothetical question such as “Which is a better medium for breaking up?”, people would talk about how instant messaging allows for conversational turn-taking, how people always respond to each other in real-time. People could take hours to respond, and one never knew when it would arrive. An instant messaging response, by contrast, one could see being typed. Sometimes people mentioned that they could get information about the other person’s state of mind by the speed and rhythm of their typing, once they knew the person well enough. In addition, instant messaging affords the possibility for explanation and a dialogue in which the person being dumped can ask “why?”

One woman, who requested the pseudonym Duac Vultae, largely preferred to break up by instant message. She explained why in the following way:

Duac Vultae: [Most people think] breaking up in person is ideal. But I just think that when it comes to breaking up with someone, if I am sure that I want to break up with someone, then the best way is to do it through other means.

Ilana: So what do you try?

Duac Vultae: I usually just go on instant messenger, and I make it as clear and straightforward as possible. And I leave no room for doubts. Because when you see someone in person, it’s harder to bring it up. And once you do bring it up, you are going to be affected by how that person responds to it. You will feel bad. And then you might change your mind based on how that person responds, if they start crying or something like that. But then, through instant messaging, you will just say it, and you won’t see
how they react... Most people think it's very harsh. Somehow it never bothered my conscience that it was just done with. It's probably better for them too. I just don't like to drag out a relationship that I have determined to end.

Ilana: So let me ask you, you are choosing instant messaging. And you have other choices. What is it about instant messaging?

Duane Vultee: Other choices, maybe phone? I could call them. That also makes it more difficult—talking. You know, talking makes it more personal. And then, if I text, its just, I don't know, then I feel like I still need to leave room for a little bit of explanation and text messaging, that would take a long time to respond back. So, or e-mail, now e-mail—I like the immediate response. With instant messaging you can do that. And if they get upset, you can just sign off, and okay, it's done. But then through e-mail, you have to wait to see.... If I am absolutely certain about the breakup, then it's instant messaging.

When people objected to instant messaging, they often pointed to the way in which IM might not be enough like spoken conversation. One student in a class of mine said that the problem with instant messaging was that you never knew if you were the only person they were talking to at that moment. Because this is on a computer screen, someone could be breaking up with one person and hooking up with another at the same time. In short, instant messaging could not guarantee that someone's whole attention was on the person they were typing to. Technically this is also true of e-mail, Facebook, or text messages. But it is the ways that people talk about instant messaging and how similar it is to face-to-face conversations that also makes the differences that they notice between these two ways of communicating more of a problem.

Another discomfort people had with instant messaging is that someone could simply end the conversation abruptly and without any forewarning. When people do this in face-to-face conversations, there are bodily movements that give some indication that this may be about to happen, and perhaps some clues as to why someone has chosen to end a conversation. By IM, there are no such nonverbal clues, so this ending is perceived as much more abrupt. Olivia told me a story about how her eighth-grade boyfriend had responded to her desire to breakup over IM by simply logging off.

This is when instant messenger was a big part of my life—away messages told about your state of mind. You would put up the quote of a song, and it told if you were happy or sad.... I had this boyfriend and it was eighth grade. He asked me out through his friend, we talked online, and we hung out, like, once, and then I got freaked out. I am not ready for this. I broke up with him online [by IM]. And then, of course, it's like that is the equivalent of deactivating [Facebook], is the person who signs off without saying anything. It's like "oh my god, are they going to go kill themselves, did they go to cry, or are they pissed off, and they don't care?"...I remember what I said, and my heart was pounding. And then he just signed off, and that was his response. I was good friends with his friends, and they told me that he was upset and everything. And he wasn't online for a few days... so I was worried about him.

Signing off instant messaging without announcing he was going felt far too vague for Olivia. She was fourteen at the time, and this was one of the first times she had ever ended a relationship, so she did not have many past experiences to help place his behavior in context. And his actions were too ambiguous for her to evaluate what might be the consequences of her desire to end the relationship. In short, she needed more information about how his media ideology and his practice coincided to interpret his actions.

I have been describing some of the media ideologies at play when people break up with each other (and there are many more),
in part to clarify what it means to analyze new media from an ethnographic or anthropological perspective. I could discuss the ways I think a medium functions—whether texting ensures more of an immediate answer than instant messaging or e-mail, and how that might affect a breakup—but that would be an interpretation based on my own assumptions and experiences with technology. People develop understandings of how media functions based on their own practices and conversations they have with the people they know, as well as the stories they hear and see through the media. Their media ideologies always managed to surprise me, and make me think about the technologies we were talking about in a new way. People are unpredictable, one can't tell without asking and observing what media ideologies they hold, and how their beliefs shape their practices. Some people I talked to thought that a text message always required a response; others had no problem ignoring text messages. Whether texts required response or could be ignored was part of a person's media ideology; it had nothing to do with the cell phone equipment. In short, one should not presume to know the media ideologies that accompany a particular technology in advance without asking a person many questions to determine what his or her media ideologies and practices are.

**Dating People with Different Media Ideologies**

There is a corollary to what I am presenting here—people don't necessarily share the same media ideologies. Being American, or a white middle-class American undergraduate is not enough information to predict with any degree of accuracy what your media ideology will be. I realized as I interviewed more and more people that not only did people have different media ideologies, but they were often dating people with different media ideologies. This would occasionally make the breakups more difficult. One person might think a text message was a perfectly acceptable way to start a breakup conversation—a conversation that they just assumed would drift to phone or face-to-face conversation before the end of the night. The other person might be horrified to get the message by text message and refuse to speak to their now ex-lover ever again. When I began interviewing people, I expected some variety in how they understood the ways that media affected messages. After all, because these *media ideologies are ideologies, they are always multiple, locatable, positioned, and contested*. What I didn't expect was how multiple and how contested all these media ideologies would be.

In my interviews, people often described having to guess what other people's media ideologies might be to interpret why they were using a particular medium to accomplish a certain communicative task. For example, on Facebook, you can send a public message by posting to someone's wall so anyone in their Facebook network can know the content of the message, the author, and the time it was sent. With a private Facebook message, only the addressee can see the message. So Joe invites Jen to go bowling via a Facebook wall post; should Jen consider this a date? Why is Joe sending this message so publicly—to make it less of a date (that is more casual) or more of a date (warning other people who might be interested in Jen that he, Joe, was pursuing her)? This particular utterance drove Jen to Joe's profile for any insight into how Joe understands and uses Facebook. And once one starts dating, as many readers may have discovered, regular

4. Upon hearing about my project, many people responded by telling me about the *Sex and the City* episode in which Berger breaks up with Carrie Bradshaw on a Post-it note.
intimate contact does not necessarily shed comprehensive light on how another person communicates or interprets the media through which they are communicating.

The fact that people don’t necessarily share media ideologies means that they don’t necessarily agree on how one should use particular media, either to connect or disconnect with each other. Yet being able to interpret other people’s media ideologies with any accuracy can affect how your conversations will flow. As I mentioned before, if two people agree that a text message is too informal a medium for breaking up, they might decide that a text message fight containing the stated desire to break up should not be taken seriously. Only a face-to-face encounter following the fight can best resolve the argument, and might potentially lead to reconciliation. But if one person decides that texting is so informal a medium that any breakup utterance performed within this medium is unconscionable (as Halle did in the story toward the beginning of this chapter), then rather than having an imminent reconciliation, a breakup has just taken place. In short, it is not just how you think about a medium, it is how you reflexively engage with the medium given what you think about it.

And Then She Texted Me

Media ideologies are central to explaining one of the striking features of the stories people told me: People always mentioned which medium was used whenever they recounted a conversation. As people of all ages told me breakup stories, they tended to tell me not only the sequence of events, who said what and when, but they also always mentioned the media in which each conversation or message took place. They would point out whenever there was a switch in medium, letting me know whenever the narrated conversational exchanges switched from phone to texting, for example. At first, I suspected that the people I was interviewing were generously humoring me—they knew I was interested in communicative technology and so they were willing to seamlessly mark its presence when they narrated their breakup conversations in an interview. But once I started paying attention, it became clear that mentioning the medium is a relatively typical feature of contemporary American breakup narratives. All my friends constantly link the utterance with its communicative medium, and many breakup narratives featured on radio shows or television or posted on blogs and other Web sites do as well. Here is a typical example of what I am describing from the Dumpedster Web site—this was posted in May 2003:

Alexis asked me out via the Internet. She was cute, hip, and a scientist. We went on five dates, but each one seemed like a first date. She let me kiss her, but never really responded. Conversation was so-so. Oh, and on the second date, I met her dad. We had plans for Memorial Day, but she never called me, and didn’t respond to my voice-mail…. The next day, I got an e-mail apologizing for blowing me off and saying “I needed to give myself a hall pass not to call” and “I don’t want to be in a relationship right now.”

The Internet, voice mail, e-mail, and hall passes all appear in this narrative. In their stories, people are tracking the media through which breakups are unfolding. Why do they do this? What work is being done when people retell what was said or typed, while constantly reminding the audience what medium was used?

I’ll begin to answer by pointing out something that readers may have been wondering about. Saying or writing “I want to break

5. The website Dumpedster (www.dumpedster.com) is now defunct.
"Breakup 2.0" is not necessarily effective; suggesting breaking up does not actually result in breaking up. People are often ambivalent about breaking up—one person may want to break up more than the other, or both people may be uncertain. Clarity on this front can seem like an elusive achievement. It turns out that the medium through which "I want to break up" is uttered contributes to its effectiveness. Louise, who was in her late twenties, had been in a seven-year relationship that had begun to contain many ambiguous conversations about whether it should continue or not. These conversations went on for months, but Louise and her significant other were still together. Finally her significant other e-mailed her that he wanted to end the relationship. When Louise reflected on the breakup, it was the e-mail that she focused on, calling it cowardly, and joking months later that she should have refused the breakup and instead waited for the text message. In fact, after the e-mail, she stopped all contact with him. She considered performing a breakup over e-mail so indicative of his personal failings that she didn’t want to continue interacting.

Before I began this research, I thought that a fairly typical response to being dumped by the wrong medium might be to refuse any further contact with the person ending the relationship. Even the popular fictional “Text Message Breakup” Youtube video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcidD2HF8K8M) depicts this response to a breakup e-mail or breakup text as the predictable response. A woman raps about the social costs her boyfriend/ex-boyfriend will now pay—namely, never sleeping with anyone else—because he has breached social norms by breaking up by text-message after a two-year relationship. The chorus being “You don’t text message breakup.” Yet as I mentioned earlier, for some college students, a text-message breakup just indicates that the phone calls or instant messaging will now start. For these people, a text-message breakup is rarely accomplished solely by texting; other media would almost immediately be called upon for this task. Texting a breakup may only be the beginning of the ritual of breaking up, and in some sense the warning shot across the bow. Just because you say you want to break up doesn’t mean that you are actually going to break up. You could be having one of many fights or be about to redefine some of the terms of the relationship, but ending the relationship is not a given.

Facebook plays an ambiguous role in how it facilitates breaking up. Sometimes it creates a sharply defined ending. For Leslie, the Facebook breakup served the same function as e-mail did in my first interview. Leslie checked her Facebook profile late in the day, and found out that she was suddenly single. In fact, she learned that her boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend, had a new girlfriend through the news feed that flashes on as soon as one logs on. And then she noticed that her profile had changed, that he was no longer listed as the person she was in a relationship with. This was a Facebook breakup that was immediately effective. And she said ruefully that because of the news feed, everyone else knew before she did. In this case, the medium helped determine whether indicating “I want to break up” becomes effective over time.

But in other cases the news feed also reveals to people how unstable Facebook claims can be—that is, how unstable a person’s single status can be. While some people will claim that a breakup isn’t official until it is “Facebook official,” just because it has become Facebook official doesn’t mean that it has taken. People will waiver—one day they announce on Facebook that the relationship is in trouble, the next day they announce that they are back together. A community’s first indication that a relationship is in trouble is often the rapid changes to a Facebook relationship status. So Facebook is a glimpse into other people’s disconnections,
but a glimpse that tantalizes instead of satisfying. And what is often unknown is whether the breakup is going to take—is the news feed recording a breakup saga or a narrative of renewing commitment, of near dissolution narrowly averted? Which kind of story will the breakup statement on Facebook eventually contribute to when the events become a story that circulates?

I want to suggest that because people don’t share the same media ideologies, especially about new media, part of what someone is doing by marking every medium in their story is tracing the detective work they had to do to determine which genre of story this narrative was going to become as it unfolded. The interactions might be a relationship fight leading to renewed commitment, or they might signal a breakup. Each person’s intentions are unclear, and can only be retroactively guessed at by seeing how what they say and what they do align. One of the clues that people focus on as they try to guess in hindsight what was going on is the medium that each person uses. Their choice of media can be read as formal or informal, enabling intonation or devoid of intonation, allowing for conversational turn-taking or preventing it, public or private, and so on. By recounting the medium used, people can gain some insight into other people’s media ideologies, and often people realize that these media ideologies are not shared in the moment of a breakup. The question “Why would anyone text that?” is a good indication that people are not sharing the same media ideology about texting.

**Idioms of Practice**

People's media ideologies contribute to why they mention the medium of a message as they tell the stories of their breakups. They are explaining the message—people’s media ideologies ensure that the same sentences are interpreted and experienced differently when read on a computer screen or on a cell phone. There is another reason, though, that marking the medium contributes to the detective work of trying to understand a breakup: People have what I am calling different *idioms of practice*, a term I mentioned in the introduction. Groups of friends, classes, workers in an office will develop together their own ways of using media to communicate with each other. Sometimes they realize that their way of using a medium is distinctive, that it marks them as different from other people. Sometimes they don’t perceive that their use of a medium is unique until some miscommunication or unexpected way someone was communicating made it clear (often unpleasantly clear) that others have different idioms of practice.

Two main reasons emerged from the interviews to explain why there are so many idioms of practice with new media right now, why people keep discovering that there isn’t a general consensus about how or if to use different media to accomplish different communicative tasks, such as breaking up. First, because these are new media, people haven’t had time to develop a widespread consensus about how to use a medium, especially for relatively rare communicative tasks such as breaking up. As Lisa Gitelman, a historian of media, points out, things we now take for granted about the telephone took a while to be established.

Inventing, promoting, and using the first telephones involved lots of self-conscious attention to telephony. But today, people converse through the phone without giving it a moment’s thought. The technology and all of its supporting protocols (that you answer “Hello?” and that you pay the company, but also standards like touch-tones and twelve-volt lines) have become self-evident as the result of social processes, including the habits associated with other, related media. (Gitelman 2006, 5–6)

As Gitelman explains, much of what we take for granted about older communicative technology like the telephone had to be
idioms of practice. A person can cancel a Facebook friendship by clicking on an X near the Facebook friend’s name. Once the person clicks to cancel the friendship, Facebook asks: “Remove friend? Are you sure you want to remove Harry Potter as a friend? This cannot be undone. Harry Potter will not be notified.” You then have to confirm that you do indeed want to cancel the Facebook friendship. Some people said they never defriended anyone on Facebook. As the Gunslinger puts it:

If someone angers me, I just don’t talk to them. It is so trivial to have them no longer associated with you on the Internet. I mean, I am trying to put this in a more base term—when you look at someone, it won’t say friends in common—the Gunslinger and “so and so.” So many people are going: “They’re friends? I thought they didn’t like each other.” But what is the point?

The Gunslinger, and others, thought that Facebook friends means so little that defriending was an excessive act of hostility. Intriguingly, other people had regular bouts of defriending friends, and gave exactly the same reason for these purges: that Facebook friends don’t really matter. Rosie described how she regularly goes through and defriends some of her Facebook friends:

Ilana: What about defriending?
Rosie: I just do it. I had so many friends on Facebook, and I didn’t even really know them all. I mean, I knew them, but they weren’t of any real importance to me. So I went through a defriending purge, spree actually. And I went from 700 friends and I have like 56 now.

Ilana: When did you do this?
Rosie: Over the last year, probably. I went through one [purge] where I deleted all the fake Facebook profiles, like Bruce Buckeye, Brad Pitt, that kind of thing. Then I started going through high school, people I don’t talk to from high school. There are a lot.

Ilana: Did you get any comments about this?
Rosie: No, I never had anybody try to re-friend me. So I am guessing that they didn’t even realize that I did it. Or they just didn’t care, in which case I didn’t need to be friends with them on Facebook anyway. My rule now is that I periodically go through my friends list and I ask: “okay, have I talked to this person in the last couple of months? No. Okay. Should I get rid of them? Probably.” There are some people that I don’t talk to on a regular basis that I keep on there. For the most part, if I don’t talk to them on a regular basis, or interact with them in real life, I probably don’t keep those friends on Facebook or MySpace.

Both Rosie and the Gunslinger are addressing the same social dilemma: how they should best maintain a social network whose members have privileged access to their profile and often circulate too much information (people’s news feed could be too packed with information about people they don’t know well or care about). Some people felt that to be a Facebook friend was so minimal a link that to deny someone this link was especially rude—the metaphorical equivalent of refusing to say “how are you doing?” to a friend of a friend, someone you barely know and pass on the street. Others do not want to clutter their network (and news feed) with people they don’t know well.

Some people broadcast their personal information so often that even reluctant defrienders will cut the link. Paul, who rarely

6. At the time that I was interviewing, Facebook did not allow you to choose whether or not a Facebook friend’s information would appear in your news feed. This changed in 2009.
defriends on Facebook, decided to remove someone from another networking site, his livejournal blog network (www.livejournal.com) because she wrote so much that his livejournal page was filled only with her entries and no one else's.

Paul: So this was on livejournal. This wasn't on Facebook, this was on livejournal. It's basically a public diary...a blog that works a little differently because you can basically create communities. It was a big thing in high school, a big big thing in high school. And when you write something down, you put up a post if you are friends with someone. Then on your friends' page, your post will be there. She would post all the time, like maybe five times a day. And it is supposed to be like once a day, maybe three times a week. That sort of daily or less ballpark. She would post five times a day! So my friends' page would be cluttered with all her posts. I still liked her as a friend, but I couldn't have that many things cluttering up my friends' page. So I took her off, we aren't livejournal friends anymore.

Ilana: Did you tell her?

Paul: I don't think so. We were in drum line [in the band] together. We weren't close enough to talk all the time. We were within the same friends' circle, which was part of the reason why I didn't want her cluttering up my friends' page. You know, friend of a friend. So I don't think I actually told her that. I am not sure that she knows. I imagine that she knows. At the same time, she has five hundred livejournal friends.

Paul put a lot of thought into figuring out whether or not this might offend her. He decided that they didn't know each other all that well, that this wasn't a violation of tacit friendship expectations. He also decided that she was unlikely to value him all that highly either, given how many livejournal friends she had. He hoped that one less link out of five hundred links surely could not matter that much to her, but this was all guesswork on Paul's part.

Of course sometimes people do defriend each other out of anger. It is even more of a statement when there are different idioms of practice involved, when someone defriends another who believes that a Facebook friend is a minimal acknowledgment of a social connection, and thus would never defriend anyone. This happened to Sadie, who would never defriend anyone, as she explains in response to my question: How did she know she had been defriended?

Sadie: She had already decided a week before, two weeks, maybe three weeks that she didn't want to be my friend, but she didn't tell me in person. So not everyone is like this particular person. It was surreal.

Ilana: How did you know that it was weeks earlier?

Sadie: I am just guessing. It could have been the day before, it could have been three weeks before. Because I hadn't had an occasion to message her. And her profile hadn't changed, maybe her profile hadn't changed in a couple of weeks. Since that is another way that you find out. It was very unsettling. I was sort of like "wait, what? Did you seriously defriend me?" And at that point I was angry, because she was disagreeing with me, but she was still talking to me an hour beforehand. And I had had other conversations with her. She wasn't super-friendly, and she was sort of strange. I didn't really notice it until I saw this and knew that she didn't want to be my friend anymore.

In this case, the fact that the people involved had different idioms of practice surrounding Facebook friending and defriending made this defriending meaningful and painful.

I interviewed someone else for whom friending or defriending had little to do with being acquaintances and much more to do with how people circulate knowledge. Noelle told me that when she was curious about someone on Facebook, she would request to
be their friend. They tended to say yes; people often friended other people they suspected that they vaguely knew. She would then look at their profile, figure out what she wanted to know, and then promptly defriend them.

Ilana: How do you decide whether to friend someone or not?
Noelle: Oh, sometimes if I want to be nosy, I want to look at the wall, but if you can't, I will friend somebody, and see what I have to see, and then delete them as a friend. I do that all the time, if I want to look at their pictures or something, just to be nosy, and then I just defriend them.

I must admit, when Noelle told me this, my first thought was, "Well, that's a different idiom of practice." No one else I interviewed would friend and defriend quite like that. Several of the people I had already interviewed would be horrified at the idea of someone doing this, but just as many might wish that they had thought of it themselves.

The wide range of idioms of practice I was encountering in interviews occasionally made for some awkward interview moments. When I was talking to college students about their use of communicative technology, I didn't want to introduce them to new techniques; I just wanted to find out what they did. But I would occasionally, to my surprise, find myself explaining or unwittingly warning people about others' practices. For example, I often asked students about fake Facebook profiles, which I had first learned about from one interviewee as a technique to find out who one's ex-lover is now dating without revealing that you want to know. In short, a fake Facebook profile can be an asset in one's Facebook stalking (more on Facebook stalking in chapter 4). But sometimes students were surprised to find out from my questions that fake Facebook profiles existed that weren't obvious jokes. In this, and other similar moments, I unwittingly stumbled across the fact that I was interviewing college students with numerous idioms of practice.

I have been trying to write from a nonjudgmental standpoint on people's various idioms of practice because I believe that one person's media ideology and use of technology is no better or worse than another's. This is the privilege and obligation of analyzing people's practices. Being a good analyst of others' practices involves accepting the validity of others' perspectives. This isn't a stance you can easily or comfortably take when you are constantly communicating with people with different idioms of practice. As an analyst, I was encountering people's different uses of technology as stories, not as practices that affected me personally. I am able to analyze and write without judging other people's behavior ethical—a luxury that people in the thick of things don't have.

It is not surprising that in my interviews, people were constantly making moral judgments. They felt strongly that some ways of using technology were wrong. For example, in response to my question about what Facebook's relationship status option "it's complicated" might mean, Keith said:

Dumb! Dumb! Why? I don't know... like I just feel like it is so trivial and so childish. What are you telling people like when you put that up there? No, I am not interested in your advances because I kind of got this thing going on with someone. Well then, just like... just remove it, just take it all off. And if people are unsure, you should be enough of an adult... you should have enough social skills to be able to give someone a sign that like 'hey, that's really sweet of you—not interested, got some stuff going on.' You need to do it through 'it's complicated' on Facebook? Really?

Not everyone I interviewed was as outspoken or funny in their critique as Keith, but most people had strong senses of what is an appropriate or inappropriate use of technology.
As people develop their solutions to social quandaries with their friends, they also are developing ethical expectations, senses of right and wrong technological uses. Just as there aren’t widely shared idioms of practice, or media ideologies, there also aren’t widely shared ethical evaluations of media use. What people are trying to figure out are the ethics of how to end the relationship as they break up with people and then tell their friends stories about their breakups.

How people understand the media they use shapes the ways they will use it. As a result, determining people’s media ideologies is crucial when you are trying to figure out the ways that people communicate through different technologies. Often, people take for granted their own assumptions about how a medium shapes the information transmitted. They don’t always realize that their way of using communicative technology is but one of many ways that what they focus on as important features of a medium may not be generally held to be the important features. This is less often the case when the communicative technologies have been around for a while. Over time, people’s practices can change from being idioms to widely accepted practices. When media is relatively new, the medium itself can pose social quandaries for people when they try to use it to accomplish particular tasks. People will talk to their friends, coworkers, and families about these dilemmas, trying to figure out solutions collectively. In these moments, they are developing idioms of practice. But these are still relatively small groups deciding together how to deal with a particular problem of social etiquette. It takes time for people to develop widely agreed on strategies to use different media, especially to accomplish emotionally charged social tasks.

In the next two chapters, I discuss at greater length what people focus on as they develop their media ideologies—the structure of communicative technologies and a technology’s relationship to other mediums. To understand other people’s media ideologies, one has to figure out two primary aspects. First, what structures of that particular medium matter for people, and when do those structures matter? People aren’t going to care all that much if a cell phone has bad reception when they are making small talk. But bad reception can become much more significant when it is happening during a breakup conversation. When ending a relationship, calling on a cell phone can become interpreted as a sign of disrespect because of the static. In other contexts, a cell phone call would be perfectly acceptable.

Second, people understand a particular medium only in the context of other media. People’s media ideologies about e-mail, for example, change if they begin to text others regularly. When people start using a new technology, they change their understandings of all the other technologies they use as well. One cannot understand people’s media ideology for one medium in isolation. One has to take into account their media ideologies for all the media they use, and analyze how these media ideologies are interwoven.
Plan of the book

In the remainder of this chapter I identify a set of key concepts that can be used to differentiate digital media and which influence how people use them and with what effects. I then offer a very brief overview of the media discussed in this book and a discussion of who does and who doesn’t make use of them. Chapter 2 is an orientation to the major perspectives used to understand the interrelationships between communication technology and society and an exploration of the major themes in popular rhetorics about digital media and personal connection. Chapter 3 examines what happens to messages, both verbal and nonverbal, in mediated contexts. Chapter 4 addresses the group contexts in which online interaction often happens, including communities and social networks. The remaining two chapters explore dyadic relationships. Chapter 5 shows how people present themselves to others and first get to know each other online. Chapter 6 looks at how people use new media to build and maintain their relationships. Finally, the conclusion returns to the question of sorting myths from reality, arguing against the notion of a “cyberspace” that can be understood apart from the mundane realities of everyday life and for the notion that what happens online may be newer, but is no less real.

Seven key concepts

If we want to build a rich understanding of how media influence personal connections, we need to stop talking about media in overly simplistic terms. We can’t talk about consequences if we can’t articulate capabilities. What is it about these media that changes interaction and, potentially, relationships? We need conceptual tools to differentiate media from one another and from face to face (or, as Fortunati, 2005, more aptly termed it, “body to body”) communication. We also need concepts to help us recognize the diversity amongst what may seem to be just one technology. The mobile phone, for instance, is used for voice, texting, and also picture and video exchange. The internet includes interaction platforms as diverse as YouTube, product reviews on shopping sites, email and Instant Messaging (IM), which differ from one another in many ways. Seven concepts that can be used to productively compare different media to one another as well as to face to face communication are interactivity, temporal structure, social links, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility.

The many modes of communication on the internet and mobile phone vary in the degrees and kinds of interactivity they offer. Consider, for instance, the difference between using your phone to select a new ringtone and using that phone to argue with a romantic partner, or using a web site to buy new shoes rather than to discuss current events. Fornäs and his co-authors (2002: 23) distinguish several meanings of interactivity. Social interactivity, “the ability of a medium to enable social interaction between groups or individuals,” is what we are most interested in here. Other kinds include technical interactivity, “a medium’s capability of letting human users manipulate the machine via its interface,” and textual interactivity, “the creative and interpretive interaction between users (readers, viewers, listeners) and texts.” Unlike television,” writes Laura Gurak (2001: 44), “online communication technologies allow you to talk back. You can talk back to the big company or you can talk back to individual citizens.” Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) posit that we should see interactivity as a continuum enacted by people using technology, rather than a technological condition. As we will see in chapters to come, the fact that the internet enables interactivity gives rise to new possibilities — for instance, we can meet new people and remain close to those who have moved away — as well as old concerns that people may be flirting with danger.

The temporal structure of a communication medium is also important. Synchronous communication, such as is found in face to face conversations, phone calls, and instant messages, occurs in real time. Asynchronous communication media, such as email and voicemail, have time delays between messages. In practice, the distinction cannot always be tied to specific media. Poor connections may lead to time delays in a seemingly synchronous online medium such as Instant Messaging. Text messaging via the telephone is often asynchronous, but needn’t be. Ostensibly
asynchronous email may be sent and received so rapidly that it functions as a synchronous mode of communication.

The beauty of synchronous media is that they allow for the very rapid transmission of messages, even across distance. As we will see, synchronicity can enhance the sense of placelessness that digital media can encourage and make people feel more together when they are apart (Baron, 1998; Carnevale & Probst, 1997; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Synchronicity can make messages feel more immediate and personal (O’Sullivan, Hunt, & Lippert, 2004) and encourage playfulness in interaction (Danet, 2001). The price of synchronicity, however, is that interactants must be able to align their schedules in order to be simultaneously engaged. Real-time media are also poorly suited to hosting interaction in large groups, as the rapid-fire succession of messages that comes from having many people involved is nearly impossible to sort through and comprehend, let alone answer. There is a reason that dinner parties are generally kept to a small collection of people and at large functions guests are usually seated at tables that seat fewer than a dozen. Accordingly, most online chat rooms and other real-time forums have limits on how many can participate at one time.

With asynchronous media, the costs and benefits are reversed. Asynchronous communication allows very large groups to sustain interaction, as seen in the social network sites and online groups like fan forums, support groups, and hobbyist communities addressed in chapter 4. Asynchronicity also gives people time to manage their self-presentations more strategically. However, word may filter more slowly through such groups and amongst individuals. We can place fewer demands on others’ time by leaving asynchronous messages for people to reply to when they like, but we may end up waiting longer than we’d hoped, or receive no reply at all. One of the biggest changes wrought by digital media is that even asynchronous communication can happen faster than before. Time lags are created by the time it takes a person to check for new messages and respond, not by the time messages spend in transit. In comparison to postal mail, the internet can shave weeks off interactions.

Most of the questions surrounding the personal connections people form and maintain through digital media derive from the sparse social cues that are available to provide further information regarding context, the meanings of messages, and the identities of the people interacting. As chapter 3 will address in more detail, rich media provide a full range of cues, while leaner media provide fewer. Body-to-body, people have a full range of communicative resources available to them. They share a physical context, which they can refer to nonverbally as well as verbally (for instance, by pointing to a chair). They are subject to the same environmental influences and distractions. They can see one another’s body movements, including the facial expressions through which so much meaning is conveyed. They can use each other’s eye gaze to gauge attention. They can see one another’s appearance. They can also hear the sound of one another’s voice. All of these cues – contextual, visual, and auditory – are important to interpreting messages and creating a social context within which messages are meaningful.

To varying degrees, digital media provide fewer social cues. In mobile and online interactions, we may have few if any cues to our partner’s location. This is no doubt why so many mobile phone calls begin with the question “where are you?” and also helps to explain some people’s desire to share GPS positioning via mobile applications. The lack of shared physical context does not mean that interactants have no shared contexts. People communicating in personal relationships share relational contexts, knowledge, and some history. People in online groups often develop rich in-group social environments that those who’ve participated for any length of time will recognize.

Though, as we will address in more depth in chapter 6, much of our mediated interaction is with people we know face to face, some media convey very little information about the identities of those with whom we are communicating. In some circumstances, this renders people anonymous, leading to both opportunity and terror. In lean media, people have more ability to expand, manipulate, multiply, and distort the identities they present to others. The paucity of personal and social identity cues can also make people feel safer, and thus create an environment in which they are more honest. Chapter 5 examines these identity issues.
Media also differ in the extent to which their messages endure. Storage, and, relatedly, replicability, are highly consequential. Unless one makes an audio or video recording of telephone and face to face conversations (practices with laws governing acceptable practice), they are gone as soon as they are said. Human memory for conversation is notoriously poor. To varying degrees, digital media may be stored on devices, web sites, and company backups where they may be replicated, retrieved at later dates, and edited prior to sending (Carnevale & Probst, 1997; Chery, 1999; Culnan & Markus, 1987; Walther, 1996). Synchronous forms like IM and Skype require logging programs that most users are not likely to have. Those that are asynchronous can be easily saved, replicated and redistributed to others. They can also be archived for search. Despite this, online messages may feel ephemeral, and indeed web sites may be there one day and different or gone the next.

Media also vary in the size of an audience they can attain or support, or reach. Gurak (2001: 30) describes reach as "the partner of speed," noting that "digitized discourse can send a message to thousands of people." Face to face communication is inherently limited to those who can fit in the same space. Even when amplified (a form of mediation in itself), physical space and human sensory constraints limit how many can see or hear a message as it's delivered. The telephone allows for group calls, but the upper limit on how many a group can admit or maintain is small. In contrast, many forms of digital communication can be seen by any internet user (as in the case of websites) or can be sent and, thanks to storage and replicability, resent to enormous audiences. Messages can reach audiences both local and global. This is a powerful subversion of the elitism of mass media, within which a very small number of broadcasters could engage in one-to-many communication, usually within regional or geographic boundaries. The gatekeeping function of mass media is challenged as individuals use digital media to spread messages much farther and more widely than was ever historically possible (Gurak, 2001). Future chapters will address how enhanced reach allows people to form new communities of interest and new relationships.

Finally, media vary in their mobility, or extent to which they are portable—enabling people to send and receive messages regardless of location— or stationary—requiring that people be in specific locations in order to interact. The mobile phone represents the paradigm case of mobility, making person-to-person communication possible regardless of location. The clunky personal computer tied to a desk requires that the user be seated in that spot. Landline phones require that people be in the building where that number rings. In addition to offering spatial mobility, some digital media allow us to move between times and interpersonal contexts (Ishii, 2006). Mobile media offer the promise that we need never be out of touch with our loved ones, no matter how long the traffic jam in which we find ourselves. When stuck with our families, we may import our friends through our mobile devices. As we'll see in chapter 6, mobile media give rise to micromediation (Ling, 2004) in which people check in with one another to provide brief updates or quickly arrange meetings and errands. However, more than other personal media, mobile phones threaten autonomy, as we may become accountable to others at all times. Schegloff (2002), one of the first to study telephone-mediated interaction, suggests mobile media don't create perpetual contact so much as offer the perpetual possibility of making contact, a distinction some exploit by strategically limiting their availability (Licoppe & Heurtin, 2002).

These seven concepts help us begin to understand the similarities and differences between face to face communication and mediated interaction, as well as the variation amongst different kinds of digital interactions. Face to face communication, like all the forms of digital media we will be discussing, is interactive. People can respond to one another in message exchanges. Face to face communication is synchronous. It is also loaded with social cues that make one another's identities and many elements of social and physical context apparent (although, as we will return to in chapter 5, this does not guarantee honesty). Face to face conversations cannot be stored, nor can they be replicated. Even when recorded and, for example, broadcast, the recording loses many elements of the context that make face to face communication
what it is. As discussed above, face to face communication has low reach, limiting how many can be involved and how far messages can spread. Face to face communication may be mobile, but only so long as the interactants are moving through space together. This combination of qualities grants face to face a sort of specialness. The full range of cues, the irreplicable, and the need to be there in shared place and time with the other all contribute to the sense that face to face communication is authentic, putting the "communion" in communication.

In contrast, some forms of mediated interaction are asynchronous, enabling more message planning and wider reach, but a potentially lower sense of connection. Media such as Skype or other video chat technologies offer many social cues – voice, facial expression, a window into the physical surroundings – but lack critical intimacy cues including touch and smell. Most digital media have fewer social cues than that, limiting interaction to sounds or even just words. By virtue of their conversion into electronic signals, all digital media can be stored, though particular interactions may not be. Even when conversations and messages are not stored, however, they may leave traces such as records of which phone numbers called which other ones, which IP addresses visited which websites, or how many tweets a person has twittered. Digital messages are easily replicated if they are asynchronous, but less so if they are synchronous. The reach of digital media can vary tremendously depending on the medium. A phone call generally remains a one-to-one encounter as does much instant messaging and chat, but emails, mailing lists, discussion groups, and websites are among the digital modes that can have extraordinary reach. Digital media are becoming increasingly mobile as the internet and mobile phone converge into single devices, meaning that these technologies make communication possible in places where it wasn't before, but also that they can intrude into face to face conversations where they never could before. As a result, people can have very different experiences with different media, yet none may seem to offer the potential for intimacy and connection that being face to face does. These distinctions all bring with them important potential social shifts, which the remainder of this book will address.

Digital media

Just as it's important to clarify core concepts that may shape mediated social interaction, it's helpful to walk through the media in question. I assume readers are familiar with the mobile phone, so I focus below on a brief historical overview of the internet. I emphasize the extent to which the interpersonal appeal of these media shaped their development. Unlike the mobile phone, the internet was not built as a personal communication medium, let alone a way for fans to connect around their objects of pleasure, for people to find potential romantic partners, for employers to find or investigate potential hires, or any such social processes. It was developed to safeguard military knowledge. When the first internet connection was made in 1969 through what was then called ARPANET, funded by the US Department of Defense, no one envisioned that an interpersonal communication medium had been launched. It is beyond the scope of this book to cover the technological development of the internet; the reader is referred to Janet Abbate's (1999) history. First, though, a disclaimer: trying to list specific types of digital media is frustrating at best. Between this writing and your reading there are bound to be new developments, and things popular as I write will drop from vogue. Let this be a reminder to us of the importance of remaining focused on specific capabilities and consequences rather than the media themselves.

The textual internet

For its first quarter-century, the internet was text-only. With its limited social cues, it seemed a poor match for personal interaction. Yet it took mere months for its developers (who were also its primary users) to realize the medium's utility for personal communication. Within three years of the first login, email was in use, and within four years, three-quarters of online traffic was email (Anderson, 2005). By 2000, the ability to use email was a significant reason that people first got online and one of the main reasons that those already online stayed online (Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szapary, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 2000).