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To cite this article: Ilana Gershon (2020): The Breakup 2.1: The ten-year update, The Information Society, DOI: 10.1080/01972243.2020.1798316

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2020.1798316

Published online: 30 Jul 2020.
The Breakup 2.1: The ten-year update

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ABSTRACT

Since 2007–2008, American undergraduates’ media ecology has changed dramatically without an accompanying transformation in how they use media to end relationships. The similarities in people’s breakup practices between 2008 and 2018 reveal that, regardless of what social media is used, American undergraduates turn to media in moments of breakup as ways to manage three complicated aspects of ending a relationship: untangling all the ways in which people signal intertwined lives, deciphering the quotidian unknowable of another person’s mind, and trying to control who knows what when. This paper explores how rapid shifts in media ecologies may change the ways in which conventionalization around social practices emerges, leading to more norms oriented around what all media accomplish, rather than generating norms around the affordances of a specific medium.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 May 2020
Accepted 9 July 2020

KEYWORDS

Breakups; conventionalization; media ecologies; social change; social media; social norms

In 2007–2008, I conducted one of the earliest ethnographic studies of Facebook almost by accident. I wanted to understand how people’s attempts to disentangle relationships were affected when they used new media that was, for the most part, designed to connect people as much as possible. I hoped to learn what cultural assumptions about how media affect messages could become ethnographically accessible if I investigated how people used technologies for purposes that these technologies were not designed for – disconnecting instead of connecting. To explore this, I interviewed 73 undergraduates, graduate students and faculty at Indiana University about how they used new media in the process of a romantic breakup, which resulted in a book, The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting Over New Media (2010a). Facebook suffused my interviews with undergraduates, it was impossible to have a conversation with a college student in 2007 or 2008 about breakups in which Facebook did not feature heavily. This is no longer the case, now Snapchat and Instagram dominate the same types of conversations (also true in Europe, see Miller 2013). Aware that there may have been this substantive shift in media ecologies, ten years later, in 2018, I decided to conduct a follow up study interviewing 40 undergraduates at Indiana University, with the help of Julie Johnson and Torie DiMartile as graduate research assistants. I wanted to learn if taking two snapshots in time of Indiana University undergraduates’ use of new media while breaking up could reveal insights into how changes in media ecologies affect the ways that people use recently introduced media to perform complicated social tasks. Breakups seemed especially appropriate to focus upon because they often entail a great deal of interpretive labor as users tried to decipher the social and emotional implications of other people’s media use.

When I started my follow-up study, I believed that changes in the media ecologies from 2008 to 2018 would lead to significant differences in how people ended relationships, that the widespread use of Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Tinder (and so on) would change breakups. I was wrong. Instead the striking similarities in breakups involving new media between 2008 and 2018 reveal that there is a growing conventionalization in how American undergraduates use media to end relationships. Yet the conventionalization is not around which media is used for a particular social interaction. Instead there is a conventionalization around what American undergraduates want media to accomplish during the socially complicated task of ending a relationship, and as well as the expectations of how people manage the mechanics of connecting or disconnecting. Too rapid a shift in which media compromise one’s media ecology has led people to forego conventionalizing practices around specific media, and instead they now conventionalize practices based on what most media
do, such as opening or closing a channel of communication. Based on continuities between these two snapshots, I argue that during romantic breakups, new media often become focal points that people attend to when accomplishing three central social tasks during breakups: 1) disentangling the relationship, including ending established routines, public displays of romance, and future plans; 2) trying to uncover what another person thinks and feels; 3) attempting to control who knows what and when. In the process, there has emerged a substantive degree of conventionalization around how one manages one’s phatic practices – how one opens, maintains or closes a channel of communication – and how one circulates knowledge, regardless of which specific medium one is using.

In stressing this form of conventionalization, I am suggesting that for people breaking up with each other, the differences between Facebook and Snapchat or Instagram were not significant enough to dramatically change how breakups took place. Yes, there were some changes, but relatively minor ones. In 2008, after the end of a relationship, US undergraduates were often concerned with the ethical and social conundrums of making the breakup Facebook official. They wondered who should first change their relationship status on Facebook – the initiator or the one dumped. Or they thought long and hard about how best to respond to the Facebook notification that friends had broken up. Yet by 2018, Facebook was largely a medium reserved for communicating with one’s parents and extended family, and was not as commonly used to communicate with one’s peer group. Thus nowadays, indicating on Facebook that one is involved with another person (that is, becoming Facebook official) is a strategy to let one’s family know who one is dating. In 2018, becoming Facebook official is the digital equivalent of bringing someone home to meet one’s parents. Although there were still some interviewees who saw Facebook official as announcing to everyone that they had entered a new stage of commitment and general publicness about their relationship, this was by no means common. Thus, in 2018 if someone wanted to announce to everyone, but not specifically their older relatives, that they were in a relationship, they would post photographs that signal romantic involvement on their Instagram account. Conversely, US undergraduates would examine the Instagram account of anyone they were romantically interested in to find out if they were available. Many decided that three or more photographs of images of their interest with the same potentially desirable person, and only that person, would give them pause. In short, people’s media ecologies had altered the medium people used to announce the end of a relationship.

Yet how important was this change in media for people’s experiences? In my interviews, it did not seem a significant enough difference that a romantic relationship is publicly announced to one’s peer group on Instagram now when it used to be announced on Facebook. Or that now when someone breaks up, they have to decide what to do with the publicly available photographic evidence of their romantic relationship, when ten years ago, they also had to figure out what to do about the fact that they were Facebook official, and ceasing to be Facebook official would be announced in all their Facebook friends’ newsfeed. When I claim that the changes in media ecologies are not significant enough, I am following Steve Barley’s lead in assessing how significant a technological change may be. He suggests that a technological change is only significant when participants have shifted how they define a situation and changed their understandings of what might be plausible lines of action in that context (Barley 2015, 10). Barley argues that focusing only on how technology might change a task, or how people view the new technologies, does not reveal whether anything substantive has changed. To discern whether technologies have introduced substantial enough social change, one has to turn to the interactional order through which a complicated social task is structured and performed, as well as examining whether new participants are included or those previously involved are excluded. If new technologies have led to a shift in interactional order or participant structure (see Gershon 2017), then, and only then, should one begin to analyze the social interactions in terms of social change.

Admittedly, I would have more clearly seen visible signs of social change, even by Steve Barley’s standards, if I had conducted my first set of interviews ten years earlier, in 1998. The contrast between twenty years ago and today is a sharper one in terms of how information circulated publicly. In the late 1990s, very few people were walking around with a camera all the time. Very few people could easily express their anger at someone else in a public forum using a handheld device. How these forums were accessed and constituted was also different. In 1998, someone recently heartbroken might have had a difficult time locating a forum that could become a rapidly growing public. Though this was not impossible, it was a possibility reserved for very few people, such as celebrities whose words would readily be re-circulated by journalists.
The difference in media ecologies between 1998 and 2008 is much greater than between 2008 and today. Over the stretch of those ten years, 1998 to 2008, how people circulated information about each other, and what kind of information people could easily circulate changed a great deal. By 2008, the media ecology allowed participants to accomplish most of the social tasks that people breaking up perform today – perhaps not in the same media or with the same affordances, but the similarities in the actions and their effects are considerable. If someone wanted to address their ex specifically in an utterance to let the ex know how miserable or how happy they are but, at the same time, pretend that they are addressing a much broader audience, one could do that in 2008 and in 2018. Similarly, if someone wanted to spend a tremendous amount of time trying to decipher what their ex was doing by carefully interpreting and re-interpreting digital traces with their friends, it has been possible for more than 10 years. In both sets of interviews, I even learned that many people will use their friends’ profiles’ access to glean information about their ex, especially when they were no longer connected to their ex by any social media platform. In short, while people in 2008 were exploring how to use new technologies during disconnection, many of the practices they came up with as solutions for the dilemmas of breaking up are still in place today. Comparing breakups in 2008 and 2018 reveals how these technologies allow undergraduates to engage with emotionally and social complicated acts of disconnection. These are not practices that must, by their very nature, have to take place through media. For example, while representing a past event through an image might inherently have to occur through a medium, announcing a breakup to others does not have to be mediated. Yet since 2008, all the practices I describe below are now being accomplished largely through media use.

**How media focus attention**

Across all my interviews, people turn to media during a breakup to achieve three things. First, they have to untangle many of the ways in which they have interwoven their lives with the other person. What does this practically mean? They have to return any objects belonging to the other person. They have to alter all future plans that people made together, and they have to decide how they want to engage with the traces of this other person that are left in their daily lives. In terms of media practice, this means deciding whether to keep the phone number in the cell phone, to keep certain photographs on Facebook or Instagram, to do something with all the past communication with their ex that they had saved over the course of a relationship.

People also have to engage with an entangling affordance that many of these channels now possess – passwords that might have been shared with a lover in the course of a relationship, and are not always changed after a relationship’s dissolution. In both sets of interviews, people clearly saw sharing passwords as a marker of intimacy and trust, an act that marked how interwoven the couple’s knowledge circulation practices were. In *The Breakup 2.0*, I devoted a chapter to how intimacy had become marked by someone’s access to one’s own back channel, the conversations occurring in the background of the public-facing profile – which I thought was a change from earlier understandings of intimacy that did not revolve around this type of access. In 2018, with eerie echoes to that chapter, one undergraduate we spoke with, MacKenzie, talked about how she would not share her passwords with anyone right now, but she definitely would in the future. She said: “I could understand if I was, like, married, or very close to getting married. I’d share my passwords then. Can’t be any secrets in our relationship.” MacKenzie illustrates a similarity in how people approached privacy, intimacy, and security since Web 2.0 was first introduced. There have been small changes that don’t change the interactional order all that much. In 2018, when we asked about sharing passwords, people often answered immediately about sharing thumbprints in one’s smartphones. And this is not so surprising, since in 2008, only approximately 50% of IU undergraduates had smartphones, and fingerprint locks didn’t exist yet. Nowadays, access to one’s phone often unlocks a myriad of other channels.

Second, especially during breakups, people are faced with how difficult it is to ever decipher the quotididian unknowable of another person’s mind. Does he or she still care? What kind of caring? Is there regret? Relief? Is this a break or a breakup? Has one’s ex found someone else to be with? And if so, do they treat this other person in the same way? Undergraduates devote a sizable amount of time to deciphering Facebook posts, Instagram photos and Snapchat stories trying to find answers to these questions, information-seeking practices that are often described as the pursuit of closure.

Third, during a breakup, people are often deeply concerned with who knows what and when, and often turn to different media to exercise some form of
control over this. This pursuit of control involves a range of practices from deciding when to make the breakup Facebook official (Robards and Lincoln 2016) to varying degrees of stalking and revenge porn. In both sets of interviews, a woman told a story about wanting to break up with her boyfriend in high school, but not getting around to actually doing so for reasons that her friends did not accept. She and her friends knew a breakup was imminent, but the boyfriend did not. Both women described hanging out with her friends, talking about the potential breakup, and being encouraged by her friends to end the relationship. Finally, frustrated, her friends grabbed her phone and texted the boyfriend to end things. These breakup conversations were the result of how a group of friends believed information should be circulated, not only what the two in the romantic relationship thought should be done. In general, both men and women consulted with their friends about what they should say in reply to a message, and also how to interpret a particular utterance. In addition, this was one of many instances in both sets of interviews in which the actual author of any message sent between people in a relationship was not always clear – who knows and when and who authors what utterance are all in question during these breakups.

In both sets of interviews, people paid heightened attention to the kinds of information they could deduce from the affordances of a medium. In 2008, Facebook allowed users to know that someone else was logging on to their profile using the appropriate password by logging the current user off abruptly. In 2018, Snapchat did the same. This came up in interviews – logging on to their profile using the appropriate password by logging the current user off abruptly. In 2018, Snapchat did the same. This came up in interviews. Different media also store information differently – in 2018, Claudia explained: “Facebook is very long-term. Like, I post things like all of my photos from the year so my grandma or my aunt and my mom can see them and I can connect with old friends that I don’t really see that often. Instagram is more short-term, this is what I’m doing right now.” Snapchat’s very instantaneous, like “this is what I did this weekend” or “this is what I did yesterday.”

Conventionalizing phatic communication

These three breakup processes are not necessarily about media – media need not play a central role in disentangling, or deciphering another’s thoughts, or concerns over who knows what and when. One could potentially engage with these tasks in other ways. Yet in my interviews, people turned to media as focal points that allow them to explore these processes. And in doing so, in both sets of interviews, people focused on second-order information, the information produced in these cases by attention to what one can glean by observing how people made use of a medium’s affordance. They also focused on the phatic components of communication, and indeed, if there is an analytically significant change in my interviews, it is an increased conventionalizing focus on the phatic – they are concerned, as Alaina Lemon puts it, with recognizing, manipulating, and representing contacts and channels (Lemon 2017, 31). Conventionalization has emerged around phatic practices in general, and tend not to be oriented toward a specific medium.

My interviewees increasingly paid attention to the phatic component of communication in part because they found that media-switching generated practices ripe for interpretation (Gershon 2010b). Both in 2008 and 2018, anyone ending a relationship had a fairly wide range of media that they were choosing among to send a message. As a result, which media one chose, and when one decided to switch media, was significant since people were using media to differentiate what messages were supposed to signal along many axes. People analyzed others’ media choices to determine when a message was formal or informal, their level of commitment or interest in the other person, the closeness of a friendship or relationship, and to reveal differences between generations.

In addition, different media’s affordances allow people to organize their phatic relationships to time and space differently, and people used these aspects to categorize interactions accordingly. Both in 2008 and 2018, people used different media to signal the urgent need for a response – email, for example, might not be responded to immediately, but a text message for some people would be a request for a fast response. Different media also store information differently – in 2018, Claudia explained: “Facebook is very long-term. Like, I post things like all of my photos from the year so my grandma or my aunt and my mom can see them and I can connect with old friends that I don’t really see that often. Instagram is more short-term, like “this is what I did this weekend” or “this is what I did yesterday.” Snapchat’s very instantaneous, like “this is what I’m doing right now.” People explicitly thought about how different media orient people toward the passage of time, and could be used to segregate how people anticipated future exchanges. They also offer users different ways to engage with where people are located. In 2018, one interviewee talked about deciding whether to go to a party by using one of Snapchat’s affordances that let people know where their Snapchat contacts are at any given moment. If enough of her Snapchat contacts were there, she would go. That is to say, people used the different
media affordances to manage the phatic components of time and space – to anticipate how they would connect in the future, remember previous interactions, and engage with spaces potentially replete with social contacts.

People also used media to demarcate certain phatic components of relationships – signaling different stages of courtship as well as different stages of break up, although demarcating stages of breakup features much more prominently in my 2018 interviews. In both sets of interviews, when a couple started communicating through a new medium, it signaled a new stage of courtship (for a discussion of similar patterns in friendships, see Yang, Brown, and Braun 2014). In 2008, people would discuss moments in courtship when each party was trying to determine whether it was time yet to move away from Facebook and start texting, or some similar media-switch. In 2018, people described becoming trapped on Snapchat – Faith explained: "Snapchat for me is the easiest first move. It’s the easiest way to get yourself, like … That’s what happened with Rowan. We moved in, but we just got stuck. We couldn’t … We got stuck in that entry phase." In these accounts, every time people switched to a new medium, by exchanging phone numbers or letting someone know one’s Finsta handle, it was a sign of increased intimacy as well as a sign that they were becoming more likely to become a couple. Not everyone had or even has the same order for their media-defined stages, but everyone engaged with texting and other media in some kind of order. What is important is not that texting is the same stage for every potential couple, but that texting is a stage for every potential couple.

Breakups nowadays can have stages associated with different media as well, something which was not clearly the case in 2008. There was a hint that media-marked stages might become a part of breaking up in 2008 since making the breakup Facebook official was so clearly a stage in 2008, and for some it is still a stage in 2018. A Facebook official breakup often happens soon after it has been clearly established that the breakup has happened – although one interview in 2008 involved a story about a man deeply confused about whether the relationship was indeed over because his ex-girlfriend took a few days to change her Facebook relationship status (Gershon 2010a).

Nowadays, there are more stages to a breakup than simply becoming Facebook official. Snapchat has a feature that, for some undergraduates, functions as a new stage in breaking up – the Snapchat streak. If you exchange Snapchat messages with someone a few days in a row, both people have to send a Snapchat message to each other in a 24-hour window – you start a Snapchat streak. The goal is obviously to have a long streak, some people interviewed had streaks that were over 300 days. The longest recorded Snapchat streak in March 2020 was 1,802 days according to the website TechJunkie3. So now, if someone has a Snapchat streak going with their lover, breaking the streak becomes its own stage of breaking up. People do not always automatically stop a streak just because they have broken up, and thus breaking up can now involve various stages of disentangling by media. First, people start to suspect the breakup might be about to happen, because as a couple they are texting more infrequently. Or perhaps, as happened for one interviewee, someone notices that her boyfriend has a Snapchat streak going with another girl he is becoming good friends with, and she didn’t have a Snapchat streak with him. After this, a conversation about ending the relationship happens – for most interviewees, this conversation would ideally take place face-to-face or at the very least through video chat, although what is ideal and what actually happens are not always the same. Once the breakup conversation has happened, each member of the couple must decide whether to preserve the public photos – in many interviews, people in 2018 viewed managing their public photo displays as the next stage of the breakup. In 2008, photographs were not as important as dealing with the Facebook relationship status, now the two are generally reversed in terms of urgency. People then have to decide whether to block someone or not on various media platforms. If the couple has a Snapchat streak going, maintaining it and for how long is yet another post-breakup decision. Later, after some time goes by, people might start testing the waters of contact again, sending short texts or liking Instagram photos, so there is a stage of phatic re-connection as well. In general, the current affordances of media allow these media to also mark different stages of breakup.

The final similarity in both sets of interviews turned out to be a surprising parallel – in each set of interviews, I have a long and detailed account of what counts as a “good” breakup that revolved largely around how the disintegrating couple used media to announce the breakup and stay in contact with each other, two descriptions of a self-identified good breakup that were strikingly similar, and strikingly American. In 2008, when Brett told me about the good breakup he had recently had with his now ex-girlfriend, he explained to me that she had discovered
she had certain mental health issues, and didn’t want to be in a relationship while she was trying to figure out how to get better. They met in person to talk about it, and discussed how they wanted to handle the fact that they were Facebook official. He said that they sat side by side and took down their statuses together, so that there was no digital suggestion that one person had changed the status before the other (an action that could be interpreted in a variety of ways). In 2018 Claudia said that she had begun to suspect that she and Joel were going to break up – their texting had slowed down considerably. They started a texting conversation, and realized that this was too serious for text, so they switched to Facetime. When it became clear that this was becoming a breakup conversation, Joel decided to jump into the car and drive an hour and a half to see her. While she waited, she talked to her mother and her friends, and began to explore how sad she felt. When he arrived, and they started talking in person, they planned out how they would interact by media. They decided to block each other, and see each other in person three months later and re-visit whether this was the kind of social media lack of contact they wanted after all. At the time that they were breaking up, Claudia thought the reason they were breaking up was that Joel was simply too involved in his work, and didn’t have enough time to maintain a long-distance relationship. Three months later, she learned that he thought they had broken up because he was deciding that he was bi. They renewed contact with each other on some sites, but when he decided he wanted to come out publicly, she asked him to block her family members. She thought that they were too homophobic, and would mar Joel’s experiences of coming out, which she was hoping would be joyful ones. In both these instances, a good breakup was understood to be one in which no one was guessing about why people were doing what they were doing – although Claudia learned later her interpretation did not coincide with her ex’s. At the same time, they were able to openly discuss with each other how they anticipated feeling – Claudia and Joel talked about not wanting to see the other dating other people for a while, that it would make them sad and so they should block each other on social media. Claudia was able to stick to the three months blackout, Joel used his mother’s Instagram account to occasionally see how Claudia was doing. But Claudia found this out from Joel himself – there was a considerable amount of open communication about how they were each using social media, and managing the phatic components of contact and representation. In both instances of a self-described good breakup, much of what made it a good breakup was the explicit and considerate negotiation over how to use media to circulate knowledge to others and between the two people once the relationship was dissolved.4

The signs of whether a breakup was a bad one also revolved around conventionalized phatic interactions. In 2008, people would talk about knowing whether other people’s breakups were bad ones because they would see their friends’ Facebook relationship status switch rapidly from “in a relationship” to “its complicated” to “single” to “its complicated” over the course of a few days. In 2018, people talked about thinking the breakup might not be too emotionally fraught because there were still pictures of the couple left up on Instagram or Facebook – traces of the past relationships still existed in people’s digital archives, which their friends read as a hopeful sign.

Since 2008, new terms have become increasingly popular, as a sign of lexical conventionalization of media practices, and these terms all emphasize the phatic components of interactions – ghosting, Finstas, thirst traps, sliding into DMs, and leaving someone in read. Ghosting according to those we interviewed refers to stopping communicating with someone entirely across all media platforms, with no explanation (for a slightly broader definition, see LeFebvre et al. 2019). In 2008, people would describe to me ghosting practices all the time, but they lacked a handy semantic token to describe their ex’s refusal to communicate. Without a term, they were driven to talking at length about all the media they used to contact someone, and how they were ignored through every single media. And while few thought it was ever reasonable behavior, just as very few people thought a mediated breakup was acceptable, it was recognizable as regrettable behavior. In 2018, every interviewee, except for one international Chinese student, knew what ghosting referred to – and they understood that there were moments in which it might possibly be acceptable. For LeFebvre et al.’s Australian undergraduate respondents, “the proper time [to ghost] depended on the relationship type and length and fluctuated depending on the medium in which the interaction originated.” (2019, 137) Ghosting is now seen as a possible alternative if done at the early stages of flirting, but not later.

In our interviews, people were conscious of ghosting’s lexical innovation. Conversations about ghosting could lead people to describe a need for even more specific terms – one woman wanted a term that
described a set of interactions in which someone was ghosting her in every medium but Instagram, and would “like” her posts on Instagram, but never do more than “liking” a post. Or others talked about needing a term for intermittent ghosting, for ghosting for a few weeks and then responding suddenly out of the blue – perhaps a lingering ghost. They also began to use the term in semantically playful ways: “I ghosted the shit out of him.”

Ghosting is the flip side of how interviewees expressed intimacy. Responding as quickly as possible to a text or Snapchat message is a sign of affection – the immediacy of a response is viewed as a signal of the perceived importance people assign to a relationship (see also Meenagh 2015). To respond slowly (once a person is clearly in a relationship or friendship) is widely interpreted as a sign that the one responding does not care all that much. People generally reported feeling entitled to openly criticize others for not responding quickly to their messages – although certain media, like texting, were seen as requesting faster responses than others. Email, for example, was not a medium that demanded a response within minutes or even a few hours. Some people experienced these expectations as a burden. One woman even reported openly re-negotiating this expectation when she and her high school boyfriend both started separate colleges an hour and a half apart. He realized he simply couldn’t text her throughout the day while he was in college, and asked her if they could limit their contact to a call in the evening. Several others reported sensing that their relationship might be in danger when they noticed a slowing down in texting responses. With these set of expectations in the background, ghosting becomes a heightened signal of indifference. Indeed, even the longed for phrase of “lingering ghosting” takes on new meaning – slowing down one’s response to the speed of molasses provides a second-order signal that the person no longer cares all that much about sustaining the relationship, yet cares a little. The contrary is also a signal. One interviewee believed that she learned how much someone had cared about her or her friends by observing how persistent they were in response to being ghosted. Refusing to accept the signal was a sign of passion, albeit unwanted passion. In short, the term ghosting focused people’s attention on how quickly or slowly one communicated, or whether one was ceasing to communicate entirely, making this phatic practice into a stance. This lexicalization also changed how acceptable this practice was, ensuring that almost everyone could think of a moment when ghosting might be acceptable – one could ghost in good conscience when one was worried the other person might turn into a stalker, for example.

Other new terms are equally focused on phaticity. Finstas are the “fake” Instagram profiles with a few close followers on which people feel free to post photos of being drunk or frustrated or depressed, and one can post several times a day, while one’s proper Instagram profile is carefully curated images of the person at their best, and people generally post only once a day (Ross 2019). Thirst traps are the photos that present someone as so desirable that it will inspire others to contact. People talked about posting thirst traps after a breakup in 2008, but they did not use the term “thirst trap.” In 2008, they talked about changing their Facebook profiles to reflect how attractive they were to others, in 2018, they used a range of media to post a thirst trap. For example, Beth was from a big city and talked about how baffled she was by her roommate’s behavior. Her roommate would post thirst traps – and then have friendly conversations with the men who responded to them, men that Beth thought were “totally gross.” Yet they came from her roommate’s hometown. In the course of the discussion, Beth began to signal that cities and small towns might inspire different strategies for managing these kinds of phatic interactions, since her roommate might feel too socially entangled with these old high school acquaintances who were contacting her.

Sliding into DMs is direct messaging someone, typically with a very flirtatious comment. To slide into DM is to express sexual or romantic interest simply through the act of doing so, to say “you look good” in person is a different act than saying this (a bit out of the blue) in a direct message. And leaving someone in read is perhaps the most phatic of the new terms, an act of communication whose primary focus is on the channel of communication. The receiver of a message ensures that the channel provides a read receipt or some other notification that the message has been read. The sender thus knows the message has been seen, at the same time the sender learns that the receiver is actively choosing not to respond. When someone is left in read, it can clarify that they are being intentionally ghosted, since the initial stages of ghosting might be ambiguous and potentially misinterpreted. In interviews, this was always understood to be a clear sign of intentional behavior, an action that everyone will interpret in the same way. None of these terms existed in 2008, and all of them are about phatic connections, they emphasize how people connect or manage channels of communication. Yet all
these practices definitely occurred in 2008 – and were often discussed in that round of interviews – so that 2018 simply brought new terms for established ways of interacting.

Media-switching – when a conversation moves from one medium to another – also has increasingly become a conventionalized phatic practice, especially when dating apps are involved. Many people in the 2018 interview set used Tinder, with Bumble coming in as a distant second as a dating app that interviewees used. For those who used Tinder, the contact medium they would initially provide to anyone they were flirting with turned out to be significant. Offering Snapchat was generally understood to be safer than a phone number. Women felt that people could learn too much information from a phone number, it left them too vulnerable. Snapchat would not reveal where they were (unless they purposely used that feature), and thus it made the connection less meaningful. Offering one’s Snapchat contact details also reinforced the initial signal sent by the use of Tinder – to connect on Tinder and then media-switch to Snapchat reinforced the likelihood that this would be a hookup. To switch to texting immediately after connecting on Tinder was to signal a willingness to consider a bit more of a commitment.

Tinder itself could create a phatic dilemma, when the app showed a friend’s image, should one swipe or not? Many people talked about swiping just as a friendly gesture. But this was a friendly gesture that could also rapidly become an ambiguous gesture. One woman explained that she had swiped on her brother’s friend’s image just to be friendly – to swipe left (or swipe no) seemed somehow too insulting. But when he swiped right as well, they were faced with a conundrum. Was the swipe a sign of interest or just friendliness? In her case, the ambiguity led to the start of a relationship. People spent considerable amounts of time trying to interpret these phatic signals and decipher what different manipulations of channels were supposed to mean.

Those we interviewed had their own understanding of an emerging conventionalization, which they saw as generationally marked. They understood media as differentiating life stages, which was invariably expressed as a generational difference. In my 2008 interviews, I would often ask people at the end of an interview if they had any questions for me. Many asked me: “what social media I should use once I graduate?” I would be surprised by the question, and they would explain, in so many words – I used Myspace in high school, and switched to Facebook once I got to college. You are an adult, what am I supposed to use after college? No one would ask that question in 2018 – Facebook was so clearly a social media platform filled with too many adults. Teenagers and college students spent far more of their time on Snapchat and Instagram so as not to be on the same platform as their parents and older relatives for most social media interactions.

While few nowadays may think different media can effectively signal their own life stages, media were still intertwined with ideas about belonging to a generation in my interviews. In 2008 and 2018, I would be interviewing college students who would indulge in Premature Geezer talk, and explain to me how kids these days behaved in ways on new media that completely baffled them. But the generational difference that they insisted on – and they always called it generational – was with their brothers and sisters who were two or four years younger than they were. Both in 2008 and 2018, they viewed these younger siblings as constantly being on a form of media that they themselves used more sparingly, and being willing to post absolutely everything. Each set of interviewees felt that “kids these days” have no sense of privacy – yet the undergraduates I was interviewing in 2008 were saying this about people who were now 8 years older than those we interviewed in 2018. In 2018, the younger generation were viewed as having all the same baffling disregard for appropriate and measured media use as they were seen to have in 2008. American undergraduates seem to have a fairly stable view on how the younger generation uses media, a younger generation that is not all that much younger. In short, media for US undergraduates gather and focus attention, enabling undergraduates to conflate life stage with generation, and to distinguish generations from each other.

Conclusion

I conducted my first set of interviews in the relatively early years of Facebook adoption, and my second round when the media ecology had changed so much that Facebook seemed passé to most undergraduates. In the early days, people I interviewed were often surprised and unnerved to get friend requests from their mothers. Facebook had only become available to everyone with an email address two years earlier. Undergraduates also texted, used instant messaging and Skype, and one man even mailed an actual breakup letter through the post. Facebook, though, dominated people’s stories – every interview with an
undergraduate in 2008 touched on the conundrums that often emerge when American undergraduates use Facebook actively while romantically involved with other people. In 2018, it was possible to have a whole interview about mediated breakups, and Facebook would never be mentioned. By interviewing in 2008 and 2018, I hoped these snapshots would illuminate how changes in media ecologies affected people’s social practices, especially when dealing with conflictual interactions such as ending romantic relationships.

My methodology to a certain degree shaped what I learned about how social norms were not yet becoming widespread in 2008. I had no trouble finding people willing to be interviewed about their breakup experiences, but I did not get many opportunities to interview people in the same friendship circles. It turns out that snowball sampling was quite difficult for me when the topic was romantic breakups. At the end of an interview, I would ask if they had friends I should talk to as well, no one ever volunteered anyone’s name. As a result, I was talking to people who had developed their own expectations of how people should use media to end a relationship, and these expectations often emerged after talking to their family and friends. But no one I interviewed was talking to the same set of family and friends. As a consequence, in every interview, I would come across a new practice or a new media ideology that I had not come across before, social norms around newly introduced media were not yet widespread. In every interview, there was a moment in which I wanted to interrupt and say “wait, you do what?” For example, one woman would tell me that she had the same ringtone for anyone who had ever been her boyfriend – her current boyfriend as well as her exes. But no one else told me that they did this. With all of this multiplicity around expectations, I was left with an open question – how does etiquette around new technologies become widespread?

Ten years after the first set of interviews, I decided to ask people again about their mediated breakups. I had a number of hunches in 2007 and 2008 about how things could change. For example, in 2008 people would often tell me that becoming Facebook official – changing their relationship status on Facebook to signal a new relationship – was now a new stage of courtship that signals a form of less than casual commitment for one’s friendship groups, it is more likely to be the medium by which someone announces a new and serious romantic partner to one’s family. Nowadays, what is more comparable to what becoming Facebook official used to involve might be taking one’s profile off of Tinder and other dating apps, or posting many photographs of oneself as part of a couple on Instagram.

Yet conventionalization still occurs. People seem to have a more established repertoire for signaling anger or knowing when they are behaving badly. In the 2018 interviews, there were far fewer signs of creative uses of media to disentangle relationships – no one posted “Cindy, I am breaking up with you” as their away message on instant messenger as someone did in 2008. And, while not breakup-related, no one in 2018 provided an example about how their friends decided to create a fake Facebook profile of their butt, Lacey Gluteus Maximus, and then tried to friend the real life Lacey using this fake profile, leaving Lacey with the odd dilemma: do I friend my own butt? My general sense from the 2018 interviews is that disentangling using new media has indeed become more conventionalized, and that the focus on second-order information and learning what aspects they never wanted to repeat again. I also wondered if people would develop norms around media-switching – if someone texts you in a highly charged moment, when is it acceptable to respond with a voicemail or email? Would people develop shared and agreed upon media ideologies about how a particular medium affects a message, or would there still be significant variation?

Yet my interviews in 2018 could not begin to approach answering questions about the minutiae of a medium’s affordances because the media ecology has changed significantly since 2008. Undergraduates in 2018 tend to relegate Facebook to communicating with parents and older relatives. Instagram and Snapchat dominated my interviews this time around, in much the same way that Facebook dominated earlier. I imagined that I would be charting how people use Facebook to end relationships with 14 years’ worth of attempts to standardize norms around Facebook behind them. Instead, my interviews became explorations of how people turn reliably to media in the process of breaking up to manage communication and uncertainty, but what the media are has shifted, and as they shift, the affordances which people can use to manage these tasks has changed. Becoming Facebook official is a good example, it is no longer a stage of courtship that signals a form of less than casual commitment for one’s friendship groups, it is more likely to be the medium by which someone announces a new and serious romantic partner to one’s family. Nowadays, what is more comparable to what becoming Facebook official used to involve might be taking one’s profile off of Tinder and other dating apps, or posting many photographs of oneself as part of a couple on Instagram.

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the phatic aspect of communication has only intensified over time.

The most significant difference between 2008 and 2018 is that people now use dating apps. No one was using dating apps or websites on college campuses ten years ago, although students’ older siblings were. I would have expected that having more people dating people across friendship circles would lead to more miscommunication and unhappiness around mediated conversations. After all, people develop their etiquette rules by chatting with their friends and families about what to do when a social conundrum comes up—problems such as: do I respond to this through the medium it was sent, or do I switch media, and so on. People’s friends don’t always come up with the same solutions. Dating apps encourage people to date outside of their friendship circles. Yet this increase in dating relative strangers does not seem to have led to an increase in dramatic miscommunications in a moment of breakup. The strategies by which people express their anger, jealousy and dissatisfaction with each other seems to have been conventionalized—people generally seem to agree on the repertoire of practices that signal breaking up badly by new media, or breakup up well, and, for the most part, they rely on this repertoire in the moment.

Perhaps because of the speed with which media ecologies now change, conventionalization occurs nowadays around the general conundrums of breaking up as well as the phatic aspects of communication. American undergraduates use media to accomplish three functions: disentangling, deciphering another’s intentions, and trying to control who knows what and when. While the media ecology has shifted over the past 10 years, adding Tinder, Snapchat and Instagram to the mix does not in fact create differences that make a difference to these three aspects. At the same time, a certain degree of conventionalization now occurs around the act of connecting, maintaining or disconnecting from a channel of communication. New terms have arisen to address this intensified focus on phatic contact, terms that enable people to focus a shared attention on how managing the phatic aspects of communication is supposed to occur. With such rapid shifts in media ecologies occurring these days, conventionalization around charged social practices now concerns the aspects that all media have—the ability to open, maintain and close a channel of communication, with less of a focus on which kind of media were used and more of a focus on how, in general, a break up took place.

Notes

1. Mark Deuze, personal communication.
2. Not so surprisingly, taking down one’s Tinder profile is a sign of commitment, now that so many undergraduates use Tinder and other dating apps. Meanwhile figuring out how to suggest to someone that they should take down their Tinder profile, if they haven’t yet, is a source of anxiety that requires quite a bit of consultation with one’s friends.
4. This is an American viewpoint, and not necessarily how people in other cultures understand what qualifies as a good breakup.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Richard Bauman for introducing me to the term of art “Premature Geezer talk,” and wide-ranging conversations about the topics in this paper. Katrien Pype, Karen Schiff and Amanda Weidman read the paper carefully and offered promising lines of argument to develop. I am also grateful to Hugh Gusterson, Jennifer Roth Gordon, and the anthropology department at the University of Arizona for helpful questions.

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