



Book Review

Ronald E. Rice and James E. Katz. *The Internet and Health Communication: Experiences and Expectations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001, 459pp. + xvi. \$37.95 (softcover), \$76.95 (hardcover).

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The recent growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has revolutionized modern society. In recent years, e-mail, web sites, and chat rooms have been readily adopted by millions of people, and they have become new media of communication that have facilitated the creation of new relationships across temporal and geographic boundaries. Furthermore, they have affected the nature of organizational, mass, interpersonal, and intrapersonal communication in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Simultaneously, the vast proliferation of CMC presents researchers with numerous challenges in terms of effectively applying and evaluating this technology in ways that should ultimately benefit people. Two relatively recent examples include telemedicine and telehospice.

During this same time period, the massive network of hospitals, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, and insurance companies, known as the U.S. health care system, has also experienced rapid change and expansion. Moreover, the healthcare system has intrigued social scientists and challenged them with opportunities to apply communication theory to help address a wide range of pragmatic concerns. Despite the rising interest in health communication and CMC, few scholars have presented work that focuses attention on overlapping concerns from both areas.

The Internet and Health Communication: Experiences and Expectations, edited by Ronald E. Rice and James E. Katz, offers a fusion of these bodies of research from an interdisciplinary and applied perspective. Both editors bring extensive experience in the areas of CMC and communication technology to the book. They also have assembled an impressive array of contributing scholars from such diverse disciplines as computer science, public health administration, communication, and medicine.

In the first section, Ronald Rice (Chapter One), as well as Robert Mittman and Mary Cain (Chapter Two), present several compelling reasons for why scholars who are interested in studying health communication should shift their attention to the computer-mediated environment, including the rapid growth of health-related web communities and the use of technology for increasing the efficiency of health organizations. These contributors demonstrate the scope of health communication behaviors that currently exist on the Internet by citing summary statistics concerning

use of health-related web sites, support communities for health concerns, physician-patient communication, and the use of communication technology within health organizations.

The second section examines the experiences of laypersons and providers using the Internet for medical information. Philip Napoli (Chapter Three) discusses a number of important issues concerning the use of online health information, such as the decentralization of health information and the credibility of online information. Philip Aspden, James Katz, and Ann Bemis (Chapters Four and Five) discuss provider use of the Internet. These chapters illuminate important characteristics of providers who use the Internet versus those who do not, and reveal that the Internet has not necessarily increased communication between providers and patients, since most physicians use the Internet for research rather than for direct communication with patients. Finally, June Anigbogu and Ronald Rice (Chapter Six) shed light on the experiences of women learning to access the Internet for information about infertility. An important contribution of this section is its ability to convey the diversity of positive, negative, and mixed perceptions of online health information and the role of computer technology in healthcare.

The third section is dedicated to research on developing and using web sites to effectively disseminate health information to the public. Finnegan et al. (Chapter Seven) discuss how researchers can use web information within a community-based intervention in their study of a web-based community intervention for cardiac patients. Schneider et al. (Chapter Eight) provide valuable information for assessing government health-related web sites, ranging from meeting with web site administrators to conducting online surveys of web site users. In addition, Elizabeth Witherspoon (Chapter Nine) draws on theories of health behavior change, such as the transtheoretical model, in a content analysis of an HMO web site. Along the same lines, Ronald Rice, Michael Peterson, and Robert Christine (Chapter Ten) provide a comparative analysis between commercial and government health-related web sites. The results of their analysis imply that both commercial and government web sites can learn from each other's strengths and weakness. For example, the authors suggest that government web sites should consider adding more interactive features. These chapters are valuable resources for researchers who are interested in developing a quantitative assessment of health-related web sites. This section presents invaluable information to researchers and practitioners who are interested in constructing health-related web sites to influence health attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

The fourth section moves away from health information, and focuses its attention on topics such as CMC within online support communities. It also explores the role of the Internet in e-commerce among the many companies that support the healthcare system, and the use of the Internet for continuing education among providers and staff. Jennifer Preece and Kambiz Ghozati (Chapter Eleven) make a contribution to the understudied area of online support groups. Their findings indicate that empathic communication is a prevalent activity within these groups; however, communicating empathy can be problematic given the restraints of the medium. Pamela Whitten, Matthew Eastin, and David Cook (Chapter Twelve) also focus on an understudied topic: the use of the web for continuing medical education. This chapter focuses on several important issues related to continuing education for providers, such as the increasing number of continuing education programs available, the quality of education, and limitations to providing continuing education credit to providers via the web.

Richard Street and Veronica Piziak (Chapter Thirteen) and Lauren Eder and Donald Wise (Chapter Fourteen) discuss how managed care organizations can increase efficiency and reduce costs by using the web to provide preventive health information and to reduce the staggering amount of paperwork within healthcare organizations. In a similar way, Elizabeth More and Michael McGrath (Chapter Fifteen) examine the use of the Internet for e-commerce between health organizations and pharmaceutical suppliers as a way to increase efficiency and reduce cost. In addition, these authors examine difficulties with this type of e-commerce, such as changes in traditional power roles and increased accountability on the part of suppliers and health organizations.

The concluding chapters draw attention to the legal ramifications of using technology to connect the disparate healthcare system in the United States. While the case is made that technology may improve efficiency, Cynthia Baur, Mary Jo Deering, and Leslie Hsu (Chapter Sixteen) explore problems concerning interstate medical practice, such as privacy concerns among patients. Barry Bayer (Chapter Seventeen) discusses problems associated with online pharmacies, such as who has jurisdiction over interstate transactions between consumers and pharmacies. James Katz and Philip Aspden (Chapter Eighteen) focus on patient rights concerning the issues of confidentiality and electronic patient records. James Katz and Ronald Rice close the book (Chapter Nineteen) by summarizing the implications of health communication on the Internet and mentioning several areas that need empirical/theoretical attention from researchers and policymakers. Among these areas are a cost-benefit ratio of adopting technology within healthcare systems, the relative infancy of applying new technology to healthcare, and ethical implications of using CMC in this context.

One of the many strengths of the book is its balanced perspective of the roles of information technology and CMC. Frequently, many scholars and laypersons adopt extreme positions concerning the value of computer technology in modern society. The book discusses as many problems associated with adopting the Internet and other computer technology within the healthcare system as potential benefits for providers and the public. Indeed, rather than presenting the Internet as a panacea for health communication, the reader is allowed to make decisions about its value and utility. A second strength of the book is its applied and interdisciplinary focus. Despite the scope of issues the book examines, each chapter identifies pragmatic issues surrounding health communication, as well as potential contributions that scholars and practitioners can make to the area of health communication and the healthcare system. Each section contains chapters that reflect a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods as well as state-of-the-art literature reviews and conceptual pieces. No singular perspective or discipline-related agenda dominates the discussions throughout the book, and the reader is left with a richer understanding of the pervasiveness of communication within the health system and how the innovation of the Internet has added to the complexity of interaction in this context.

In general, I feel that this book is a "must read" for anyone interested in health communication and CMC. The range of topics is impressive from a communication standpoint, encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication contexts. Most chapters hold one's attention (see Chapters One, Two, Five, Eleven, Thirteen, and Fourteen) and they inspire reflection about the many possibilities and problems that the Internet brings to the world of health, although a few chapters are somewhat more tedious to peruse (see Chapters Ten, Fifteen, and Eighteen). However, they still make an important contribution to these important areas of communication research.