

Good to Talk?

'All three billion of us are being connected by telephones, radios, television sets, airplanes, satellites, harangues on public-address systems, newspapers, magazines, leaflets dropped from great heights, words got in edgewise. We are becoming a grid, a circuitry around the earth. If we keep at it, we will become a computer to end all computers, capable of fusing all the thoughts of the world.' Lewis Thomas, 1983

It's a small world

It's often said that our world is a small place, and that it's getting smaller. We can now communicate with people around the world in ways that would never have been thought of a century ago. Air travel means that we can travel around the world in a matter of days, while the telephone allows us to speak to far-flung relatives without leaving our living rooms.

Online information

Over the last few years the Internet has changed communication even more radically. Vast amounts of information are available online, accessible to anyone with a computer and a phone line. Virtual communities are being created, where people from all over the world chat with each other, laugh, flirt, discuss issues, argue... developing friendships with those they've never met. Meanwhile, our news is updated more frequently than ever – where cameras are present, we can actually watch things as they happen.

You're going to look at the impact of these changes and discuss whether their effects are mostly positive, negative or neutral.



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What you need to do:

- Think about the changes that there have been in technology over the last couple of centuries, and how they've changed the way that we communicate. List as many means of communication as you can, along with their benefits and drawbacks.

Things to consider:

Are they available to everyone?

If they involve technology, when were they invented?

- Many people have mixed feelings about the new technology. Gary Younge, writing in the Guardian, points out that the quantity of communication is threatening to overwhelm quality:

'Gone are the delights and disappointments of waiting for the postman – electronic valentine cards will soon take over. Gone are the pangs of new lovers yearning for the end of the day so they can call each other or meet up – they do not crave contact because they have not been deprived of it. They've been flirting in cyberspace all day, which is where they probably met. Gone too are the days when you'd have to wait for friends to come back from a trip to hear all about it over a bottle of wine – they've been sending you daily bulletins so it never feels as though they've been away... We gain immediacy and, particularly if someone is abroad, we save money. But we also lose inflection, nuance, voice tone and body language. We gain stress and lose intimacy.'

Gary Younge, The Guardian, 4th Jan 2001

Read the rest of this article and summarise what he's saying. Do you agree or disagree with his arguments? Discuss this in class.

- Write your own newspaper article or essay about communication in today's society. You might want to pick one of the following topics, or choose your own:
- Respond to Gary Younge's article, writing an opinion piece for the same newspaper. Are we really being swamped by information?
- Virtual friendships – many people use the Internet to speak with people around the world in various chat rooms and forums. Do you think it's possible to be friends with someone you've never met in real life? Are virtual friendships a good or bad thing? What are the potential benefits and problems?
- Online news – the Internet has revolutionised the communication of news. Newspapers from around the world are available online, giving access to every possible viewpoint on a news story. Describe the difference between

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an online newspaper and those in print format – will online papers ever replace the printing press?

- Some people say that we are creating an 'information underclass' of people who don't have access to the Internet. Why is this a problem, and what can we do about it?

You're aiming to persuade readers of your arguments, so make sure you justify what you're saying. You can use your own experiences as examples.

Resources that might help you:

You'll find a list of 'important historical inventions and inventors' online at:

www.lib.lsu.edu/sci/chem/patent/srs136.html

Look in the 'communication' section for the most relevant inventions.

Media resources:

Most national UK newspapers have websites. The best way to find these sites is using a search engine like www.google.com – type in the newspaper's full title and see what you find.

For international news, a good place to start is the Guardian newspaper, online at www.guardian.co.uk. The Weblogs section provides links relevant to current news stories, along with links to international newspapers and magazines.

If you want to take things further:

- Carry out a survey in your school. Which means of communication do people use, and what do they think of them? Are there differences between boys and girls, or between age or year-groups?
- The volume of information available to us online creates problems: how do we filter out the information we don't need or want, to get to the information we do? When we come across opposing views, how do we decide what information is reliable, and what is not? Discuss ways you'd do this – you might want to write an information sheet for pupils at your school who use the web for research.