

■ Original Article

「会話型社会」と「手紙型社会」  
— 高度情報化社会における「いま、ここ」の分析論的意義 —

“Conversation-Based Society” and “Mail-Based Society”:

The Analytical Significance of “Here and Now”  
in a Highly Networked Information Society

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**Abstract**

In a modern highly networked information society, we have various types of communication media such as email, electronic bulletin boards, and social networking sites including Twitter and Facebook. I believe that these media should be classified not according to their technical differentiations but in terms of how and what human beings experience through each of them.

Contrasting uttered voices with written characters, we can find it very effective to adopt “here and now” as an analytical concept through which to understand experiences related to human encounters. Spoken language is destined to pass away at the very moment in which it arises. Each moment of a conversation, including periods of silence, continues to be confined in the “now.” Spoken voices can exist only within the reach of “here.” In contrast, written characters can survive physically without disappearing automatically. They can be performed in the “neither here nor now,” thanks to their potential for going beyond time and space.

Additionally, I classify media experiences into two fundamental types: “conversation-based” and “mail-based” in dualistic terms. Face-to-face interaction with others is absolutely stuck in the “here and now” owing to the inevitability of sharing specific time and space. On the contrary, exchanges of letters across distances are basically free from the “here and now.” But the breakthroughs in advanced communication technology have generated hybrids of the two types outlined above. Talking to others on the phone belongs to “conversation-like speech” type. Email communication can be regarded as a typical form of “mail-like letters.” But voicemails on answering machines can be categorized into “conversation-like letters.” Considering the enormous number of people participating in Internet-based chats, “mail-like speech” type is assumed to have developed very efficiently.

The main purpose of this paper is to break down into patterns the various and complicated media experiences, mainly on the basis of the spatiotemporal theory.

*Keywords* : here and now, conversation, mail, interactivity

**【Contents】**

Introduction

Part 1: A Provisional Classification of Various Media

Part 2: Comparison between Uttered Voices and Written Characters

Part 3: The “Now” as the Divide between Conversation-based and Mail-based Communication

Part 4: The “Here and Now” as an Effective Analytical Tool to Arrange Various Media

Part 5: The Hybrids of Conversation-based and Mail-based Media Experiences

Part 6: Concrete Effects Caused by Differences in Media Experiences

Conclusion

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## Introduction

I work at a national university in a provincial area and belong to an organization titled “The Center for Education and Research of Community Collaboration.” Though the English word “collaboration” in the name of the Center is a translation of the Japanese word “renkei,” it is not the exact or only translation. This is because; the word “renkei” has many meanings. For example, while we often translate “renkei” as “cooperation” or “association,” we can also deal with it as “linkage” or “connection.”

What is “renkei”? Indeed, at a glance, the definition of this Japanese word seems to be very easy. However, an in-depth investigation indicates that this question has a more complex answer. I think that the meanings and significances of the word “renkei” are not only complicated in principle but also are expanding in a practical sense, especially due to the demands of the information age.

Our current, highly networked society has undoubtedly enormously enriched human encounters. Thanks to information and communication technology, our global connections have not only been nurtured quantitatively but also diversified qualitatively. We are now able to encounter a variety of people who were

previously very difficult to communicate with and can access information that was never available before. However, does the seeming quantitative richness achieved by this highly sophisticated information society reflect a real richness in the qualitative sense? I believe that we need to reconsider the possibilities and problems regarding connections between people precisely because we live in the age where we are quite easily able to develop relationships with anyone, at least superficially.

In this paper, I will not aim at providing a direct answer to the question relating the meanings of “renkei”. Instead, I would take the opportunity to drop many hints about how we can rethink this multidirectional word by intentionally taking the long route of thought. The research results I present will allow us to rediscover the profound necessity of exploring what communication “is” and “should be.”

## Part 1: A Provisional Classification of Various Media

Today, we live in a highly sophisticated information society with various types of media. As examples of one-directional mass media, in which information flows from

**Table 1. Comparison between Uni-directional and Bi-directional Media**

	Uni-directional media	Bi-directional media
<b>Flow of information</b>	One-way	Two-way
<b>General descriptive term</b>	Mass media	Personal media
<b>Paper media</b>	Books Magazines Newspapers	Letters
<b>Analog media</b>	Radio Television Video	Telephone Mobile phone Fax machine
<b>Digital media</b>	Satellite broadcasting Digital terrestrial broadcast reception	Email Electronic bulletin boards Smartphone Social networks (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)

informers to recipients, we can point to television, radio, and video as well as books, magazines, and newspapers. When we watch TV today, however, digital terrestrial broadcasting enables us to send our data directly to broadcasters as well as receive information from them—a multilateral exchange that was impossible in the days of analog technology. In addition, such forms of media as telephones and fax machines can be considered bi-directional because there is a two-way flow of information. Moreover, since the explosive spread of the Internet, numerous means of communication—not only email and electronic bulletin boards but also social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook—have emerged in succession.

At first glance, this exponential growth of media sources seems almost out of control; however, with regard to our theoretical understanding, should we just leave this complicated situation as it is? No, I think that we need some simple analytical frameworks based on which many citizens, including scholars, can share and discuss ideas.

I have created Table 1 to help you understand my classification of various media, based on the contrast between uni- and bi-directional forms, although I have left out the finer details. However, I am not completely satisfied with this arrangement, because it is not likely to help us anticipate the future evolution of media forms or clarify the essential nature of human life in a highly networked society. From what perspective, then,

should we categorize these tangled forms of media? I find it highly effective to classify them not in terms of technical differentiation but in terms of what human beings experience through each of them and how they experience it.

## Part 2: Comparison between Uttered Voices and Written Characters

How should we distinguish various media experiences? I believe that we can find a clue to understanding new theoretical developments in the media realm by first delving deeper into our everyday communication experiences.

Walter Jackson Ong—an American Jesuit priest, professor of English literature, cultural and religious historian, and philosopher—compared orality with literacy, describing the process of historical transition from the former to the latter. A means of communication that involves talking and listening is quite different from one that entails writing and reading. The former basically comprises auditory communication using the ears and mouth, whereas the latter incorporates visual experiences with your eyes and hands. Inspired by Ong’s comparison, I believe that it is similarly useful to contrast uttered voices with written characters. This contrast is highlighted in Table 2.

When a sound is created, it simultaneously

**Table 2. Comparison between Uttered Voices and Written Characters**

	Uttered Voices	Written Characters
<b>Spatiotemporality</b>	Here and now	Neither here nor now
<b>Ong’s framework</b>	Orality	Literacy
<b>Human actions</b>	Talking and listening	Writing and reading
<b>Parts of the body used</b>	Ears and mouth	Eyes and hands
<b>Sensory experience</b>	Auditory	Visual
<b>Primary media used</b>	Auditory signs (Sound, voice)	Visual signs (Paintings, drawings, characters)
<b>Basic feature of communication</b>	Transience	Repeatability

disappears. As soon as a voice—a sound emitted by a human—appears, it also disappears. Spoken language is destined to pass away at the very moment at which it arises. If you miss hearing something important, you can never retrieve it again. Indeed, you can listen to a conversation over and over again after recording the sound of the voices, but each moment of the conversation’s flow fades away as soon as it comes into existence. Every moment of a conversation is inevitably a transient phenomenon, no matter how much it is prolonged or how often it is reproduced.

In contrast, pictures and characters remain fixed in a specific space and survive physically, without disappearing automatically. This basic attribute of drawn or written materials enables us to look at them repeatedly. Furthermore, you can read a very recondite book, back and forth, and absorb it completely, whereas you might have much difficulty in keeping up with the conversation commensurate with it, because of your inability to understand its contents when they are initially spoken.

### Part 3: The “Now” as the Divide between Conversation-based and Mail-based Communication

I believe that the contrast between uttered communication and drawn or written communication

provides us with the most fundamental divide for classifying various media. Similarly, we can understand some essential differences of communication by comparing face-to-face interaction with the exchange of letters over a distance. With regard to their social composition, I will propose a bold hypothesis that states that the various modern media can be roughly divided into two types: “conversation-based” and “mail-based.” Their theoretical relationship can be shown by contrast, as in Table 3.

Phenomenologically, human beings are always living in the present moment, but they are also capable of dividing time into three periods (past, present, and future) in their ordinary perception, even if that perception may be full of epistemological mistakes in terms of strict phenomenological analysis. I insist that the most fundamental standard for evaluating various media depends on how and in what form human beings experience time and space.

Every moment of a conversation is inevitably experienced as unrepeatable. Once the present has become the past, it never returns. If you fail to catch your counterpart’s utterance simultaneously with its emergence, you will not be able to participate fully in a conversation-based interaction. In other words, it is in a series of unrepeatable one-time encounters that spoken language delivers meaning.

In contrast, mail-based communication is rich in repeatable chances. You can read someone’s letter

**Table 3. Comparison between Conversation-based and Mail-based Communication**

	Conversation-based	Mail-based
Fundamental form of communication	Utterance	Drawing Writing
Typical example	Face-to-face interaction	Exchange of letters at a distance
Repeatability of the experience	Unrepeatable (series of one-time encounters)	Repeatable
Relationship with the “now”	Confined in the “now”	Bypasses the “now”
Position of the present	Shared present	Absence of a shared present
Relative time frame of participants	Present	Future and past
Nature of interaction	Direct	Indirect

over and over without any limitation. Similarly, when writing a letter, you have ample opportunities to review and rewrite it. Mail-based communication offers a flexible time frame within which to act or react to your counterpart. You are allowed to rehearse your work as many times as you wish until you are satisfied with the final version, the “real thing” that your counterpart will receive and read. Notably, the same situation is very true of drafting an email.

On the contrary, when you are talking to someone face to face or on the phone, an utterance reaches your counterpart the moment you issue it. You cannot prepare a response to your counterpart’s ad lib reaction in advance. Conversation is a style of interpersonal interaction that occurs continuously on a real stage. In this sense, each moment of a conversation, including the periods of silence, continues to be confined in the “now.” Of course, conversation-based communication can be involved with the past or the future, in that you can recall past events or predict future ones. However, memorizing and recalling the past belongs inevitably to every moment equivalent to the “now,” as does anticipating the future, because it is in a series of present moments that you can recall the past as you have imperceptibly retained it in memory and anticipate the future as you have unconsciously imagined it.

In contrast, mail-based communication can be regarded as inevitably bypassing the “now,” because you and your counterpart, who is at a distance, never have a common “now.” A letter itself inevitably partakes of the past. First, the products that you have finished writing are regarded as an outcome of the past, although each moment while you are writing is an ongoing process. Second, your letter is destined to be something of the past by the time it reaches your reader. Actually, there is an inescapable gap between the moment when you finish writing a letter and the moment when your counterpart receives it. You may have changed your mind during the intervening period or forgotten what you had written. Third, reading the written letter means communicating with a past moment, although (conversely) the moment when someone reads a letter belongs to the future when viewed from the point when one is writing the letter.

Written communication, while basically occupying the past, always looks toward the future, or the specific

time, date, or place at which someone will be expected to read the letter. In writing and reading letters, you do not share the present with others. Rather, mail-based communication is divided into two components, future and past, based precisely on the absence of a shared present. This repetition of bypassing the present in mail-based communication can be contrasted with the continuity of being confined in the present in conversation-based communication.

Sending a letter is, in itself, a one-way action from a sender to a receiver, and receiving a letter is also, in itself, a one-way deed by the receiver without the sender’s continued participation, as sending and receiving never come into effect simultaneously. This is why exchanges of emails seem formally interactive but are never virtually interactive; each opportunity to communicate does not overlap the next one in time. Of course, mail-based communication can create interaction, but it can develop only an indirect interactivity through each individual’s imagination.

## **Part 4: The “Here and Now” as an Effective Analytical Tool to Arrange Various Media**

Thus far, I have classified media experiences in binary fashion into two fundamental types: “conversation-based” and “mail-based.” This distinction lies mainly in the temporal perspective based on whether the essence of experience is dominated by the “now.” When combined with the spatial perspective, this argument for arranging media experiences will become more stereoscopic. Let me provide some specific examples to clarify my classifications.

First, suppose that you have a face-to-face conversation with a close family member. This is the most primitive and basic form of conversation-based communication. You can communicate with the person you are addressing not only by vocalizing but also by gesticulating. You can share the “now” with the other person because you also share the “here” with him or her. Spoken voices can exist only within the reach of “here.” Face-to-face interaction with others is absolutely stuck in the “here and now” owing to the inevitability of

sharing a specific time and space.

However, since the invention and proliferation of the telephone, you have been able to talk to someone located at a distance from you. Mobile phones now allow you to do this at any time and anywhere. Furthermore, by using videophone technologies, such as Skype, you can talk with a person who is not physically present near you and yet see his or her face on the screen. Thanks to the significant progress of telephone communication technology, you can increasingly share the “now” with someone without sharing the “here.” We will classify all communications that have the “now” in common as conversation-based. Telephone technologies have created this conversational category of “now, but not here.”

Next, let us consider mail-based media. For this type of communication, record retention is an essential defining factor. Mail-based communication originated as a message recorded in a specific place that is not very different from historical monuments, which can be regarded as mail from the past. The previous form of mail-based media began as a communication category of “not now, but here.” If you stand in front of the bulletin board in your town, you can receive a message from someone else who has used it. You are able to transcend time to communicate with the messenger by sharing the “here” with him or her.

But some of you may consider it a bother to move physically to the bulletin board. Our modern postal system, which is a government-based operation, enables you to receive information without going out to seek it; someone else transports the message to you so that you can read written communication without sharing the “here” with the sender. Exchanges of letters need not be restricted to the “here and now.”

Moreover, in our highly digital society, you can choose to use email. If you were to compare entering characters into a communication device to writing letters by hand, email communication could be regarded as a typical form of mail-based communication. Exchanges of emails across distances are almost perfectly free from the “here and now,” because you can use mobile devices such as cell phones, smartphones, and portable computers anytime and anywhere. Therefore, we now have common forms of mail-based communication that can be performed in the “neither here nor now.”

Hence, I will now contrast “conversation-based communication” with “mail-based communication,” dividing various media into these two classifications while considering the following four categories: “here and now,” “now, but not here,” “not now, but here,” and “neither here nor now.” By locating the temporal dichotomy between “now” and “not now” on the ordinate

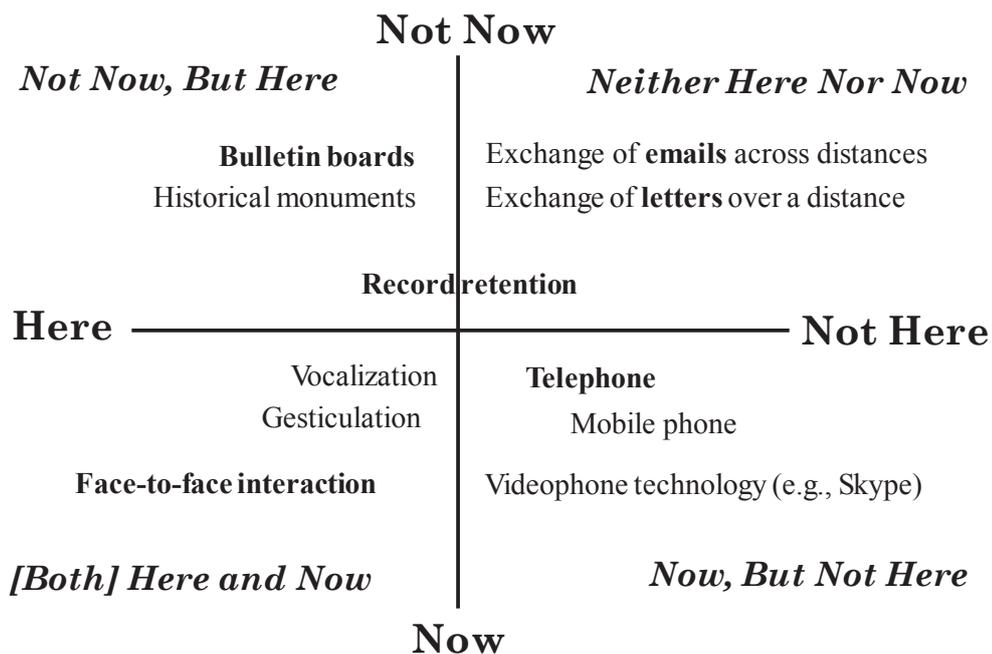


Figure 1. Use of the “here and now” as a tool to classify various media

and the spatial dichotomy between “here” and “not here” on the abscissa, I can create the illustration shown in Figure 1. This will enable you to keep my theoretical framework in perspective more easily.

## Part 5: The Hybrids of Conversation-based and Mail-based Media Experiences

What do we experience through various media and how? By way of provisional conclusion, we experience “conversation-based” or “mail-based” communication, according to whether it is “here and now” or not.

However, I should first point out that breakthroughs in advanced communication technology have generated hybrids of the two types. On one hand, there are letters that obviously have a conversation-like character; on the other hand, we can observe examples of speech that display a mail-like nature. Considering my framework that contrasts conversation with mail, I would like to introduce an additional distinction between “conversation-like” and “mail-like.” Plotting the contrast between speech and letters on the vertical axis and that between “conversation-like” and “mail-like” on

the horizontal axis, I obtain the four-way classification illustrated in Figure 2. To come right to the point, there now exist not only “conversation-like speech” and “mail-like letters” but also “conversation-like letters” and “mail-like speech.”

Walter Benjamin, a famous German thinker, noted that one of the most important features of human artistic experience was to experience its presence in time and space, which is equivalent to the “here and now” within my paradigm. He further emphasized that the copying technology prevailing in the 1920s, such as photos, movie pictures, and phonographs, had deprived the human esthetic experience of this unique feature in a profound way. His significant insight can be paradoxically applicable to my theory.

The technology of sound and visual recordings enables a primitive conversation to be free from the “here and now.” Someone can deliver his or her message to you by speaking into an answering machine. It is as if your counterpart had packaged a small amount of the “now” at a particular time and helped you to equate the “then” with the “quasi-now.” Moreover, you can repeat this experience by listening to the caller’s voice more than once. Such re-emergence technologies have unlocked the potential for human beings to feel as though they

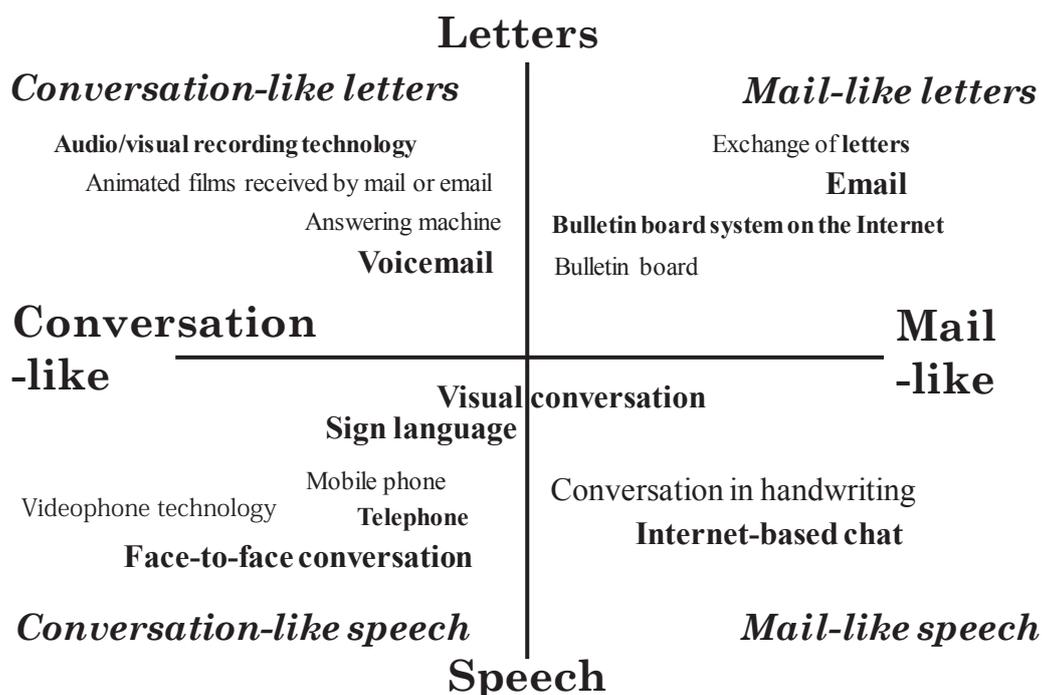


Figure 2. Hybrids of conversation-based and mail-based media experiences

were experiencing the “here and now” repeatedly. This experience can be compared to reading a letter virtually, regardless of the fact that you are listening to speech left by a messenger. In this sense, voice mail is precisely a conversation-like letter. Similarly, when you view animated films received by mail, it is similar to opening and welcoming a conversation-like letter, because the video clips appear very vivid, with both the flow of sound and voices and the motion of visual images. When these data are digitalized, they can be received by email as file attachments or downloaded from the Web.

In contrast, if you keep a pen and paper handy, you can converse in writing with someone sitting next to you. You can communicate with him or her almost simultaneously, reading each other’s writing and perhaps drawing pictures for each other. This interaction remains in the present progressive, although it is written and drawn rather than spoken. It would be fair to call this a form of “visual conversation,” although we should recall that sign language is also a visual form of conversation based on a shared “here.” A series of prompt exchanges of letters based on a shared spatial location can be considered as a conversation in handwriting. It is a primitive form of mail-like speech, which has been recorded automatically.

With the Internet’s growing prominence, a large number of people participate in Internet-based chats. You can have a visual conversation with someone who is far away by entering characters into communication devices, such as cell phones, smartphones, and portable computers. In this context, mail-like speech is assumed to have developed very efficiently, although John McWhorter, an American linguist and political commentator, summarized the concept of texting and emailing with the phrase “fingered speech.”

At any rate, conversation-based communication is inevitably in the present progressive, but mail-based communication contains a time lag. If we could amplify the hypothesis up to the level of social composition, we might say that the life-world that humans live in and experience can be divided into conversation-based and mail-based societies.

## Part 6: Concrete Effects Caused by Differences in Media Experiences

What is the point of classifying the complex array of possible media experiences in this way? One practical reason for doing so is to help us explain the new social phenomena that are emerging with the development of highly networked societies.

For example, some young people become nervous and close-mouthed when they talk to others face to face, although they express themselves quite openly and profusely when interacting online by entering characters in communication devices in a fashion similar to writing letters. This contrast seems striking since we can now communicate interactively with each other through a wide variety of media. I would attempt to explain this inconsistency that is evident in communication today.

According to my framework, how a style of communication exerts gradual influence on human character, or even has a strong impact on it, depends on whether it is conversation-based or mail-based. Allow me to use an extreme and fanciful illustration to help us clearly understand this contention.

Suppose that a group of people, in their daily lives, talk to one another without written communication, whereas another group of people exclusively exchange emails without talking directly. The former group can be regarded as living in a world based on the “here and now” while the latter live in a world based on the “neither here nor now.” I will name the former group the “Talking People” and the latter the “Emailing People” for descriptive purposes. The Talking People form a village concentrated in a specific geographical area, whereas the Emailing People form a virtual community, interconnected online. Now, I conjecture that the two groups can be contrasted in many ways.

As the Talking People continue to be connected directly to their counterparts who are positioned in front of them, they cannot cut off relations with them easily. When they want to do so cordially, they must leave their present location to stop sharing the “here and now.” The Emailing People, who are intermittently connected to their counterparts at a distance, can break off relations with them relatively easily. Since they do not share the “here and now,” they merely have to stop responding

to emails to cut off a relationship. Like it or not, the Talking People, who have abundant opportunities to establish close relations, can love or hate each other deeply; however, the Emailing People can afford to be selective about their partners and conduct distant communications, rather than establishing close relations. The Talking People are constantly improvising their behavior on the basis of the various reactions of their counterparts in a series of unrepeatable one-time encounters; thus, they have abundant opportunities to be influenced directly by “actual others.”

The Talking People learn to construct their selves in a complex web of interactions without enjoying individual, quiet opportunities for self-reflection. In contrast, the Emailing People have little opportunity to encounter others face to face, but they have abundant opportunities to think of “imaginary others” because they are bound to imagine their counterparts as they write or read emails. Therefore, their delusions about these others are in danger of arbitrarily becoming inflated and dissimilar to the real counterparts.

Let us now apply these observations to contemporary life. The Japanese youth, who prefer emailing to talking, tend to be very sensitive to the slightest provocation from their friends, and also, if they arrive at an unwarranted assumption that they are now

in a friend’s bad books, they part company with that person for fear of getting hurt again. If you look at this situation from another perspective, however, written communication provides abundant opportunities for each individual to reflect on the self, and thereby he or she may learn to deepen his or her awareness of the self and consider others’ views in a calm and reflective manner. I think that bookworms have a tendency to show the advantage of this type of self-pursuit, though they are sometimes in danger of locking themselves away.

In addition, the Talking People are apt at acting boldly, whereas the Emailing People are inclined to be cautious. While talking to someone, you cannot help being continually aware of the other person and changing your facial expression, tone, or verbal content in response to the other person’s changes, with the inevitable risk of being easily swayed by that person. In a face-to-face interaction, you need greater boldness to interrupt or sometimes contradict your counterpart and state your own opinion without hesitation. This is how the Talking People learn the basics of associating with others nearby. In contrast, when you email someone, you need to be careful and reread your written message, because you cannot revise it once it has been received by your counterpart.

**Table 4. Comparison between Talking People and Emailing People**

	Talking People	Emailing People
<b>Spatiotemporal Basis</b>	Here and now	Neither here nor now
<b>Basic living space</b>	Specific geographical area	Virtual community, interconnected online
<b>Nature of human relations</b>	Close relations	Selective, distant relations
<b>Type of interaction with others</b>	Direct influence by others	Recollection of imaginary others
<b>Self-recognition</b>	Selves	Self
<b>Communication requirement</b>	Boldness	Cautiousness
<b>Character tendency</b>	Extroversion	Introversion
<b>Facial expressions</b>	More expressive	Less expressive
<b>Capacity to improvise dialogue</b>	Spoken words that do not remain in archives	Inexperienced in improvising

Indeed, email communication, which permits people to keep their face and identity secret, is sometimes conducted in a spirit of surprising openness and without much reserve, but in this situation you may tend toward taking no account of what your counterpart is really like and immersing yourself in your own world, even though your counterpart's messages may provide a powerful clue to your own innocent openness. In other words, the openness that occurs in email exchanges might be only the result of the accumulation of your own concentration on yourself.

Therefore, you can unconsciously learn cautiousness rather than boldness toward others through the experience of email communication. Taken as a whole, a stack of face-to-face conversation experiences will drive you to become an extrovert, but an accumulation of email communications will cause you to be an introvert. The Talking People may appear rather expressive because face-to-face communication requires facial expressions along with words and flexibility in responding to different people as the occasion arises. The Emailing People live a life rich in face-to-screen communication and can remain less expressive as compared to the Talking People, because they feel less need for bodily expression.

Now consider the following situation. What will happen if the Talking People relocate to the village of the Emailing People or vice versa? Even if the Talking People learn how to email, they may find themselves in awkward situations, for example, not understanding that the negative messages they write remain online and are semi-permanently accessible, because they have become accustomed to addressing each situation as it arises with spoken words that do not remain in archives. Meanwhile, the Emailing People, accustomed to expressing themselves by entering characters in communication devices, may become nervous and close-mouthed when talking with others face to face, because they are inexperienced in improvising while responding to their counterparts' various reactions. They may become bewildered by a series of transactions occurring in an impromptu manner, unaware of which facial expression

they should show in the presence of "actual others."

Table 4 summarizes the outcome of comparison between the Talking People and the Emailing People, further clarifying my framework.

## Conclusion

I would like to stress the effectiveness of my hypothesis that the life-world is divided into two types of societies, "conversation-based" and "mail-based." The concept of "here and now" is the most fundamental standard by which to evaluate the conversation-letter division. Although my development of this concept contains a fairly high level of abstraction, it is simultaneously, I think, very pragmatic. In reality, my proposed classification is applicable not only to sociological analysis and communication theory but also to the study of character building, language education, and other fields.

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