



## Full length article

## Temptations of fluency and dilemmas of self definition: Stutterers' usage and avoidance of new media technologies

Hananel Rosenberg <sup>a, b, \*</sup>, Ayelet Kohn <sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Communication, Ariel University, Israel<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel<sup>c</sup> The Department of Communications, David Yellin Academic College of Education, Jerusalem, Israel

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## ABSTRACT

Media technologies, such as telephones, often challenge stammers. Other media, especially applications such as SMS and social networks, enable stammers to express themselves fluently. This study looks into the multifaceted meanings of the encounter between stammers and new media, focusing on applications which enable speech through writing, and a Stammers forum website, as a site for reflexive debate on the meaning of new media opportunities. The study focuses on questions such as anonymity, the “noise” of various media and the ways in which new media helps to improve the users quality of life, but at the same time might lead them to reduce their social life to an alternative “verbal ghetto”, confined to the borders of the new media platform.

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## 1. Introduction

Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech* (hereinafter: “TKS”)<sup>1</sup> brought short-lived pleasure to stutterers, or to use the clinical terminology, those suffering from verbal fluency disorders (hereinafter: “VFDs”).<sup>2</sup> After years of VFD sufferers suffering the further insult of being mocked and portrayed as laughingstocks by Hollywood (Johnson, 2008), the motion picture industry presented a “royal narrative” of stuttering in King George VI's struggle with a lifelong speech impediment that he could no longer hide in the royal palace due to the rise of a new mass medium — radio — that required him to speak clearly and fluently. Communication technologies

occasionally present challenges and difficulties to stutterers that are amplified during use, depending upon each medium's unique character (James, Brumfitt, & Cudd, 1999). At the same time, some communication technologies, particularly the range of applications in the new media, constitute an opportunity for “stutter bypass”, and a new type of fluency, for those for whom fluency constitutes a constant obstacle to self-expression. In this study, we present the varied implications of the encounter between the stutterer and new media, focusing on the various speech and writing applications available, and on the online Israeli Tapúz Stutterers' Forum as a locus of reflexive discourse on this matter and as a test case for these uses.

The Stutterers' Forum serves as a fascinating site for reflexive debate on the meaning of new media opportunities. While liberating its users from their difficulties to conduct a fluent conversation, it might lead its participants to reduce their social life to an alternative “verbal ghetto”, confined to the borders of the new media platform. This contradiction leads us to characterize the stutterers' forum as a multi-functional site for its participants: as a host of a support group, as a site which enables its users to gain their voice back, as an opportunity to discuss the place of new media in the life of people with impairments on a whole, and as a site of self reflection about stutterers and their relationships with

\* Corresponding author. Communication and Journalism Department, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel.

E-mail addresses: [hananelro@gmail.com](mailto:hananelro@gmail.com) (H. Rosenberg), [ayeletkohn@gmail.com](mailto:ayeletkohn@gmail.com) (A. Kohn).

<sup>1</sup> *The King's Speech* (2010): T. Hooper (Dir.), I. Caning, E. Sherman, & G. Unwin (Prods.). UK Film Council.

<sup>2</sup> The terms “stammer”/“stutter” and “stutterer”, which we shall expand upon later further on, are used herein for ease in reading, and do not reflect a dehumanization or rejection of the subjects of this study. In parallel, the choice to use these terms actually demonstrates the daily encounter with image-based difficulties that VFD sufferers face every time they open their mouths.

the fluent society.

In the discourse on various relationships between the stutterer and [direct] interpersonal communication and technology-assisted communication, we shall begin by stating that regarding stuttering, the problem lies in the human voice, that is, in the basic communication medium itself, i.e., the very fact of verbal interaction taking place face to face. If we broaden the metaphor, we have a “broken medium”, the sounds emerging from the mouths of the speakers are difficult — sometimes nearly impossible — for the hearer to decode and understand. The problem is exacerbated when the stutterer needs technology that serves as an extension of one's mouth (McLuhan, 1964), like that of a radio broadcaster — as seen in the aforementioned film — or the telephone, which in the case of the stutterer, instead of serving as a transparent medium and assistive technology, actually amplifies the obstacles to the conversational flow (Bloodstein, 1995).

As such, the relationship between stuttering and the widespread [use of] communication technologies has a checkered history. At the same time that technological developments that create new communication norms might amplify the aforementioned obstacle even more (such as the commonplaceness of mobile phone communication); they also may actually enable remedying the interaction and be used as a support and “bypass” tool, such as use of text messaging or computer-mediated/online communication.

At the same time, dependency on such technology leads to a change in the very essence of the interaction, in turn bringing up existential, technological, and cultural questions regarding the identity shaped in the course of defining the dynamic relationships of the human > technology > world cycle, in a changing communication climate (Richardson, 2007).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Stuttering in a shifting communication climate

There are as many etiologies of stuttering as there are stutterers. Thus, it is accepted practice to describe stuttering as a *multi-causal phenomenon* or as a *multi-theoried impediment* (Jonas, 1977) whereby the many components involved in its formation are identified. Stuttering is four times as common in men as women (Mansson, 2000), and can be manifested in several various speech characteristics, or in only one, such as repetition of sounds, vocal chord obstruction, stoppages in airflow, breaking up words due to halting mid-word, and others (Craig et al., 1996). At the same time, the type of stutter and its severity also vary as per the circumstance, context, and style: activities such as singing, mimicry, rhythmic accompaniment, or a noisy environment (the *chorus effect*) can mitigate severity. The implications of lack of fluency for the stutterer go beyond the physiological, as stuttering is not only a physical phenomenon, but also an impediment whose effects manifest in various life spheres. The emotional manifestations of stuttering include embarrassment, stress, shame, and anger (Ezrati-Vinacour & Levin, 2004). Researchers emphasize that lack of confidence is not a cause of stuttering, but rather its effect, so that child stutterers tend to be the butt of teasing and bullying more than are their “normal” peers (Blood, Boyle, Blood, & Nalesnik, 2010). This is one reason that on the social level, stuttering is accompanied by shame and attempts to hide, and therefore stutterers tend to be less involved in verbal social interactions (Kraaimaat, Vanryckeghem, & Van Dam-Baggen, 2002), in some cases even distancing [themselves] socially and avoiding communication. This difficulty in forging social relationships exists both in adolescence and adulthood (Ross, 2001).

The ambivalent position (Rosental & Ribak, 2011) that combines

the desire to adopt the innovation and the society's consumption, character, and values, encompasses a range of strategies vis-à-vis any new medium: rejection, partial adoption, or ongoing adjustment. This process has been studied up until now from many perspectives: religious (Rosenbreg & Rashi, 2015), sociological (Kline, 2003), psychological (Pierce, 2009), educational (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015), and familial (Silverstone, 2006). From this viewpoint, the technology defines the group that adopts it, or that opposes it, and the relationships through which it runs; and at the same time, it is defined by them (Horst & Miller, 2006).

Similarly, we can view the complex relations of the fluency challenged to technology-mediated communication and the central place of this technology in the stutterers' day-to-day struggles. For instance, many stutterers abstain from use of the telephone — particularly from initiating calls — due to the exacerbation of the stutter created by the use of this medium compared to face-to-face communication (James et al., 1999). With the development of new means of communication such as cellular, online, and computer assisted, a plethora of challenges, opportunities, and struggles face the fluency challenged and aids her in creating friendly, available communication (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

The present study will examine the opinions of VFD sufferers regarding this aid, and how its structure applies to the new technologies. As we will see, the opportunity created by the change in communication climate actually exacts a personal price, the extreme consequence of which is refraining from some of the new media options, certain situations, and even rejection thereof.

### 2.2. The virtual community

One of the focuses of discourse in this research touches on the patterns of motivation for participating in an online stutterers' forum. Many researchers have insisted on the Internet's importance in general and of forums in particular in empowering those with various disabilities such as handicaps (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007) and CP patients (Greer, 2000). For all these, forums serve not only as a means of communication with professional authorities, but mainly as a comfortable space for sharing concerns and feelings common to all members (Kouri, Turunen, Tossavainen, & Saarikoski, 2006).

The online forum's unique function stems from the protected environment that it creates, enabling individuals with social inhibitions to develop and discover their “true me” (McKenna et al., 2002). The ability to hide physical characteristics via anonymous communication, particularly with those struggling with the same challenges, offers an appropriate solution to such groups, due to both forging social ties and to the sharing and support that they offer (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). And indeed, there is a near-consensus among researchers on the effectiveness of such support groups as a tool in handling the day-to-day challenges facing their members. At the same time, note that a few researchers cast doubts regarding whether online communities offer enough support to generate significant change in the psychological states of their members, particularly those suffering more severely (Eysenbach, Powell, Engesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004).

In this study, we shall attempt to track change in the communication climate and non/acceptance among fluency disorder sufferers while focusing on the following questions: How do new communication technologies fit into the day-to-day lives of this group? Can we identify instances of avoidance, adoption, and domestication of specific technologies in given situations? And on another level: What unique significances are attributed to the new media as viewed by fluency disorder sufferers? How are these perceived by this group, and do use habits thereof reflect their self-perceptions of the impediments from which they suffer?

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