

University of Michigan  
Undergraduate Research Journal



THE **ZINE**

Winter 2011





# Our Digital Future:

An Interview with UM Dean of School of Information  
Jeffrey MacKie-Mason

Compiled by Allison Peters, Julia Wang, Lily Zhang

*The Internet has come to dominate the lives of the current generation. Many of us cannot imagine living in a world without instantaneous communication, entertainment or immediate access to information. But are we too dependent on this technology? What is our future as citizens of a digital world?*

UMURJ discussed these issues with the Dean of the UM School of Information Dr. Jeffrey Mackie-Mason. Recently a speaker at the Future of Technology Conference held at Rackham Auditorium, Dr. Mackie-Mason is also the Arthur W. Burks Professor of Information and Computer Science and a Professor of Economics and Public Policy. As his research combines economics, computer science and psychology, his insight into the pros and cons of technology forms an interesting commentary on our digital lives.

**UMURJ:** As technology advances—and what we once valued as personal becomes shared via social spheres such as Facebook or Twitter—do you think public spaces will become more detrimental or more beneficial to us?

**Dr. Jeffrey MacKie-Mason:** It's going to be some of both. Humans adapt and change with their environment, and that environment includes technology. We have to communicate with each other. Public spaces are going to change—it's going to be good in some ways and bad in some ways, and we're going to have to deal with it. Having common, shared public spaces, available at almost any time, almost any place—that's a good thing. People do better when they communicate. Society does better when people interact with each other more.

But there are going to be some problems, too. People are going to make mistakes. Some people are going to be harmed because it will be so easy to observe them: because we will have less privacy. Spaces will be more public, but just because it's happening doesn't mean it's all good. The changes that are enabling us to be in community more easily and have common experiences with more people are very compatible with the social nature of humans, so on balance I think we'll be better off, but we have to be vigilant.

**UMURJ:** With the increased accessibility of information, are we becoming more aware of the societal problems around us, or are we suffering from information overload?

**JMM:** Yes and no. Information is what determines our actions; it's what determines our ability to adapt to change and threats. It enables us as humans to develop our culture and social relationships. More access to information—almost necessarily—has to be a good thing. But people have to know how to use

that information. What has happened in the past twenty years is that technology has gotten ahead of us. We don't know yet what to do with all the information available to use, how to sort out the reliability of different information sources, or how to make good credibility judgments. We're going to make mistakes, and we have to learn. But societies have been through things like that before—for example, with the advent to telephone, the telegraph, and radio. All the sudden information was made available from different locations, and people didn't know how to process or make good use of it. But society had to adapt—and there were problems along the way. But we learned and are still learning. Information is fundamental to all species; we learn how to use the information around us to help us and how to improve our literacy and our fluency in new types of information.

**UMURJ:** Thanks to digital communications technology, humans are now essentially able to manipulate time, as we can have conversations via email, text, chat, etc. Because we can communicate faster and more efficiently on the web, do you think there is a higher and higher standard of what we can accomplish, not only in a single day, but also in our lives?

**JMM:** Probably. Maybe not standard, but expectations. There is always some pressure to do more, particularly for professionals who don't have fixed time schedules. People who want to succeed want to satisfy their bosses so there's a tendency to try to do more. Technology has enabled us to do more. For instance, I can send my staff emails during the weekend, and even if they don't normally read emails over the weekend, they can either respond to them over the weekend or come in Monday morning and see they have ten emails from me. The expectation builds up that they are available to me at different times of the day. The evidence suggests that professionals are working more hours. But it's not good for me as a leader of an organization to expect people to work so many hours that they burn out or are unhappy or that their personal lives fall apart. Managers and leaders have to learn not to ask too much of their workers—but there is this tendency to want to ask more and more because the immediate result is that we get more work done. The greater ease of communication has been enabling in the codependency sense.

**UMURJ:** What are your thoughts on the quintessential postmodern complex—

the ideology of living in a “mash-up” culture, where, so they say, nothing is original because everything has been created? Does this worry you at all?

**JMM:** That does worry me a lot in certain ways. A number of us teachers are puzzled and concerned about whether or not youth is learning as well as they used to. It’s the difference between original ideas and repeated ideas—coming up with their own thoughts, their own ideas, versus finding someone else’s ideas and reporting them or combining them. But I think there’s an enormous amount of creativity expressed through mash-ups: in music, the art of sampling is enormously creative, and some fascinating art has been created that way. Piecing together, refactoring, and remixing the culture and the ideas around you can stimulate creativity and can produce some wonderful things for individuals and for society. But I’m a bit concerned about whether we are helping younger people understand the difference between creating something new—even if it’s a mash-up or mixture of previous ideas—and just replicating somebody else’s work. That’s something else we have to figure out.

**UMURJ:** During your presentation for the Future of Technology, you hypothesized that, in the future, all space will be public space. In a January 2010 interview in front of a live audience, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said if he were to have made Facebook today, he would not implement privacy settings, and all information would be public by default. What are your thoughts on the value of privacy as we look toward the future?

**JMM:** It’s going to be much harder to provide privacy or to be private: that’s just a fact—it’s more or less out of our control, it’s the nature of communication technology, and it’s the urge to communicate with people. We’re going to be living in public much more as time goes on. But we’re still going to want privacy some of the time, so the questions is how do we get that privacy even though we’re in public, and how do we facilitate privacy in public: what technologies do we create to carve out bits of privacy?

**UMURJ:** People of Generation Z—those born after 1990 and before the late 2000s—are nicknamed “digital natives.” Compared to previous generations’ relationship with new technologies (radio, TV, etc.), is Generation Z’s relationship different? How so?

**JMM:** Speaking and communicating is a natural part of the general part of human existence, but now we’re seeing a generation growing up that takes for granted much greater opportunities to communicate. The difference is in the way people express themselves in their interactions with other people, how they form attachments and how they see the world. My generation still tends to talk about the “virtual world,” but I don’t think it’s meaningful to distinguish between the “virtual world” and the “real world” for a lot of what we do.

For people who grew up digitally, it is the world. Communication is always “real”, but now it is easier to share and communicate without being physically co-present. It is so much more dynamic, interactive and easy to connect with people than it used to be that it is changing the way we live. That’s really what is having an impact on Generation Z.

**UMURJ:** The way we communicate both professionally and personally seems to be increasingly depersonalized with the utilization of social technologies. How is that affecting the way we communicate with others?

**JMM:** One of the really important changes is that we are not only more connected, but it is easier to time-shift. With the development of email, a lot of people wondered: Why are young folks using email so much? It takes longer to type than it does to talk, so where is the advantage of typing out your message? Wouldn’t you rather just pick up the phone and talk to somebody? Well, it turns out to be wonderful that we can have asynchronous conversations—that you and I can have a conversation in which I may write now, and you may answer

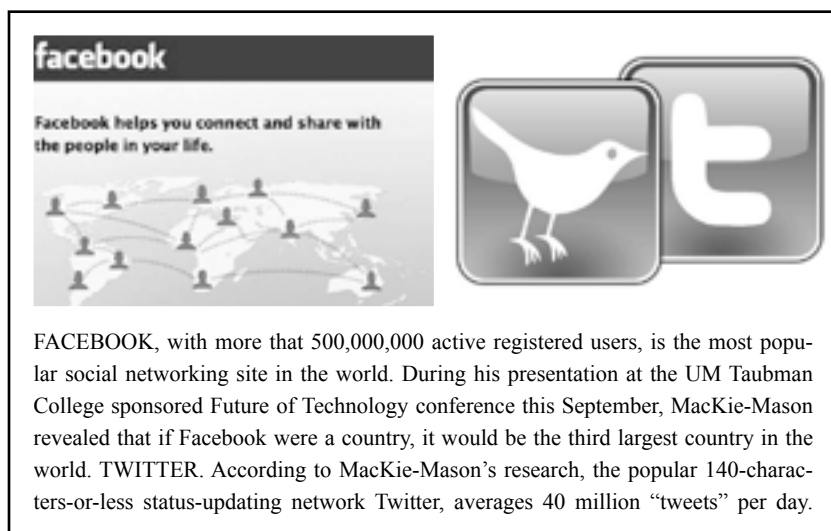
twenty minutes later, and I may answer four hours later—and it’s all part of the same conversation. Many of these conversations would never occur before because we weren’t available at the same time.

I think a lot of the concern about depersonalization is a myth. It’s true that in different forms of communication we can express ourselves with greater or less richness. There’s a lot we can communicate when we’re face-to-face; plain text is not nearly as expressive. So for certain types of communication we lose texture, context, richness—but I

wouldn’t call it “depersonalizing.” It’s a trade-off: we can communicate more frequently, we can communicate with more people. It’s not damaging human relations that we have more communication mediated through technology; in many cases, human relations are improving because you can communicate in ways you didn’t before.

**UMURJ:** How do you see this digital culture in fifty years?

**JMM:** What is interesting to me is how we will deal with the changes that we are already engaged in—technology gets ahead of people, gets ahead of society. The advancement of technology generally is a wonderful thing. Technologies are tools; with them, we have greater capabilities. We can do more; we have more opportunities. That means we have more opportunities for good. If we want to have better individual lives, greater justice, a better understanding of the world—it’s going to be easier because of the technologies, as long as we use them well. Of course, new technologies can also be used for bad. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: technology does not cause good or bad; we decide how to use the tools. The tools will be fabulously better decade by decade—there’s no question that the speed of technological progress is going to continue to grow. Since I tend to be an optimist, I see that as opportunity—an opportunity for good.





Visit <http://umurj.org> for more content, including:

- Our full interview with the Dean of the UM School of Information, Jeffrey MacKie-Mason
- A large variety of articles and pieces written by both UMURJ staff and UM undergraduates
- Past issues of both the Research Journal as well as our reading supplement, **THE ZINE**
- More info on “How to Get Involved with Research”
- **And much more!**

### Interested in UMURJ?

Consider submitting your original research for publication  
in the annual Undergraduate Research Journal!

Or, apply for next year’s Editorial Board!  
Contact us at [umurj-submissions@umich.edu](mailto:umurj-submissions@umich.edu)

*Sponsored by:*

---

