Disembodied Dialogue: Machine-Mediated Communication and Proto-AI Interaction in E.M. Foster's "The Machine Stops

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ABSTRACT

E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909) imagines communication as a technological achievement that gradually transforms the conditions of human interaction. While existing scholarship has examined the novella through technological dependence, alienation, human agency, and contemporary technological culture, its communicative transformation warrants further attention. This study develops the concept of disembodied dialogue to examine how communication remains extensive and efficient while the embodied, reciprocal, and critical conditions associated with dialogue become progressively less necessary. Using qualitative close reading of eighteen purposively selected textual passages, the analysis traces four interconnected dimensions: infrastructural dependence, embodied displacement, relational attenuation, and communicative authority. The findings show that the Machine evolves from a medium that facilitates communication into an infrastructure that organizes social participation, reduces the practical necessity of physical presence, alters expectations of reciprocity, and acquires normative authority over communication and criticism. The study argues that disembodied dialogue is not synonymous with technological mediation or alienation; rather, it names their cumulative convergence when technological dependence begins to reshape the conditions of interpersonal encounter and critical communication. The article further situates this argument in relation to contemporary AI-mediated communication, while treating the comparison as structural rather than predictive. Forster's novella ultimately reveals the paradox of expanding connectivity alongside diminishing dialogic conditions.

Keywords: Disembodied Dialogue; Technological Mediation; Relational Attenuation; Communicative Authority; The Machine Stops

INTRODUCTION

E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909) imagines a society in which technological mediation has become the ordinary condition of human communication. Its inhabitants live in isolated underground rooms, communicate through mechanical interfaces, receive information without leaving their private spaces, and maintain social relationships without physical proximity [1]. At first, this arrangement appears to represent an extraordinary expansion of human connectivity: geographical distance loses its practical significance, information remains continuously available, and communication occurs without travel. Yet Forster gradually exposes a tension within this apparent achievement. Communication becomes more extensive and efficient while the embodied and relational conditions of dialogue become increasingly fragile. The central problem of the novella is therefore not the disappearance of communication but the transformation of the conditions under which communication occurs.

This distinction is significant in contemporary scholarship on mediated communication. Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) examines technological mediation as a component of social interaction rather than merely as a channel for transmitting messages [2,3]. AI-mediated communication scholarship similarly considers technological systems as increasingly involved in the production, modification, and organization of communicative acts [4]. Research on authenticity further demonstrates that successful transmission does not, by itself, determine the quality or relational significance of mediated interaction [5]. These perspectives provide a contemporary context for revisiting Forster without treating the Machine as a literal precursor of artificial

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intelligence. The more productive question is how the novella represents communication when technological mediation becomes sufficiently comprehensive to reorganize the conditions of human interaction.

Existing scholarship on *The Machine Stops* has examined technological dependence, fatalism, human agency, posthuman subjectivity, alienation, and social organization [6,13–17]. Scholarship on dialogue and mediated interaction also provides conceptual resources for distinguishing communication from more demanding forms of interpersonal encounter [7,11,12]. Yet these concerns have generally remained analytically differentiated. What requires further attention is their convergence within the communicative structure of Forster's fictional society: technological mediation does not merely facilitate contact but progressively alters the necessity of embodiment, the expectations of relational reciprocity, and the possibility of questioning the infrastructure through which communication takes place.

This article develops the concept of disembodied dialogue to describe that convergence. The term does not mean communication without bodies, nor does it imply that technologically mediated communication is inherently deficient. Rather, it identifies a condition in which communication remains possible, frequent, and efficient while the embodied, reciprocal, and critical conditions associated with dialogue become progressively less necessary. The concept therefore distinguishes communication from dialogue. Communication can be understood as the successful transmission or exchange of information, whereas dialogue involves a more demanding encounter in which participants remain responsive to one another as situated subjects whose perspectives may require adjustment, negotiation, or reconsideration. The distinction becomes crucial when a technological system can preserve communicative access while reducing the necessity of the conditions through which such responsiveness ordinarily develops.

Forster's relationship between Kuno and Vashti provides the novella's clearest expression of this tension. Kuno's insistence that he wants to see and speak to his mother outside the Machine challenges the assumption that technological access is equivalent to interpersonal encounter [1, p. 5]. His objection is not that communication has become impossible. On the contrary, communication has become extraordinarily easy. His concern is that the Machine has altered what counts as sufficient communication. This distinction provides the conceptual basis for examining how the novella moves from technological convenience toward a more comprehensive reorganization of social interaction.

The analysis consequently traces four interconnected dimensions of this transformation. Infrastructural dependence examines how the Machine develops from a communicative medium into the environment through which social participation is organized. Embodied displacement considers how physical presence becomes progressively less necessary to communication without disappearing from human existence. Relational attenuation examines how relationships remain active while some demands of reciprocity, accommodation, and embodied encounter become less necessary. Communicative authority considers how a system that organizes communication can also acquire influence over the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, criticism, and discourse. These dimensions are analytically distinct but cumulative: each identifies a different consequence of the Machine's increasing centrality to social life.

The article therefore asks three related questions: How does the Machine transform communication from a technological convenience into an infrastructural condition? How does this transformation alter the role of embodiment and reciprocity in interpersonal relationships? And how does technological dependence develop into communicative authority? Through close textual analysis, the study argues that *The Machine Stops* represents a cumulative transformation in which technological mediation expands communicative access while progressively reducing the necessity of embodied encounter, reciprocal adjustment, and critical independence. Disembodied dialogue names this specific communicative condition.

The contemporary relevance of the argument is structural rather than predictive. Contemporary AI-mediated communication provides a useful context because computational systems increasingly participate in producing, mediating, and organizing communicative interactions [4,8–10]. Yet Forster's Machine should not be equated with contemporary artificial intelligence. The significance of the comparison lies instead in the question shared across the two contexts: what happens when a technological system moves from being one means of

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communication to becoming part of the environment that determines how communication is organized? Read in this way, *The Machine Stops* offers not a prophecy of a particular technology but a sustained examination of the social and communicative consequences of making technological mediation indispensable.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, text-centred methodology based on close reading of E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*. The primary objective is interpretive rather than quantitative: the analysis examines how the novella represents technological mediation as a changing condition of communication, embodiment, relationality, and authority. Secondary scholarship on computer-mediated communication, AI-mediated communication, authenticity, dialogical communication, and machine communication provides conceptual vocabulary for interpreting these textual developments [2–5,7–10]. The primary text remains the principal evidentiary basis of the analysis.

The close reading focuses on eighteen key textual passages selected for their direct relevance to the study's research questions. Selection was purposive rather than frequency-based. A passage was included when it met at least one of four analytical criteria: it provided explicit evidence concerning the organization of communication through the Machine; it illuminated the changing role of physical presence or embodiment; it revealed a transformation in interpersonal or relational expectations; or it demonstrated the Machine's influence over knowledge, criticism, or communicative norms. Passages were therefore selected for analytical significance rather than numerical representativeness.

The eighteen passages were distributed across four interpretive categories: infrastructural dependence, embodied displacement, relational attenuation, and communicative authority. These categories identify the primary analytical function of each passage, although some passages contribute to more than one dimension. Such overlap is expected because the novella presents technological transformation as cumulative rather than as a series of isolated developments. The categories consequently operate as interpretive distinctions within a connected process rather than as mutually exclusive coding units.

Interpretive consistency was maintained by applying the same set of questions to the selected passages. The analysis asks: What form of communication is represented? What role does the Machine play in enabling or organizing that communication? What happens to embodiment, reciprocity, or interpersonal adjustment? Does the passage alter the relationship between communicative access and interpersonal encounter? Does it indicate a shift in the Machine's authority over knowledge, criticism, or legitimate discourse? These questions provide a consistent analytical procedure while allowing each passage to retain its literary and narrative context.

The study does not treat the eighteen passages as a quantitative content sample and does not assign numerical values to textual features. Their function is to provide a concentrated evidentiary corpus through which recurring transformations can be examined closely. Particular attention is given to Kuno and Vashti because their conflict provides the novella's most sustained exploration of mediated communication, physical encounter, and competing understandings of relational sufficiency [1, pp. 5–10]. Other passages are examined where they extend the analysis from interpersonal communication toward the broader infrastructural and normative functions of the Machine.

Secondary sources are used selectively. Scholarship on CMC establishes the broader communicative context [2,3]. Research on authenticity and dialogical communication helps distinguish successful transmission from relational and reciprocal dimensions of interaction [5,7,11,12]. Work on AI-mediated and machine communication provides the contemporary conceptual context for the article's final discussion [4,8–10]. These sources are not treated as evidence for claims about Forster's fictional society; rather, they provide conceptual frameworks against which the primary-text evidence can be interpreted.

The methodology therefore combines purposive textual selection with sustained close reading. Its analytical procedure moves from individual passages to patterns within the four categories and then from those categories to the broader concept of disembodied dialogue. This approach allows the study to remain grounded in the

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language and narrative structure of *The Machine Stops* while connecting its literary observations to current debates about technologically mediated communication. The resulting framework is interpretive rather than predictive: it uses contemporary communication scholarship to clarify the novella's communicative problem without claiming that Forster anticipated any particular contemporary technology.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Infrastructural Dependence

The first stage of the communicative transformation in *The Machine Stops* is the emergence of infrastructural dependence. The Machine initially appears as an extraordinary technological means of overcoming distance, but its significance gradually exceeds that of a medium through which individuals communicate. It becomes the environment within which communication, education, entertainment, information exchange, and social participation are organized. A medium facilitates interaction between participants who remain capable of acting outside it; an infrastructure establishes conditions within which participation becomes possible, routine, and increasingly difficult to imagine otherwise. In Forster's society, the Machine moves progressively from the former condition toward the latter.

Forster initially presents this transformation through the expansion of communicative possibility. Vashti is described as having "knew several thousand people," while the narrator observes that "in certain directions human intercourse had advanced enormously" [1, p. 4]. The language of "advanced" is significant because the Machine is not initially presented as a mechanism of social control. It appears to solve an obvious human limitation: physical distance. Vast numbers of people can remain socially connected without travelling or occupying the same geographical space. The Machine consequently produces an apparent enlargement of human communicative capacity.

Yet the expansion of "human intercourse" also indicates that the Machine has begun to reorganize the conditions under which social intercourse takes place. Communication is no longer an activity merely supported by technology; it is embedded within the technological environment of everyday existence. The description of Vashti's room makes this transformation particularly clear. Her room is "in touch with all that she cared for in the world" [1, p. 7]. The phrase extends the Machine's function beyond interpersonal communication. People, information, entertainment, and social experience are gathered into a single technological environment. The Machine does not simply connect Vashti to particular individuals; it mediates her relationship to the world itself.

This comprehensive function changes the meaning of technological usefulness. A technology remains a tool when users employ it for particular purposes while retaining meaningful alternatives outside it. Infrastructure operates differently. Once a system becomes sufficiently integrated into ordinary life, its operation can become almost invisible because participation is assumed to occur through it. Forster's inhabitants rarely experience the Machine as one communicative option among others. Its services are so thoroughly incorporated into social existence that alternative forms of participation appear unnecessary. The system consequently derives power not only from what it provides but from the extent to which social life has been organized around its provision.

The routine character of mediated life reinforces this dependence. The inhabitants receive lectures, communicate, obtain information, and pursue entertainment without leaving their rooms. These activities are not exceptional conveniences; they constitute the ordinary structure of existence. The Machine has therefore crossed an important threshold: technological mediation is no longer external to social life but constitutive of it. The inhabitants do not simply use the Machine to participate in society; participation itself has become inseparable from the Machine.

This transformation also explains why the system's power does not initially depend upon overt coercion. Dependence can emerge through convenience. When a technological system repeatedly removes practical difficulties, users become accustomed to the conditions it establishes. Its efficiency then begins to make alternatives appear unnecessary rather than merely inconvenient. Forster represents this normalization through

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the inhabitants' unquestioning acceptance of the Machine's centrality. Its services are so comprehensive that the possibility of communicating otherwise becomes increasingly difficult to formulate.

Kuno's resistance exposes this condition precisely because he attempts to imagine communication outside the established infrastructure. His insistence that he wants to see and speak to Vashti "not through the wearisome Machine" [1, p. 5] interrupts the assumption that technological mediation is the natural condition of interpersonal contact. At this stage, the importance of Kuno's statement lies less in its implications for embodiment than in the fact that his request appears anomalous. The Machine has become so deeply integrated into communication that bypassing it requires justification. His resistance therefore reveals the extent to which the infrastructure has normalized itself.

The distinction between technological assistance and technological necessity becomes crucial here. If a technology merely expands communicative options, individuals can move between mediated and non-mediated forms of interaction according to circumstance. When one system becomes the dominant environment of participation, however, the distinction between technological assistance and technological necessity begins to disappear. Forster's inhabitants increasingly inhabit the latter condition. The Machine determines not only how communication is delivered but also which forms of communication appear efficient, rational, and socially acceptable.

The transformation can therefore be understood as a progression from usefulness to normalization and from normalization to dependence. The Machine first expands communicative possibility by overcoming geographical limitations. Its repeated success then makes technological mediation ordinary. Once social participation has been organized around the system, withdrawal from it becomes increasingly difficult because alternative modes of participation have lost practical and institutional significance. Dependence is thus produced through the Machine's success rather than through technological failure.

Forster's critique is especially significant because the Machine works remarkably well according to the immediate standards of efficiency. People communicate across great distances, receive information rapidly, and maintain extensive networks of contact. The problem therefore lies at another level. The question is not whether the Machine can accomplish communication but what happens when its ability to accomplish communication becomes the primary criterion by which communication is understood. Once efficiency becomes sufficient, other dimensions of interpersonal interaction may begin to appear unnecessary.

The distinction between communicative capacity and communicative conditions is consequently essential. The Machine dramatically expands the former while reorganizing the latter. It gives its users unprecedented access to other people, but that access occurs within a system that increasingly determines the practical circumstances of participation. This dependence establishes the foundation for the transformations examined in the subsequent sections. Once technological mediation has become infrastructural, physical presence can lose its practical necessity; once presence becomes less necessary, relational expectations can change; and once the infrastructure becomes indispensable, its authority can extend beyond communication toward knowledge and criticism.

Infrastructural dependence is therefore not simply a condition of technological reliance. It is the point at which technological mediation becomes structurally embedded in social existence. Forster's inhabitants do not merely communicate through the Machine; they inhabit a world in which communication has become dependent upon it. The significance of this dependence lies precisely in its ordinariness. Because the system is experienced as convenient, efficient, and comprehensive, its underlying authority remains difficult to perceive until someone attempts to imagine communication otherwise. The Machine's most consequential achievement is thus not merely that it connects people across distance, but that it makes technological mediation appear indistinguishable from the ordinary conditions of social life.

Embodied Displacement

Once the Machine has become the infrastructure of social participation, physical presence begins to lose its practical necessity. Forster does not represent this development as the disappearance of the body. His inhabitants

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remain embodied subjects, but their bodies become increasingly unnecessary to the communicative functions through which social life is organized. Embodied displacement therefore refers not to the elimination of embodiment but to its declining necessity within communication. The body remains materially present while becoming progressively less central to the conditions through which individuals encounter one another.

Kuno's resistance to Vashti provides the novella's clearest articulation of this distinction. He tells her, "I want to see you not through the Machine. I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine" [1, p. 5]. The significance of his demand lies in the fact that technological communication has already solved the practical problem of distance between them. He does not lack access to his mother. What he questions is whether access through the Machine can substitute for encountering another person directly. His request therefore shifts the issue from communicative availability to embodied presence.

Kuno's subsequent statement makes the distinction sharper: "I see something like you... but I do not see you" [1, p. 5]. The contrast between "something like you" and "you" separates representation from presence. The Machine provides a technologically mediated appearance of Vashti, but Kuno refuses to treat that representation as equivalent to encountering her. The problem is consequently not that the Machine fails to make another person available. Its communicative success is precisely what makes Kuno's objection significant. It can reproduce enough of another person's presence to sustain communication while leaving aspects of physical encounter outside its representational capacity.

Forster reinforces this limitation through the narrator's description of technologically mediated perception. The Machine conveys a "general idea of people" but cannot transmit the "nuances of expression" [1, p. 6]. The distinction between a "general idea" and "nuances" suggests that interpersonal perception involves more than information that can be deliberately transferred from one participant to another. Facial movement, gesture, silence, proximity, interruption, and immediate bodily response can shape interpretation in ways that are difficult to reduce to standardized communicative signals. The Machine therefore does not simply mediate the encounter; it determines which dimensions of encounter remain communicatively available.

This distinction is important because the Machine's effectiveness might otherwise be mistaken for communicative completeness. From the standpoint of transmission, the system performs remarkably well. People can see and hear one another across distance, exchange information, and maintain relationships without travelling. Yet Kuno's objection reveals that transmission and encounter are not synonymous. The Machine can reproduce communicative access without reproducing the full range of circumstances through which one person experiences another as physically present. Embodied displacement consequently emerges from the gap between what technology can transmit and what embodied encounter makes possible.

Vashti's response to direct experience further demonstrates the extent of this transformation. When she encounters conditions outside the controlled environment of the Machine, she is "seized with the terrors of direct experience" [1, p. 10]. The phrase is significant because direct experience has become unusual enough to appear threatening. Physical encounter, which would ordinarily constitute a basic condition of human existence, has become an interruption to the technological order within which Vashti lives. The body has not disappeared, but the social system has altered the circumstances in which bodily presence is expected or valued.

The resulting condition can therefore be distinguished from conventional understandings of disembodiment. Disembodiment might suggest that technological communication removes the body from interaction altogether. Forster's representation is more complex. Bodies remain essential to biological existence, but their participation in communication is increasingly mediated and, in many ordinary situations, unnecessary. Individuals can communicate without travelling, receive experiences without physically entering the environments being discussed, and sustain social relations without occupying shared space. Embodiment is displaced from the centre of communicative practice rather than erased from social life.

This displacement also changes the relationship between communication and movement. In an embodied communicative environment, distance imposes practical demands: people must travel, share physical space, adjust to unfamiliar surroundings, and respond to circumstances that cannot be fully controlled in advance. The

Machine removes many of these demands. Communication can take place while individuals remain physically stationary. What is gained is obvious efficiency, but what is lost is the encounter with the material circumstances through which communication unfolds. Forster thus presents technological mediation as a transformation of communicative conditions rather than simply an improvement in communicative speed.

The distinction between mediation as supplementation and mediation as substitution becomes particularly useful here. Technological mediation can supplement embodied interaction by allowing individuals to communicate across distance while preserving physical encounter as a meaningful alternative [2,3]. In Forster's society, however, mediation increasingly substitutes for activities that would otherwise require bodily movement and co-presence. The problem is not that the Machine mediates communication; it is that its comprehensiveness makes alternative forms of communication increasingly unnecessary.

This distinction prevents the argument from becoming technologically deterministic. Mediated communication does not inherently eliminate embodied connection, nor does physical presence automatically guarantee meaningful communication. Contemporary CMC research demonstrates that mediated interaction can sustain relationships across geographical distance [2,3]. The distinctive condition of Forster's society is the systematic reduction of alternatives. Because the Machine can perform so many communicative and social functions, physical encounter becomes increasingly difficult to justify in practical terms. Kuno's desire to meet Vashti consequently appears irrational from within the system's logic because the communicative purpose of the journey has already been technologically fulfilled.

The conflict between Kuno and Vashti therefore represents competing understandings of what communication requires. For Vashti, technological access is sufficient because the Machine reproduces the functional elements necessary for continued contact. For Kuno, communication can involve forms of encounter that cannot be reduced to functional transmission. His objection does not establish physical presence as an absolute standard of authentic communication; rather, it exposes the danger of allowing technological efficiency to determine in advance which dimensions of human encounter are necessary.

Embodied displacement consequently marks a significant shift in the communicative order of the novella. Once the Machine has made physical presence unnecessary for ordinary interaction, absence ceases to be an exceptional condition and becomes normalized. Individuals remain socially connected while increasingly encountering one another through representations rather than shared physical circumstances. The body persists, but its communicative role is diminished. This transformation provides the basis for the next stage of the argument: when relationships no longer require sustained embodied encounter, the expectations of reciprocity and interpersonal adjustment can also change. The question therefore moves from whether people can reach one another to what happens to relationships when reaching another person no longer requires encountering them.

Relational Attenuation

The displacement of embodied presence produces a further transformation in the structure of relationships. Once communication can occur without physical encounter, relationships do not necessarily disappear; instead, the conditions required to sustain them begin to change. The Machine makes individuals continuously accessible to one another while reducing the practical need for physical movement, immediate adjustment, and sustained interpersonal accommodation. Relational attenuation describes this transformation: social relationships remain extensive and operational, but some reciprocal demands through which relationships acquire depth and responsiveness become less necessary.

The distinction between accessibility and reciprocity is central to this condition. The Machine makes other people readily accessible, but accessibility does not necessarily require the same degree of reciprocal adjustment as embodied interaction. Participants can remain in contact without sharing physical circumstances, responding to another person's movements, negotiating silence, or accommodating unexpected reactions. Communication therefore becomes easier to maintain because some circumstances that make interpersonal engagement demanding have been removed. The result is not the disappearance of relationality but its reorganization around technological accessibility.

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Forster develops this tension most clearly through the relationship between Kuno and Vashti. Their conflict cannot be explained by a lack of communication. They can speak to one another, see one another, and remain connected across geographical distance. What divides them is the meaning they assign to that connection. Vashti accepts technologically mediated contact as sufficient for maintaining their relationship, whereas Kuno regards such contact as inadequate to the encounter he seeks. Their disagreement therefore concerns not whether communication is possible but what communication should require.

This distinction shifts the analysis beyond the problem of physical presence established in the previous section. Kuno's resistance initially exposes the difference between representation and embodied encounter. Here, however, its significance lies in the relational expectation underlying it. He asks Vashti to undertake an action that has no obvious communicative necessity within the logic of the Machine: she must travel to him. The journey would not provide information that could not already be transmitted. Its significance lies instead in the willingness to accommodate another person through an encounter that technology cannot render necessary.

Vashti's refusal reveals how thoroughly technological mediation has altered this expectation. From her perspective, travel is inefficient because the communicative purpose of the journey has already been fulfilled through the Machine. The technological system therefore changes not only how relationships are maintained but also how relational actions are judged. An activity that might constitute an expression of interpersonal commitment can appear unnecessary when communication is evaluated primarily according to efficiency and accessibility.

Accessibility concerns whether another person can be reached; reciprocity concerns the extent to which participants must respond to one another as situated and potentially unpredictable individuals. The Machine excels at the first condition. It makes contact almost continuously available. Yet the second can become less demanding because participants are not required to share the same physical environment or negotiate the contingencies of direct encounter. Communication can therefore remain frequent while requiring less interpersonal adjustment.

Lee's discussion of authenticity in computer-mediated communication helps clarify this distinction by showing that communicative adequacy cannot be evaluated solely through successful transmission [5]. Interaction is also shaped by communicators and relational context. Forster's Machine represents an extreme fictional configuration of this problem. Its technical performance is highly successful: messages circulate, people remain socially connected, and information is readily available. Yet technical success does not establish relational completeness. The system can preserve contact while transforming the conditions through which participants respond to one another.

The reduction of relational demands is also connected to the altered cost of interpersonal engagement. Physical encounter requires time, movement, attention, and accommodation. Technological mediation reduces many of these costs. Communication can be initiated and terminated within the predictable environment of the Machine, while physical inconvenience and environmental uncertainty are minimized. What is gained in efficiency, however, may also reduce opportunities for reciprocal adjustment through which relationships develop.

This does not mean that technological communication necessarily produces shallow or inauthentic relationships. Contemporary CMC research demonstrates that mediated interaction can sustain meaningful interpersonal connections across geographical distance [2,3]. The problem in Forster is more specific. The Machine does not merely provide mediation as one option among several; it has become the dominant environment of social life. Because alternative forms of encounter have been marginalized, mediated accessibility increasingly becomes the standard against which other relational practices are evaluated.

This distinction makes relational attenuation more precise than the broader concept of alienation. Forster's inhabitants are not isolated or deprived of social contact. They participate in extensive networks of communication, attend lectures, exchange information, and remain continuously connected to the larger system. Their condition is therefore not social absence but altered relational structure. The network remains dense while particular forms of encounter become thinner.

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The concept also avoids assuming that every mediated relationship lacks reciprocity. Relational attenuation is a contextual condition rather than an inevitable consequence of mediation. What matters is the degree to which a communicative environment reduces the necessity of reciprocal adjustment. In Forster's society, the Machine performs so many functions of social coordination that participants have little practical reason to develop alternatives. The resulting attenuation arises from the comprehensive character of the infrastructure rather than from technological mediation in isolation.

The Machine consequently changes the expectations attached to relationships. When communication is always available, continued accessibility can appear sufficient evidence of relational connection. Physical effort, environmental sharing, and accommodation become optional rather than necessary. Kuno seeks a form of connection that requires an interruption of technological routine, while Vashti sees such interruption as unnecessary because the Machine already provides communication.

The statement, "You mustn't say anything against the Machine" [1, p. 5], marks an important transition. The Machine is not merely accepted because it is convenient; its centrality has become a social norm that can constrain disagreement. Its full implications belong to the next stage, where infrastructural centrality develops into communicative authority. Here, its importance lies in showing that altered relational expectations are beginning to affect the possibility of questioning the system itself.

Relational attenuation therefore represents a distinct stage in Forster's communicative transformation. Infrastructural dependence makes technological mediation ordinary; embodied displacement reduces the practical necessity of physical encounter; relational attenuation alters what participants expect from relationships once encounter is no longer required. The result is not the end of human connection but a different standard of connection, increasingly defined by accessibility, efficiency, and continuity of contact. The question then becomes what happens when the system organizing those relationships also acquires authority to define the limits of acceptable communication.

Communicative Authority

The final transformation occurs when the Machine's infrastructural centrality becomes a source of communicative authority. Dependence on the system does not merely make its services difficult to abandon; it gives the system increasing influence over what can be said, known, and questioned. The Machine therefore moves beyond organizing communication to shaping the normative conditions under which communication takes place. Its authority emerges not from technological sophistication alone but from the social dependence that has accumulated around its operation.

The clearest indication of this development is the prohibition, "You mustn't say anything against the Machine" [1, p. 5]. The statement establishes a boundary around criticism and reveals that the Machine has become more than a medium of communication. Its legitimacy has itself become protected from communicative challenge. Once the infrastructure through which communication occurs becomes an object that cannot legitimately be criticized, technological mediation acquires a normative dimension: the system begins to influence not only how people communicate but also what they are permitted to question about communication.

Forster reinforces this authority through the quasi-religious status of the Machine. The Book of the Machine functions as an authoritative source of knowledge, while the invocation "O Machine! O Machine!" [1, p. 9] indicates how technological dependence has become culturally internalized. The Machine's authority therefore does not rest exclusively on technical performance. It is reproduced through habits of trust, institutionalized knowledge, and collective reverence. What began as a practical infrastructure has become an organizing principle through which the inhabitants interpret their world.

Yet Forster simultaneously preserves the possibility of resistance. Kuno reminds Vashti that "Men made it" and insists that "The Machine is much, but it is not everything" [1, p. 5]. These statements challenge the assumption that technological authority is natural or inevitable. If human beings constructed the Machine, then its authority remains historically produced rather than inherent. Kuno's resistance is therefore not simply a rejection of

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technology. It is a refusal to treat technological capability as sufficient justification for determining the limits of human possibility.

The development can consequently be understood as a progression from usefulness to dependence, dependence to legitimacy, and legitimacy to authority. The Machine first demonstrates its practical value by overcoming geographical and communicative limitations. Its comprehensive usefulness then makes dependence appear ordinary. Dependence supports its social legitimacy because the system becomes difficult to imagine outside everyday life. Finally, that legitimacy enables the Machine to regulate the boundaries of criticism and accepted knowledge. Communicative authority is thus the culmination of the preceding transformations rather than an independent characteristic of the system.

This progression also clarifies why authority in Forster's society should not be understood as simple technological determinism. The Machine does not acquire authority merely because it possesses superior technical capacities. Its authority is socially produced through the normalization of dependence and the erosion of alternatives. The inhabitants themselves participate in maintaining the system's legitimacy because they have come to understand mediated communication as the ordinary and sufficient form of social interaction. The Machine becomes authoritative partly because its users no longer recognize its centrality as something that can meaningfully be contested.

Kuno's resistance interrupts this process by restoring a distinction between technological capability and human possibility. His challenge demonstrates that a system can be highly effective without possessing unlimited legitimacy. The Machine can transmit communication, organize knowledge, and sustain social participation, but none of these capacities establishes that it should determine the conditions under which communication occurs. Kuno's resistance therefore introduces a critical dimension into the novella's communicative structure: communication must remain capable of questioning the infrastructure through which it is organized.

The contemporary relevance of this argument can be established through AI-mediated communication without treating Forster's Machine as a prototype of artificial intelligence. Research on AI-mediated communication examines computational systems that can participate in producing, modifying, interpreting, or organizing communicative acts [4,8–10]. Forster's Machine is different: it is a fictional infrastructure that governs the environment within which human communication occurs. The comparison is therefore structural rather than technological. Both contexts raise questions about what happens when technological systems move beyond facilitating communication and increasingly participate in determining its conditions.

This distinction is important because technological mediation does not automatically generate communicative authority. Mediated technologies can expand access and sustain meaningful relationships [2,3]. Authority emerges under more specific conditions: when dependence becomes comprehensive, alternatives become difficult to sustain, and criticism of the system becomes socially or institutionally constrained. Forster represents this condition in an extreme form. The Machine's authority is powerful precisely because its users experience dependence as normality rather than coercion.

Communicative authority therefore completes the transformation traced across the analysis. The Machine becomes indispensable as infrastructure; this dependence reduces the practical necessity of alternatives to mediated communication; altered communicative conditions reshape relational expectations; and the system's resulting legitimacy makes it increasingly resistant to criticism. The final danger is consequently not that communication disappears but that communication becomes organized by a system whose authority is itself removed from meaningful communicative scrutiny. Forster's most significant warning lies in this paradox: the infrastructure that makes communication possible can, when rendered indispensable, begin to determine the terms under which communication remains possible.

DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that *The Machine Stops* represents technological mediation not simply as a change in the means of communication but as a reorganization of the conditions under which communication is understood

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and practiced. The four dimensions identified above—infrastructural dependence, embodied displacement, relational attenuation, and communicative authority—are analytically distinct, but they describe a cumulative transformation. Communication remains extensive, efficient, and socially indispensable while some of the embodied, reciprocal, and critical conditions associated with dialogue become progressively less necessary. Disembodied dialogue names this particular configuration.

The concept is therefore not intended as a synonym for technological mediation, disembodiment, or alienation. Each of those terms identifies an important dimension of the problem, but none alone captures the cumulative relation established in Forster's society. Technological mediation explains how communication is organized through a system; disembodiment can describe the reduced significance of bodily presence; alienation can identify forms of separation or estrangement; and relational attenuation specifies the weakening of particular reciprocal demands. The analytical work of disembodied dialogue lies in bringing these dimensions together while adding a further condition: the infrastructure through which communication occurs becomes sufficiently authoritative to influence the terms under which communication itself can be questioned.

This distinction also explains why Forster's society cannot adequately be described as simply isolated or socially disconnected. The inhabitants communicate constantly. They maintain extensive networks, receive lectures, exchange information, and remain continuously accessible to one another. The problem is therefore not a quantitative reduction in communication but a transformation in what counts as sufficient communication. The Machine makes access increasingly easy, but expanded access does not necessarily preserve the conditions of encounter through which dialogue can remain reciprocal and critically open. Forster consequently separates two conditions that technological systems can easily collapse: being connected to another person and encountering another person.

The analysis further indicates that embodiment should not be treated as an absolute measure of communicative authenticity. Mediated communication can sustain meaningful relationships and overcome geographical barriers [2,3]. The distinctive problem in Forster is the comprehensive character of the Machine. Because technological mediation has become the dominant infrastructure of social life, physical encounter is no longer an ordinary alternative. Embodied interaction is displaced not because the body disappears but because the system makes bodily presence unnecessary for an increasing range of communicative activities.

This transformation has consequences for relationality. When communication can occur without physical movement or shared environments, relationships can remain continuously accessible while requiring fewer forms of accommodation and adjustment. The distinction between accessibility and reciprocity is therefore central. Accessibility concerns whether another person can be reached; reciprocity concerns how participants respond to one another as situated and potentially unpredictable subjects. The Machine privileges the first condition because its principal achievement is continuous access. The resulting relationships remain active, but some of the demands through which interpersonal engagement becomes responsive and mutually adjustable become less necessary.

Relational attenuation is consequently more precise than a general account of alienation. Forster's inhabitants are not deprived of social connection. Their society is intensely communicative. What changes are the conditions under which connection is sustained. The network remains extensive while particular forms of encounter become thinner. This distinction also prevents the argument from becoming technologically deterministic: mediated communication does not inevitably produce shallow relationships. The attenuation identified here arises from the comprehensive organization of social life around the Machine.

The final transformation concerns authority. Once communication, information, and social participation become dependent upon the Machine, the system's legitimacy becomes increasingly difficult to separate from the legitimacy of ordinary social life. The statement that one "mustn't say anything against the Machine" [1, p. 5] is therefore more than evidence of technological dependence. It reveals a normative boundary around criticism. The Machine has become authoritative because its users have come to treat its centrality as normal, necessary, and largely beyond dispute. Its power is consequently socially produced rather than technologically inevitable.

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Kuno's resistance provides the critical counterpoint to this process. His assertion that "Men made it" and that "The Machine is much, but it is not everything" [1, p. 5] restores a distinction between technological capability and human possibility. The Machine may be capable of organizing communication, knowledge, and social participation, but capability does not establish unlimited legitimacy. Kuno's position therefore preserves the possibility of questioning the infrastructure through which communication takes place. His resistance is important not because it establishes physical presence as the only valid form of communication, but because it refuses to allow technological efficiency to determine the boundaries of human possibility.

The contemporary significance of this argument can be situated within scholarship on AI-mediated and machine communication. AI-mediated communication research examines systems that participate in producing, modifying, interpreting, or organizing communicative acts [4]. Recent scholarship on machine communication and human-AI interaction further demonstrates that technological systems can occupy increasingly active positions within socio-technical communicative relations [8–10]. The comparison with Forster, however, remains structural rather than predictive. The Machine should not be treated as a direct fictional equivalent of contemporary artificial intelligence. Its relevance lies in the communicative question it makes visible: what changes when a technological system moves from facilitating communication to participating in the organization of the conditions under which communication occurs?

This structural comparison also places a limit on the article's contemporary claim. The novella does not establish that AI-mediated communication will necessarily reproduce Forster's dystopian society. Nor does technological participation in communication automatically produce communicative authority. Authority depends upon more specific conditions: extensive dependence, normalization, diminished alternatives, and the social or institutional restriction of criticism. Forster's fiction represents these conditions in an extreme form, allowing the consequences of infrastructural dependence to become particularly visible.

The four-stage framework therefore contributes a way of distinguishing between different levels of technological influence. Infrastructural dependence concerns the system's control over the conditions of participation. Embodied displacement concerns the declining necessity of physical presence. Relational attenuation concerns the transformation of reciprocal expectations. Communicative authority concerns the system's influence over what can legitimately be questioned. These are not four independent problems but four analytical dimensions of a single communicative transformation.

The resulting concept of disembodied dialogue thus performs a synthetic function. It identifies a situation in which communication persists rather than disappears, but does so under conditions where embodiment, reciprocity, and critical independence have become progressively less necessary. Its significance lies precisely in this paradox. The inhabitants of Forster's society are connected more extensively than ever, yet the infrastructure that enables their connection increasingly determines the terms of that connection. The novella consequently shifts the critical question from whether technology can connect people to whether technologically optimized connection remains sufficient when the conditions of encounter and the freedom to question its infrastructure have been diminished.

Seen in this way, *The Machine Stops* remains relevant not because it predicts a particular technological future but because it examines the social consequences of making technological mediation indispensable. Its enduring contribution is to reveal that communication can become more abundant without becoming more dialogic. The central danger is not silence but the normalization of a communicative environment in which access substitutes for encounter, efficiency reduces the necessity of reciprocity, and technological authority becomes difficult to subject to communicative scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* presents a society in which technological communication achieves extraordinary efficiency while the conditions of dialogue progressively narrow. Its inhabitants are not deprived of communication; they are connected through a system that makes communication possible without requiring physical encounter. The central problem of the novella is therefore not the disappearance of communication but

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the transformation of the conditions under which communication, relationships, and critical judgement take place.

This study has conceptualized that transformation through disembodied dialogue, a condition in which communication remains possible and extensive while embodied presence, reciprocal adjustment, and critical independence become progressively less necessary. The concept does not imply that technological mediation is inherently inadequate or that physical communication is automatically superior. Its analytical value lies in identifying the convergence of several transformations that are often considered separately: the infrastructural organization of communication, the reduced necessity of physical presence, the attenuation of reciprocal demands, and the emergence of authority within the communicative infrastructure.

The analysis has demonstrated that these transformations are cumulative. The Machine first becomes indispensable to social participation, then reduces the practical necessity of embodied encounter, subsequently alters expectations surrounding interpersonal relationships, and finally acquires authority over the conditions of communication itself. The progression matters because the Machine's authority does not appear suddenly. It develops through ordinary usefulness and repeated dependence until the system becomes sufficiently embedded in social life that questioning it becomes increasingly difficult.

Kuno's resistance remains crucial to this argument. His insistence on encountering Vashti beyond the Machine challenges the assumption that successful communication is equivalent to interpersonal encounter [1, p. 5]. His declaration that "Men made it" and that "The Machine is much, but it is not everything" [1, p. 5] further establishes that technological capability does not possess inherent authority. The Machine is powerful because human beings have organized their social and communicative existence around it. Kuno therefore preserves the possibility of distinguishing technological necessity from human possibility.

The article's contemporary relevance should consequently be understood structurally rather than predictively. Research on AI-mediated and machine communication provides a useful context because contemporary computational systems increasingly participate in the production and organization of communicative acts [4,8–10]. Yet the Machine should not be treated as a direct representation of artificial intelligence. The significance of Forster's novella lies instead in the communicative problem it makes visible: when technological mediation becomes indispensable, what happens to the forms of encounter, reciprocity, and critical judgement that are no longer required for communication to function?

The answer offered by *The Machine Stops* is not that technological communication inevitably destroys human relationships. Rather, the novella demonstrates how the criteria of communicative sufficiency can change. A society may become extraordinarily connected while increasingly treating access as sufficient, physical encounter as optional, and technological efficiency as a justification for reducing the demands of reciprocity. When the infrastructure that produces this condition also becomes resistant to criticism, communication itself becomes subject to the authority of the system through which it occurs.

The contribution of the concept of disembodied dialogue therefore lies in identifying this paradox. Communication can expand while dialogue becomes more vulnerable; access can increase while encounter becomes less necessary; and technological systems can facilitate communication while increasingly influencing the terms under which communication is understood. Forster's enduring significance lies in making these tensions visible before technological mediation becomes so ordinary that its social consequences disappear from view.

Ultimately, *The Machine Stops* does not ask whether human beings will continue to communicate. They clearly will. Its more difficult question concerns what communication becomes when the infrastructure that makes connection efficient also determines which forms of presence, reciprocity, and criticism remain necessary. Disembodied dialogue names that condition and, in doing so, redirects attention from technological capability to communicative consequence. The novella's continuing relevance lies precisely in this unresolved tension: communication may become easier to maintain while the human conditions that make it dialogic become increasingly difficult to recognize.

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