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Internet-Mediated Communication: Publicly Interpersonal
by
Katharine A. Cannella

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Abstract

INTERNET MEDIATED
COMMUNICATION
PUBLICLY INTERPERSONAL

by Katharine Cannella

Chair

Dr. Ann Rosenthal

Department of Communication

A thesis on communication between individuals as mediated by the Internet,
concluding that certain types of messages are interpersonal as well as public in
nature. Away messages and blogs are examined as evidence that Internet-
mediated interpersonal communication is a new context. The researcher
determines that Internet-mediated communication (IMC) results in several
communicative adaptations unique to this medium and that significance lies
within the development of extended interpersonal relationship through the
creation and expansion of online social networks.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet affects millions of people worldwide with its pervasive presence and allows instant interpersonal communication between users in real-time. In this virtual landscape, the medium affects communication in ways that have not yet been studied. While e-mail and instant messaging remain one-to-one methods of communication, artifacts such as away messages and blogs increase in significance as their content can be accessed online by many users. Interpersonal communication as context must be redefined when mediated by the Internet to accommodate the inherently public nature of many of its manifestations.

FRAMING THE STUDY

Internet communication has become common practice, with colleges and universities requiring competency in e-mail for undergraduates. It also provides new methods of interpersonal communication. However, interpersonal communication is traditionally defined as face-to-face interaction, which transmits up to 90% of meaning through nonverbal channels that enhance oral communication. A text-based medium, the Internet excludes these channels. Regardless, people are still creating meaning and building relationships. The Internet is a different communicative environment that has been studied primarily as a technology.

Statement of the problem: The traditional definition of interpersonal communication is inadequate concerning Internet-mediated communication.

Purpose: To define Internet-mediated communication (IMC) contexts that constitute interpersonal communication. To consider IMC as a new context, one that bridges interpersonal and mass communication. To consider the effects of this emerging context, including adaptations and social repercussions.

Terms:

Communication: a process of interaction between two or more individuals that creates shared meaning and understanding (Berlo, 1960).

Context: Discourse that surrounds a language unit and helps to determine its interpretation ("Context").

Interpersonal Communication: Communication between few participants in close physical proximity to each other using many channels and providing immediate feedback (Borchers, 1999).

Mass Communication: Messages directed from one sender to many receivers (Personal communication, Rosenthal, 2004).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Global Network

In order to understand the manifestations of Internet-mediated communication, we must first understand the development of the digital environment in which it occurs. The Internet was initially developed in 1969 by the United States Department of Defense with objective of connecting several geographically dispersed super-computer sites via telephone line in a communication system that could not be destroyed in the event of an emergency. This network of information quickly became so successful that large computer sites within other government departments, universities, and large corporations began linking in. As academics, officials, technicians, and scientists were easily able to communicate with each other and share information, its advantages attracted the attention of organizations outside the United States and soon the internationalization of the network created its moniker: an INTERnational or INTERconnected NETwork—the Internet ("How did the Internet start?" a; "Internet;" "How did the Internet start?" b; Huston, 1999). The Internet is decentralized by design, and each node is merely one point in an exponentially expanding network. Nodes can access services provided by other nodes on the network, such as electronic mail (email), file transfer (FTP), and hypertext (WWW) as well as allowing real-time interpersonal communication. Today more

than 100 countries exchange data, news, and opinions (Sweet & Russell, n.d.; "How did the Internet start?" n.d.a; "Internet," 2002).

Existing Scholarship

Scholars have largely focused on the educational aspects of utilizing the Internet. Many discuss strategies for Web-assisted classrooms. Frey, Faul, and Yankelov (2003) determined email communication with the instructor and online provision of course information as the most valuable strategies. Instructors can also post grades online and encourage classmate interaction via email. Other scholars report that traditional classroom strategies translate well into distance learning classes (Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell, 2002). In addition to positive effects on students, the Internet affects teachers as well. Becker & Ravitz (1999) relate increased use of constructivist teaching practices to Internet use. A prevalent theme in education-related studies is the emphasis on interaction between instructors, students, and peers in order to build strong online communities that encourage learning (Frey, Faul, & Yankelov, 2003; Kanuka, Collet, & Caswell, 2002; Swan, 2002; Varnhagen, Drake, & Finley, 1997). However, Woods (2002) found in a study of doctoral candidates at a Virginia university that regardless the number of personal emails sent to the students from the instructor, no statistically significant difference could be identified in perceived sense of community, amount of student participation in web discussions, overall satisfaction with the learning experience, or personal relationship with the teacher.

Several recent studies apply Michael Grahame Moore's theory of transactional distance to explain the relationship between student, instructor, and medium. Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell (2002) analyze the impact of asynchronous text-based Internet communication technology on pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles of instructors. These roles translate into four dimensions of transactional distance within an Internet classroom: learner-content, learner-learner, instructor-learner, and learner-interface (Chen, 2001). This transactional distance prompts the instructors to develop strategies as mentioned previously to facilitate planned, deliberate, and effective learning. Chen notes that transactional distance is not a geographic phenomenon, but a "distance of understandings and perceptions that might lead to a communication gap or a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between people" (p. 2). In this light, Moore's theory of Transactional Distance may well be applicable when describing Internet-mediated communication.

A New Context

Studies show that of the Internet-literate population, nearly all users utilize it for email, information retrieval, and web-browsing to significantly enhance their lives (Bernhardt, Lariscy, Parrot, Silk, & Fetter, 2002; see Nie, 2001). Becoming more important, however, is Internet use to create interpersonal relationships through public channels such as chatrooms and newsgroups (Merchant, 2001; Newlands, Anderson & Mullin, 2003; Peris, *et al.* 2002; Perry, Perry & Hosack-Curlin, 1998). For more than a decade, electronic mailing lists have been used to create online

communities (Personal communication, Rosenthal, 2004). Peris *et al.* (2002) report that interpersonal communication is in fact a dominant use of the Internet, and that the virtual friendships that flourish as a result are as familiar and satisfying as face-to-face friends. It is significant to note that the Internet provides an opportunity to for users interact anonymously or as any persona he or she wishes to assume. The user one believes to be of similar age and interest may in reality be someone completely different.

This networked, electronic environment fosters instantaneous interaction from opposite sides of the globe that frequently disregards the normal rules of grammar and spelling. Users struggling to type as quickly as the ideas flowing through their minds must adapt to this electronic medium, writing in shorthand and abbreviations. As the Internet and its use thereof continue to increase dramatically, the most fascinating phenomenon is the opportunity users have to make an interpersonal message public. Emerging is a new communicative context, one in which Internet-mediated communication (IMC) as an interpersonal medium empowers individuals to become interpersonal mass communicators.

METHODOLOGY

The text-based nature of IMC calls for a method of study that seeks to preserve and accurately report meaning at the relational as well as content levels. Thus, this is a participant observer study, meaning that the researcher is immersed in the subject of study for a deeper understanding (Garson, n.d.). The researcher has engaged in the use of the selected phenomena since 1997 and is an undergraduate degree candidate in communication.

Selection of Phenomena

In the virtual reality of the World Wide Web, all communication is asynchronous in that information is sent intermittently, at the will of the user, rather than in a steady stream at specified intervals ("Asynchronous"). Asynchronous IMC includes channels in which communicators offer feedback in real time, as is the case with instant messages. Instant messages are:

> (a)bbreviated *IM*, a type of communications service that enables you to create a kind of private chat room with another individual in order to communicate in real-time over the Internet, analogous to a telephone conversation but using text-based, not voice-based, communication. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts you whenever somebody on your private list is online. You can then initiate a chat session with that particular individual ("Instant Messaging").

As IMs create direct sender-to-receiver communication by opening chat windows between two users only, this instantaneous IMC can be considered almost wholly interpersonal. Of course, similar to eavesdropping, another person may be reading over the intended recipient's shoulder, but the message is intended to be from one individual to another.

The focus of this study is IMC composed for a public audience. A large quantity of IMC is not pure point-to-point interpersonal communication, and many users post messages with the understanding that their words have a high probability of being read by numerous web-surfers, friends and strangers alike. Several IM programs have a utility that allows users to post an away message, the Internet counterpart to a telephone answering machine. Away messages generally give viewers an idea of what the poster is doing elsewhere, of why he or she is not available to chat. With certain programs such as America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM), users can personalize these automatic responses, and anyone searching for more information on a particular user can view this message. This method of IMC is very popular among young adults; a study recently conducted by two Wake Forest University students reported 97% of students surveyed use an instant messaging program at least once a day and regular users update away messages an average of five times a day (Newsom, 2004; Marklein, 2004; Personal communication, Gray, 2004).

However, even personalized away message may be inadequate for users who cannot or do not wish to summarize their feelings or actions in a few short

sentences. For these lengthier, often more intimate posts that may not be appropriate for an away message, many Netheads utilize blogs:

> (n.) Short for *Web log*, a blog is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author. (v.) To author a Web log. ("Blog").

Though blogs and online journaling have exploded into Web space only relatively recently, they have been in use since the early days of the Internet. Blogging pioneers credit Andrew Smales with launching the first do-it-yourself blog tool in July 1999, Pitas.com, as he was developing software to facilitate updating his personal website and foster the "online diary community" he foresaw. Smales' vision enabled what was then merely dozens of blogs to multiply into the millions of electronic journals now online, a presence that can hardly go unnoticed (Mallory, 2003). Blogs have begun to infiltrate the mainstream: many newspapers allow reporters to utilize blogs in or as their columns, to comment on current events with frank immediacy, though obligations to credibility and accuracy are prompting more and more newspapers to require that blog entries be cleared by a copy editor, just as a print column would (Heyboer & Rosen, 2003; Palser, 2003). Harvard University has created a blog community (http://cyber.harvard.edu).

Collection of Data

The researcher used AIM to observe away messages and MySpace.com to observe blogs. Data was collected from Internet users in the researcher's social

network over a period of four months from January 7, 2004, through April 27, 2004.

Away messages of over twenty users were checked at irregular intervals at least three times per day. The researcher followed normal personal behavior in interacting through the selected communication media and did not inform those being observed of her intent to analyze the messages. These represent public communication, accessible to the general public, and do not constitute privileged communication between the researcher and the individuals observed. Individuals using these forms of messaging protect their own privacy through the use of screen names. No direct quotations from personal messages have been used in the study. Precedent for this method of observation comes from content analysis of traditional print media (Pottker, 2003; Rodgers & Thorson, 2003).

Blogs of over ten users were checked an average of every two days, to allow individuals opportunity to update them. Not all observed data has been reported, but representative examples and public sites have been included with care taken to protect the integrity of the blog builder's established public persona. No references have been made to specific personal relationships between the research and those individuals whose messages have been analyzed.

Analysis of Data

Lessig (1999) reminds us that in real space and time, much about a person's identity is revealed whether they are aware of it or not. In cyberspace, however, how a user is perceived is dependent on the messages he or she chooses to post

for others to view. Obviously, many away messages simply told the status of the unavailable user:

"I am away from my computer right now."

"I'll be back later."

"gone to bed"

"studying for finals, even though I don't wanna"

"at work"

"watching a movie, call the house"

But many also included quotations, jokes, and other information that gave the reader clues to the user's personality, likes/dislikes, and current state of mind:

"One time a guy handed me a picture of himself, and he said, "Here's a picture of me when I was younger." Every picture of you is of when you were younger. Here's a picture of me when I am older. You son of a bitch, how'd you pull that off? Let me see that camera...bed"

"'I'd rather have 30 minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special!'~ Shelby from Steel Magnolias"

"There will be times when you cannot find a reason to stand and sing but let this remind you time after time you're a child of the King!!!!"

"my backpack's got jets/i'm boba tha fett/i bounty hunt for jabba hutt/to finance my 'vette

slingin' catfish. don't be dumb, get you some!"

"always remember to forget, the friends who have failed to be true.... you

know who you are!!"

Whereas away messages were more information-centered, many users employed

blogs to rant at greater length about anything on their minds. One user, for

instance, blogged about dying electric toothbrushes. Another wrote a facetious

essay on why she found women to be "bloodsucking hookers." Yet another

wrote about her weekend escapades out of town, reminding readers to "put your

clothes on before you open the door." Bloggers also use their portion of

webspace to comment on popular culture:

"If I keep hearing Lil John impressions I am going to start thinking that

shit isn't funny anymore. So don't become a victim of my hating on you

and stop doing terrible impressions/ruining things that bring me

happiness in life."

Each post is unique, reflecting the individuality of the users, and the

implications of this publicly interpersonal medium must be considered.

DISCUSSION

The digital medium of the Internet itself affects interpersonal communication. As IMC is text-based, communicators must adapt for the loss of nonverbal channels. Evidence of this adaptation includes emoticons, "netiquette," and standard abbreviations. Emoticons--icons composed of keyboard characters, such as a smiley [:)]--communicate emotions that can be lost when messages are textualized. The first use of a smiley is believed to have been used on the Carnegie Mellon University bulletin board, posted September 19, 1982 by Scott E. Fahlman to signify a joke ("First 'smiley' discovered," 2002). Today's smileys are much more diverse than the traditional :); conducting a web search for "smileys" results in hundreds of thousands of hits, all advertising downloadable smileys to help express emotions more precisely (www.smileycentral.com, www.smiling-faces.com). Netiquette refers to Internet etiquette, the rules that maintain civility in discussion and guide formatting that is unique to communicating online ("Netiquette"). One rule holds that users should not type in capital letters, as that indicates shouting. Users also make use of many abbreviations in order to quickly convey common messages, such as LOL (laughing out loud) and BRB (be right back). Numerous sites on the Internet provide extensive lists of standard abbreviations (www.webenet.com/internetglossary.htm, www.abvsta.com/computer-internet).

The particular channel of IMC used also impacts interpersonal communication. Away messages lend themselves to short, terse messages explaining the status of a user at that particular point in time. This seems to confirm Newlands, Anderson & Mullins (2003) report that users readily adapt to computer-mediated communication through precise instruction giving in order to establish clear mutual understanding. A big part of the intrigue of away messages, however, is the personal commentary left in addition to a user's whereabouts. Users in this asynchronous environment are clearly aware that their messages are reaching a wider audience than simply their face-to-face social networks and use song lyrics, quotations from movies or famous personalities, and/or personal outbursts to approximate their state of mind and emotional status for message viewers (Newsom, 2004). The content of away messages tends to reflect greater immediacy in real-time because users update them so frequently. Marklein (2004) quotes Wake Forest graduate student Ryan Farley, co-designer of BuddyGopher, a program that allows users to view all of their buddies' away messages in one screen, who along with Wake Forest undergraduate Nick Gray is currently studying away messages:

> "You check away messages not only to see what (friends) are doing, but on the hope that they'll put something clever up there. If you leave up bad away messages, no one checks your away messages anymore."

This emphasizes the importance of users' social networks but also points out that while the Internet medium has the *potential* to be a mass medium, if no one reads the message, then the user is still an isolate in webspace.

Blogs lend themselves to longer postings with a wider array of medium adaptations. Many users approach blogs as a pastime, filling the text box with entertaining musings, while others pour their hearts out in eloquent paragraphs, attempting to share the depth of emotion that fills them. Users make the most of smileys when emphasizing emotions, but often times users will post links to other websites to make a point. Quiz links are popular, as users know that friends will read their blog and most likely will post and compare results with others in their social circles. Bloggers also have the option to post pictures, of themselves or of other web images that emphasize their point. These provide contextual cues and facilitate deeper understanding in an environment that by design inhibits the sharing of meaning.

As is the case with away messages, blogs are also susceptible to the possibility that no one may read a user's heartfelt post. One of the more interesting properties of blogs is that viewers may comment on a particular post. This feedback lets the user know that their message has been viewed and creates a sense of social support and community. It also helps extend social networks because users who often view friends' blogs will then see comments written by other users with similar interests, and soon new friendships flourish over a single shared post.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

The Internet as a communicative medium clearly creates a new context that bridges the interpersonal and mass communication realms. Away messages and blogs are evidence of this new context; these artifacts serve as communicative snapshots of an individual, suspending real-time exchange and making what was once an interpersonal message public.

Because nonverbal channels are not available to help interpret and enhance relational levels of meaning, the Internet's asynchronous, text-based nature necessitates innovative adaptations such as emoticons, netiquette, and widely accepted abbreviations. IMC also fosters adaptations specific to the channels studied. Away messages are usually brief, but many users attempt to enhance their messages with interesting comments, jokes, or quotations that will entice other users to read them and thus share a bit of the poster's lived experience. Bloggers utilize similar adaptations, as well as several others such as links to websites and pictures. Messages are posted with the hope that someone, anyone will read them, and so an interpersonal message quickly becomes a public message.

The significance of publicly interpersonal messages mediated by the Internet lies in the extension of transactional space between individuals thus enabling the creation and building of interpersonal relationships and extended social networks

between users. This extended transactional space constitutes a new interpersonal

communication context that provides rich opportunities for further study.

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