

Relating Electronically

Interpersonality in the Net¹

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This article discusses communication in the Net from the perspective of interpersonal communication. We raise some special questions concerning the Net, e.g. whether there are unique characteristics in the interpersonal communication, what kind of possibilities the Net offers for building relationships and what kind of effects the Net might have on our interpersonal communication. In the light of research literature, we will consider to what extent communication in the Net is interpersonal, explore the questions of self-presentation and anonymity in the Net, and finally make a preliminary sketch of the nature of Net relationships. We also make use of the results of our brief net-survey concerning users' characterizations of e-mail communication (Gerlander & Takala 1996).

New ways of Relating

No one denies that something has changed in social relationships along with the development in communication technology. Though developing relationships at a distance is not a novel phenomenon, computerization has vastly increased the field of available relationships far beyond the limits set by physical proximity (Gergen 1991, Lea & Spears, 1995, 206). The important question is what are the specific changes and how dramatic or fundamental they might be considered in terms of their effects. In his book, Gergen (1991) discusses relationships also from the historical viewpoint and he presents several substantial remarks of self and relationships.

A century ago, social relationships were largely confined to the distance of an easy walk. Most were conducted in person, within small communities: family, neighbours, townspeople [...] From birth to death one could depend on relatively even-textured social surroundings. Words, faces, gestures and possibilities were relatively consistent, coherent and slow to change. (Gergen 1991, 61.)

New technical devices and methods used in transmission processes of communication altered also interpersonal relationships: they are not so place-bound anymore, and as Gergen (1991, 64) says, they have become "unglued" and can take pla-

ce anywhere. In this situation, it is worth asking whether it is possible to capture the characteristics of new forms of communication by seeking theoretical tools from face-to-face-communication (FtF). Lea and Spears (1995, 212) argue that prevailing conceptualizations of relationships processes presuppose that personal relationships will be difficult to obtain and maintain via telecommunications media. Thus, also in research on computer-mediated-communication (CMC)² research there is apparently an overreliance on the physical and spatial aspects of interaction (Lea & Spears 1995, 220), though it must be admitted that it is natural to consider FtF as a prototype of human communication (e.g. Berger & Luckmann 1995, 39). What is needed is an open-minded exploration and reappraisal of theoretical backgrounds of mediated interpersonal communication. For example, CMC has certain features that makes it more difficult to exchange some, and easier to exchange other types of relational communication (Lea & Spears 1995). It is also worth remembering the special kind of text-basedness of Net communication which has been mostly neglected in CMC studies.

Impersonal – Personal – : How Personal?

The very argued theme in CMC research has been its effect on the quality of human relationships. The discussion has either focused on arguing that CMC is highly inhibited, formal and impersonal or that it is, on the contrary, intimate, informal and even more personal than parallel face-to-face communication.

Contradictory views appeared also in users' descriptions of e-mail:

It is a suitable medium for faceless communication. It is easier and more convenient than most of media and it requires less effort. Thus the threshold to communicate is lower. In addition, you don't have to meet the receiver.

It can take on an intimate character – making strangers seem like friends. It also makes strangers and people of higher status approachable

Repeatedly, numerous computer-mediated-communication studies have contended that the lack of nonverbal and contextual cues available in FtF communication makes CMC formal and distant (termed cues-filtered-out perspective). However,

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contradictory claims have also been put forward, insisting that the absence of these cues increases the emotional and social content of communication (Kiesler, Sieger & Mc Guire 1984), and the communication seems more intimate and informal. Thus, the same explanation has been used for supporting these differing findings.

It has also been suggested that the (high) sense of immediacy has an effect on the content of communication and on the formation of social relationships. In e-mail communication, users easily feel like having access to each others' mental worlds.

E-mail is both very intimate and unpleasantly impersonal. I have frequently noticed the paradoxical nature of e-mail... It is embarrassing how easily and quickly you can start dealing with very intimate matters. People start writing about things which couldn't be handled even within a year if they communicated all the time face-to-face.

The most notable point in the excerpt above is the intensity of the intimacy experienced which is almost impossible or at least unusual in FtF interaction. It can be claimed that due to the possibility of "faceless intimacy" e-mail communication may become extremely personal, even hyperpersonal, by which Walther (1996) means that the level of affection and emotion in CMC has surpassed that of face-to-face interaction. Accordingly, for example e-mail communication might even become more socially desirable and intimate than FtF communication. Because intimacy and sociality are typically considered as favourable features in communication, it follows that hyperpersonality is also framed with positive meanings. However, high amount of intimacy might not only be regarded as favourable or worth reaching. On the contrary, it can also be experienced as stressing and even the as a matter to be evaded.

I have some e-mail pals around the world. In the course of years we have discussed all things possible at length, deeply and passionately. In some respect I feel these people to be very close to me... but on the other hand I'm a little bit embarrassed about this. It is strange and sometimes it also makes me feel anxious to discuss with a person you have never seen, whose voice you have never heard...

However, it is not very fruitful merely to argue whether CMC is formal *or* informal, impersonal, personal or even hyperpersonal³. Instead, the point of departure could be to consider CMC as embedding very multifaceted and conflicting features. According to Luhmann (1986) the modern society is to be distinguished from older social formations by the fact that it affords more opportunities both for impersonal and for more intensive personal relationships. Thus, based on this thought, more substantial questions to be asked include: What is CMC like as interpersonal communication? What kind of strategies people use for creating and maintaining e-mail or Net relationships (or on-line relationships)? How do they construct their virtual identities (on-line identities) and present themselves and What are these digital relationships like?

Questions of Self-Presentation and Anonymity

There are some underlying aspects that need to be recognized before proceeding to address self-presentation and anonymity in electronic relationships. First of all, Net participants exist to each other mainly as a text. Secondly, they can take control over the information of their visual appearance which is always available to persons in face-to-face situations. They can decide whether to reveal, what, when, and to what extent to reveal. Further, Net communicators do not have to share common time and place, spatial and physical contexts and in this respect they lack co-presence – they are in physical isolation. Unarguably, these features affect processes of relationships development and the quality or characteristics of relating.

Evidently, the absence of physical contact means that the first impressions in the Net are different from those in FtF, where gender, age and physical appearance are immediately revealed (Lea & Spears 1995, 202). For example, unavailable physical cues make it impossible to fall in love at the first *sight* (Lea & Spears 1995, 208.) This is the reason why CMC has been seen to have an empowering force: e.g. people with physical disabilities can communicate without certain encumbrances, free of prejudices concerning their physical appearance. Van Gelder (1996, 535) states that for disabled people Net is a medium where they can make the first impression on their own terms. Understandably, people always make some judgments of the other's physical qualities; that is not dependent on visual perception.

I find myself trying to picture what each of these people look like, what the sound of their voice might be. I try and picture them in their offices... (Loughlin 1993.)

An essential feature of electronic relationships which can have an effect on the quality of social communication is that there is a greater tendency to create an imaginary other with whom to relate. Users have great opportunities to produce ageless or sexless identities for the homepages or in the Net which are entirely based on imagination.

People who present themselves on the Internet are not always what they appear to be. We have no way to verify that the people we interact with are what they claim to be. People on the Net can present themselves as men instead of women, thin instead of horizontally challenged, and tall instead of short. Simply stated, people have an opportunity through text-only exchanges to create idealized versions of themselves. (Phillips & Barnes 1995, 13)

Admittedly, the facility to optimize self-presentation through selective and strategic disclosures (Lea & Spears 1995, 223) or even to create imaginary or false identities fit perfectly the spirit of postmodernism according to which the question of authenticity is regarded somewhat insignificant and uninteresting. Van Gelder (1996, 535) argues that "perhaps there's a thin line between getting out of one's skin and getting into a completely false identity".

Nevertheless, the issue of the true character or genuineness in Net communication and Net relationships has been repeatedly a subject of discussion. According to Phillips and Barnes (1995) using fake identities and pseudonyms does not mean that communication would be unreal and communicators would not exist. Being present for someone does not presume that communicators must be authentic or real. The question of genuineness of Net relationships is often linked to the issue of intimacy. For example, a commonly held conception that "the reduction of full co-presence in communication media undermines opportunities for genuine, intimate personal relationships" has proved to be exaggeratedly biased and even invalid. (e.g. Lea & Spears 1995.)

I have talked to some people for years without knowing where they live or their real names. Yet they are as much a presence in my life as if they were right in the room. They are my friends. (Kerr & Hiltz 1982).

Considering communication skills in the light of how to construct or create the preferable identity, it is logical that self-presentation skills (e.g. how to present oneself by means of 'text' and text-based icons the best possible way) have emerged as critical Net skills "Given the performance nature of all email communication (a writer addresses a reader, a performer speaks to an audience), list or private, it is reasonable to believe that performance skills are necessary for successful interactions." (Phillips & Barnes 1995, 23).

However, there apparently are special ways to be attractive or impression-leaving in the Net context. For example, to be a good writer and to know how to behave correctly on-line are keys to successful image in the Net context. How to put your ideas across may be a more crucial source of attraction than in FtF. As Loughlin (1993) says, CMC allows you to form opinions about people based solely on the quality of their words and thoughts.

This suits perfectly one essential feature of postmodern relationships, that of avoiding commitment to other people (e.g. Bauman 1994). Due to an indifferent or even negative attitude to the duties and responsibilities needed to maintain relationships, the main emphasis in communication is not put on the skills aiming at enhancing mutual commitment, cooperation and satisfaction, but on the skills by virtue of which a successful personal impression is accomplished.

Lea and Spears (1995, 202) point out that for some communicators, visual anonymity and physical isolation are the elements which create/produce the "magic" of on-line relationships. In consequence of the enormous possibilities to control the revealing of personal information, Net users can even present themselves as totally anonymous. There are widely known technical devices available for making anonymous messages: it is possible to strip the return addresses from an email message and even to choose a fictitious address that does not exist.

In many ways, anonymity is a double-edged sword. It can enhance the development of intimate and supportive relationships, as in the cases of crises help lines in which the conditions of (visual) anonymity and physical isolation encourage feelings of intimacy and trust. In contrast, the ease with which users can disguise themselves as anonymous can also encour-

age depersonalizing the other communicators and using them for highly selfish and one-sided fun-like purposes.

Many researchers have discussed the effects of anonymity on power structures, especially on the relationships between superiors and subordinates, and on power as a communicational element. It has repeatedly been suggested that anonymity may offer conditions for the less powerful to challenge⁴ the powerful individuals, but in addition, it also makes easier for the more powerful to manipulate others by distancing the individual from the consequences of his or her actions (Lea & Spears 1995, 224).

Noticably, anonymity can be conceptualized in two ways: anonymity of the sender for the receivers and anonymity of the audience for the sender. Lea and Spears (1995, 222) refer to the first as identifiability as the receivers of the message can not know the sender. Another mode of anonymity is sending a message to some news or discussion group, the number of participants of which is unknown as well as their identities. The senders of messages may receive some messages in return from the others or they may notice that their intellectual efforts have disappeared like a waterdrop into the sea.

Characterization Relationships in the Net

In principle, it can be claimed that Net relationships are more often based on the ideology of consumption and utilization than the traditional relationships. This argument can be supported, for example, by the following features which are highlighted in the Net

– *the better possibilities to control and manipulate self-information.* For example Gergen (1991) remarks that the Net is a very favourable place for fractional relationships, which means that they are based on very limited information concerning oneself. Communicators disclose only fragments of information.

– *the ease with which relationships can both be fastly created and to gotten rid of which leads to short-cycle relationships.* Something must have changed in our relationships due to the technological development. One aspect of it is the speed, the rate of relationship development. "Courtships may thus move from excitement to exhaustion within a short time" (Gergen 1991, 63). In addition, Net persons do not bother us like the people in one's life (e.g. Rosenberg 1992) due to belonging to the world outside of normal life, to a virtual world.

– *the ease with which relationships can be forgotten.* It is not usual to reflect on or to analyze the past relationships.

– *the omnipotent thinking and the illusion of total control.* "I do not have to stand anything I find difficult or harmful", that is, conversing only with the chosen ones. In a metaphorical sense, this means the possibility to "skim the cream" in human relationships, to pick out only those people who produce pleasure and satisfaction. Gergen (1991, 66) catches something essential when saying that "microwave oven is a good symbol of the newly emerging form of relationships; in both cases the users command intense heat for the immediate provision of nourishment. The adequacy of the result is also subject to debate in both cases."

– *the avoidance of commitment and intimacy*. In addition to avoidance of doing one's "relational" duties and responsibilities, Bauman (1994) also brings up another significant characteristic of postmodern relationships, namely the cult of interpersonal intimacy which is not in opposition to the avoidance of commitment but draws from the same underlying ideas and values as it.

– *the recorded and recalled history*. To quote Lea and Spears (1995, 232), for the first time now it is easy to document the development of entire relationship and the recorded history can be manipulated, edited and restructured in order to investigate special themes and find out underlying assumptions. Furthermore, Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) remind us

of the inherent empiricism of the Net: communicating in the Net leaves tracks.

Finally, some brief remarks concerning CMC research. Future research on the social effects of electronic communication technology should not consider only the technological characteristics of various media but also those purposes and goals that users accomplish through the media should not be neglected. (Markus 1996, 518). The uses and gratifications, in a broad sense and including interpersonal functions, are the most obvious areas of inquiry for humanistically-oriented CMC research. Medium may be the message, but wo/man makes the medium.

Notes

1. This article is partially published in Finnish, in *Tiedotustutkimus* 4/1996.
2. In this article we consider CMC and Net communication as synonymous and when using them we refer to different types or forms of CMC, like electronic mail and discussion groups, which probably are most relevant when considering potential interpersonal relationships.
3. To be precise, it is worth to remember that when users are engaged in e-mail they do not communicate with the other users but rather with the computer, and that is why Loughlin (1996) states that "the chat is less than human in terms of human communication as it is classically defined".
4. On the governmental and global level anonymity can be viewed as a considerable vehicle for minority views and those lacking in power to influence and bring out their opinions. It is essential for democracy to give people a possibility to criticize social institutions and governments without subjecting them to persecution.

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