Internet–Mediated Communication at the Cultural Interface

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INTRODUCTION

As individuals launch themselves into cyberspace via networked technologies, they must navigate more than just the human-computer interface. The rhetoric of the "global village"—a utopian vision of a harmonious multicultural virtual world—has tended to overlook the messier and potentially much more problematic social interfaces of cyberspace: the interface of the individual with cyberculture (Macfadyen, 2004), and the interface of culture with culture. To date, intercultural communications research has focused primarily on instances of physical (face-to-face) encounters between cultural groups, for example, in the classroom or in the workplace. However, virtual environments are increasingly common sites of encounter and communication for individuals and groups from multiple cultural backgrounds. This underscores the need for a better understanding of Internet-mediated intercultural communication.

BACKGROUND

Researchers from multiple disciplines (cultural studies, intercultural studies, linguistics, sociology, education, human-computer interaction, distance learning, learning technologies, philosophy, and others) have initiated studies to examine virtual intercultural communication. The interdisciplinarity of the field, however, offers distinct challenges: in addition to embracing different definitions of culture, investigators lack a common literature or vocabulary. Communicative encounters between groups and individuals from different cultures are variously described as cross-cultural, intercultural, multicultural, or even transcultural. Researchers use terms such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, cyberspace, and virtual (learning) environments (VLEs) to de-

note overlapping though slightly different perspectives on the world of networked digital communications. Others focus on CMC (computer-mediated communication), ICTs (Internet and communication technologies), HCI (human-computer interaction), CHI (computer-human interaction), or CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) in explorations of technologies at the communicative interface.

This article offers an overview of existing theoretical and empirical approaches to examining what happens when culturally diverse individuals communicate with each other on the Internet: the publicly available, internationally interconnected system of computers (and the information and services they provide to their users) that uses the TCP/IP (transmission-control protocol/Internet protocol) suite of packet-switching communications protocols.

INVESTIGATING ONLINE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Does Culture Influence Internet-Mediated Intercultural Communication?

What does current research tell us about the interplay between individuals, cultures, and communication online? A significant number of studies has begun to explore online intercultural communications between and within selected populations. Some have employed quantitative methods to investigate whether there are specific cultural differences in attitudes to technology and the use of technologies, in communication patterns and frequency, and in communication style or content (for detailed references to these quantitative studies, see Macfadyen, Roche, & Doff, 2004). Others (and especially those using qualitative approaches) focus less on the technology and instead seek evidence of cultural influences on interpersonal or intragroup processes, dy-

namics, and communications in cyberspace. For example, Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, and Roche (2002) describe nine thematic clusters of apparent cultural mismatches that occurred in communications between culturally diverse individuals in a Web-based discussion forum: differences in the choices of participation format and frequency, differences in response to the forum culture, different levels of comfort with disembodied communication, differing levels of technoliteracy, differences in participant expectations, differing patterns of use of academic discourse vs. narrative, and differing attitudes to time and punctuality. To this list of discontinuities, Wilson (2001) adds "worldview, culturally specific vocabulary and concepts, linguistic characteristics…[and] cognition patterns, including reading behaviour" (p. 61). Kim and Bonk (2002) report cultural differences in online collaborative behaviours, and Rahmati (2000) and Thanasankit and Corbitt (2000) describe the different cultural values that selected cultural groups refer to in their approaches to decision making when working online.

Evidence is accumulating, then, that seems to suggest that cultural factors do impact communicative encounters in cyberspace. What is the most effective framework for exploring and explaining this phenomenon, and what role is played by the design of human-computer interfaces?

The Problem of Defining Culture

Perhaps not surprisingly, most intercultural communication researchers have begun by attempting to clarify and define what culture is to allow subsequent comparative analyses and examinations of cultural differences in communication practices. Given that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams, 1983, p. 87), this definitional quest is, unfortunately, beset with difficulty. The word itself is now used to represent distinct and important concepts in different intellectual disciplines and systems of thought, and decades of debate between scholars across the disciplines have not yielded a simple or uncontested understanding of the concept.

In reality, a majority of existing research and theory papers published to date that examine culture and communication in online environments implicitly define culture as ethnic or national culture, and

examine online communication patterns among and between members of specific ethnic or linguistic groups; only a few attempt to broaden the concept of culture. Of these, Heaton (1998b) notes, "organizational and professional cultures are also vital elements in the mix" (pp. 262-263) and defines culture as "a dynamic mix of national/geographic, organizational and professional or disciplinary variables" (p. 263). Others highlight the importance of gender culture differences in online communications, or note the complicating influences of linguistic culture and linguistic ability, epistemological type, technical skill, literacy (Goodfellow, 2004), class, religion, and age (for detailed references, see Macfadyen et al., 2004).

The Problem of Essentialism

Even more problematic than the simplistic equating of culture with ethnicity is the persistent and uncritical application of essentialist theories of culture and cultural difference in intercultural communications research. These theories tend to characterize culture as an invariant and uncontested matrix of meanings and practices that are inherited by and shared within a group. They are commonly used either to develop testable hypotheses about the impact of culture on Internet-mediated intercultural communications, or to interpret data post hoc (or both). In particular, an increasing number of studies relies unquestioningly upon Hofstede's (1980, 1991) dimensions of (national) culture (Abdat & Pervan, 2000; Gunawardena, Nolla, Wilson, Lopez-Islas, Ramírez-Angel, & Megchun-Alpízar, 2001; Maitland, 1998; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Tully, 1998) even though serious questions have been raised about Hofstede's methodological assumptions that might make his subsequent conclusions less reliable (McSweeney, 2002). Also referenced frequently are Edward Hall's theory (1966) of high- and low-context communications (Buragga, 2002; Heaton, 1998a; Maitland) and the nationally delineated cultural models of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000).

Some researchers (Abdelnour-Nocera, 2002; Hewling, 2004; Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004) are now offering critiques of the use of essentialist cultural theories in intercultural studies. Abdelnour-Nocera discusses, for example, the risks of using "ready made cultural models" such as

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