Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier: Gender Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication

Though research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) dates back to the early days of computer network technology in the 1970s, researchers have only recently begun to take the gender of users into account.1 This is perhaps not surprising considering that men have traditionally dominated the technology and have comprised the majority of users of computer networks since their inception, but the result is that most of what has been written about CMC incorporates a very one-sided perspective. However, recent research has been uncovering some eye-opening differences in the ways men and women interact “on-line,” and it is these differences that I will address here.

My basic claim has two parts: first, that women and men have recognizable different styles in posting electronic messages to the Internet, contrary to claims that CMC neutralizes distinctions of gender, and second, that women and men have different communication ethics—that is, they value different kinds of on-line interactions as appropriate and desirable. I illustrate these differences—and some of the problems that arise because of them—with specific reference to the phenomenon of “flaming.”

Since 1991 I’ve been lurking (or what I prefer to call “carrying out ethnographic observation”) on various computer-mediated discussion lists, downloading electronic conversations and analyzing the communicative behaviors of participants. I became interested in gender shortly after subscribing to my first discussion list, LINGUIST-L, an academic forum for professional linguists. Within the first month after I began receiving messages, a conflict arose on the list (what I would later learn to call a “flame war”) in which the two major theoretical camps within the field became polarized around an issue of central interest. My curiosity was piqued by the fact that very few women were contributing to this important professional event; they seemed to be sitting on the sidelines while men were airing their opinions and getting all the attention. In an attempt to understand the women’s silence, I made up an anonymous survey which I sent to LINGUIST-L asking subscribers what they thought of the discussion and, if they hadn’t contributed, why not.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The number one reason given by both men and women for not contributing to the LINGUIST discussion was “intimidation”—as one respondent commented, participants were “ripping each other’s lungs out.” Interestingly, however, men and women responded differently to feeling intimidated. Men seemed to accept such behavior as a normal feature of academic life, making comments to the effect that “Actually, the barbs and arrows were entertaining, because of course they weren’t aimed at me.” In contrast, many women responded with profound aversion. As one woman put it: “That is precisely the kind of human interaction I committedly avoid....I am dismayed that human beings treat each other this way. It makes the world a dangerous place to be. I dislike such people and I want to give them WIDE berth.”

When I analyzed the messages in the thread itself, another gender difference emerged, this time relating to the linguistic structure and rhetoric of the messages. A daunting 68 percent of the messages posted by men made use of an adversarial style in which the poster distanced himself from, criticized, and/or ridiculed other participants, often while promoting his own importance. The few women who participated in the discussion, in contrast, displayed features of attenuation—hedging, apologizing, asking questions rather than making assertions—and a personal orientation, revealing thoughts and feelings and interacting with and supporting others.

It wasn’t long before I was noticing a similar pattern in other discussions and on other lists. Wherever I went on mixed-sex lists, men seemed to be doing most of the talking and attracting most of the attention to themselves, although not all lists were as adversarial as LINGUIST. I started to hear stories about and witness men taking over and dominating discussions even of women-centered topics on women-centered lists.2 In contrast, on the few occasions when I observed women attempting to gain an equal hearing on male-dominated lists, they were ignored, trivialized, or criticized by men for their tone or the inappropriateness of their topic.3 It wasn’t until I started looking at lists devoted to women’s issues, and to traditionally “feminized” disciplines such as women’s studies, teaching English as a second language, and librarianship, that I found women holding forth in an amount consistent with their numerical presence on the list. I also found different interactional norms: little or no flaming, and cooperative, polite exchanges.
male style is characterized by
assertiveness, potency, frequent
assertions, and frequent
contentiousness, often causing
people to feel threatened or
angered. This style is often
demonstrated by men in
professional and social settings.

The female style, on the other hand,
is characterized by
expressiveness, gentleness,
compassion, and sensitivity. It
often involves indirect
communication and an
emphasis on maintaining
harmony. This style is typically
demonstrated by women in
personal and social situations.

The characteristics of assertive
male and expressive female
styles are influenced by cultural
and societal expectations, with
men generally encouraged to
be direct and powerful, and
women encouraged to be
empathetic and nurturing.

However, the boundaries
between these styles are not
rigid, and individuals can
adapt their communication
styles depending on the
context and audience.

In conclusion, understanding
the differences between
assertive male and expressive
female styles is important for
effective communication and
positive relationships. By
recognizing and appreciating
these differences, we can
better understand and
communicate with others.
order of a poster is open to question. Consider the following cases, the first involving a male posting as a female, the second a suspected female posting as a male:

i. A male subscriber on SWIP-L (Society for Women in Philosophy list) posted a message disagreeing with the general consensus that discourse on SWIP-L should be nonagonistic, commentating, "There's nothing like a healthy denunciation by one's colleagues every once in a while to get one's blood flowing, and spur one to greater subtlety and exactness of thought." He signed his message with a female pseudonym, however, causing another (female) subscriber to comment later, "I must confess to looking for the name of the male who wrote the posting that [n] sent originally and was surprised to find a female name at the end of it." The female subscriber had (accurately) inferred that anyone actively advocating "denunciation by one's colleagues" was probably male.

ii. At a time when one male subscriber had been posting frequent messages to the WOMEN list, another subscriber professing to be a man posted a message inquiring what the list's policy was towards men participating on the list, admitting, "I sometimes feel guilty for taking up bandwidth." The message, in addition to showing consideration for the concerns of others on the list, was very attenuated in style and explicitly appreciative of the list: "I really enjoy this list (actually, it's the best one I'm on)." This prompted another (female) subscriber to respond, "Now that you've posed the question... how's one to know you're not a woman posing this question as a man?" Her suspicion indicates that on some level she recognized that anyone posting a message expressing appreciation and consideration for the desires of others was likely to be female.

The existence of gendered styles has important implications, needless to say, for popular claims that CMC is anonymous, "gender blind," and hence inherently democratic. If our on-line communicative style reveals our gender, then gender differences, along with their social consequences, are likely to persist on computer-mediated networks.°

Entire lists can be gendered in their style as well. It is tacitly expected that members of the non-dominant gender will adapt their posting style in the direction of the style of the dominant gender. Thus men on women's special interest lists tend to attenuate their assertions and shorten their messages, and women, especially on male-dominated lists such as LINGUIST and PAGLIA-L, can be contentious and adversarial. Arguably, they must adapt in order to participate appropriately in keeping with the norms of the local list culture. Most members of the non-dominant gender on any given list, however, end up style mixing, that is, taking on some attributes of the dominant style while preserving features of their native style—for example, with men often preserving a critical stance and women a supportive one at themacro-message level. This suggests that gendered communication styles are deeply rooted—not surprising, since they are learned early in life—and that some features are more resistant to conscious reflection and modification than others.

- DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION ETHICS

The second part of this essay concerns the value systems that underlie and are used to rationalize communicative behavior on the net. In particular, I focus on the phenomenon of flaming, which has been variously defined as "the expression of strong negative emotion," use of "derogatory, obscene, or inappropriate language," and "personal insults." A popular explanation advanced by CMC researchers is that flaming is a by-product of the medium itself—the decontextualized and anonymous nature of CMC leads to "disinhibition" in users and a tendency to forget that there is an actual human being at the receiving end of one's emotional outbursts. However, until recently CMC research has largely overlooked gender as a possible influence on behavior, and the simple fact of the matter is that it is virtually only men who flame. If the medium makes men more likely to flame, it should have a similar effect on women, yet if anything the opposite appears to be the case. An adequate explanation of flaming must therefore take gender into account.

Why do men flame? The explanation, I suggest, is that women and men have different communication ethics, and flaming is compatible with male ethical ideals. I stumbled upon this realization recently as a result of a survey I conducted on politeness on the Internet. I originally hypothesized that the differences in the extremes of male and female behavior online—in particular, the tendency for women to be considerate of the "face" needs of others while men threaten others' "face"—could be explained if it turned out that women and men have different notions of what constitutes appropriate behavior. In other words, as a woman I might think adversarial behavior is rude, but men who behave adversarially might think otherwise. Conversely, men might be put off by the supportive and attenuated behaviors of women.

In the survey, I asked subscribers from eight Internet discussion lists to rank their like or dislike for 30 different on-line behaviors, including "flaming," "expressing thanks and appreciation," and "overly tentative messages," on a scale of 1 (like) to 5 (dislike). The survey also asked several open-ended questions, including most importantly: "What behaviors bother you most on the net?"

My initial hypothesis turned out to be both correct and incorrect. It was incorrect in that I found no support whatever for the idea that men and women's value systems are somehow reversed. Both men and women said they liked expressions of appreciation (avg. score of 2), were neutral about tentative messages (avg. about 3), and disliked flaming (although women expressed a stronger dislike than men, giving it a score of 4.3 as compared with only 3.9 for men). This makes male flaming behavior all the more puzzling. Should we conclude, then, that men who flame are deliberately trying to be rude?

The answers to the open-ended questions suggest a different explanation. These answers reveal a gender contrast in values that involves politeness —
cannot be described in terms of politeness alone. It seems women place a high value on consideration for the wants and needs of others, as expressed in the following comment by a female net user:

If we take responsibility for developing our own sensitivities to others and controlling our actions to minimize damage—we will each be doing [good deeds] for the whole world constantly.

Men, in contrast, assign greater value to freedom from censorship (many advocate absolute free speech), forthright and open expression, and agonistic debate as a means to advance the pursuit of knowledge. Historically, the value on absolute freedom of speech reflects the civil libertarian leanings of the computing professionals who originally designed the net and have contributed much of the utopian discourse surrounding it; the value on agonistic debate is rooted in the western (male) philosophical tradition.

These ideals are stirringly evoked in the following quote from R. Hanba (1993) praising the virtues of the Usenet system, on which 95 percent of the contributors are estimated to be male:

The achievement of Usenet News demonstrates the importance of facilitating the development of uncensored speech and communication—there is debate and discussion—one person influences another—people build on each other’s strengths and interests, differences, etc.

One might think of uncensored speech if abused could cause problems, but M. Hanba (1993) explains that there is a democratic way of handling this eventuality:

When people feel someone is abusing the nature of Usenet News, they let the offender know through e-mail. In this manner... people fight to keep it a resource that is helpful to society as a whole.

In daily life on the Internet, however, the ideal of “people fighting to keep [the net] a resource that is helpful to society as a whole” often translates into violent action. Consider, for example, the response of a male survey respondent to the question: “What behaviors bother you most on the net?” (tions are in the original):

As much as I am irritated by [incompetent posters], I don’t want imposed rules. I would prefer to “out” such a person and let some public minded citizen fire bomb his house to imposing rules on the net. Letter bombing an annoying individual’s feed is usually preferable to building a formal hierarchy of net cops.

Another net vigilante responds graphically as follows:

I’d have to say commercial shit. Whenever someone advertises some damn get-rich-quick scheme and plasters it all over the net by crossposting it to every newsgroup, I reach for my “gatling gun mailer crasher” and fire away at the source address.

These responses not only evoke an ideal of freedom from external authority, they provide an explicit justification for flaming—as a form of self-appointed regulation of the social order, a rough and ready form of justice on the virtual frontier. Thus a framework of values is constructed within which flaming and other aggressive behaviors can be interpreted in a favorable (even prosocial) light. This is not to say that all or even most men who flame have the good of net society at heart, but rather that the behavior is in principle justifiable for men (and hence tolerable) in ways that it is not for most women.

- NETIQUETTE

Further evidence that flaming is tolerated and justified within a system of male values comes from the content of written rules of network etiquette, or “netiquette,” such as are available on many public FTP sites and in introductory messages to new members of some discussion lists. I analyzed the content of netiquette rules from six lists, along with those found in the guidelines for Usenet and in the print publication *Towards an Ethic and Etiquette for Electronic Mail*, by Norman Shapiro and Robert Anderson (1985). What do netiquette rules have to say about flaming?

The answer is remarkably little, given that it is one of the most visible and frequently complained about “negatives” cited about the Internet. One might even say there is a striking lack of proscription against flaming, except on a few women-owned and women-oriented lists. And in the rare instances where flaming is mentioned, it is implicitly authorized. Thus the guidelines for new subscribers to the POLITICS list prohibit “flames of a personal nature,” and Shapiro and Anderson advise, “Do not insult or criticize third parties without giving them a chance to respond.” While on the surface appearing to oppose flaming, these statements in fact implicitly authorize “flames other than of a personal nature” (for example, of someone’s ideas or values) and “insulting or criticizing third parties” (provided you give them a chance to respond). Normative statements such as these are compatible with male values and male adversarial style; the intimidating rhetoric on LINGUIST and many other lists is not a violation of net etiquette according to these rules. Yet these are behaviors that female survey respondents say intimidate and drive them away from lists and newsgroups. Can the Internet community afford to tolerate behaviors that intimidate and silence women? This is a question that urgently needs to be raised and discussed net wide.

- CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, I have argued that women and men constitute different discourse communities in cyberspace—different cultures, if you will—with differing communicative norms and practices. However, these cultures are not “separate but equal,” as recent popular writing on gender differences in com-
munication has claimed. Rather, the norms and practices of masculine net
culture, codified in netiquette rules, conflict with those of the female culture in
ways that render cyberspace—or at least many "neighborhoods" in cyber-
space—in hospitable to women. The result is an imbalance whereby men control
a disproportionate share of the communication that takes place via
computer networks.

This imbalance must be redressed if computer-mediated communication is
ever to live up to its much-touted democratic potential. Fortunately, there are
ways in which women can promote their concerns and influence the discourse
of the net. I will mention three here. First and foremost is to participate,
for example in women-centered lists. Such lists provide supportive fora for
women on line and are frequently models of cooperative discourse whose
norms can spread if subscribers participate in other lists as well. But separa-
ratism has its disadvantages, among them the risk of ghettoization. Women
must not let themselves be driven by flame throwers away from mainstream,
mixed-sex fora, but rather should also actively seek to gain influence there,
individually and collectively, especially in fora where metadiscourse about
the net itself takes place.

The second way to promote women's interests netwide is to educate online
communities about the rhetorical strategies used in intimidating others,
and to call people on their behavior and its consequences when they use
such strategies. This is already happening on some women-centered lists
such as WMST-L and SWIP-L—aware of the tendency for a single man or
group of men to dominate discussions, female subscribers call attention to
this behavior as soon as they realize it is happening; interestingly, it is hap-
pening less and less often on these lists. Group awareness is a powerful force
for change, and it can be raised in mixed-sex fora as well.

Finally, women need to contribute in any way they can to the process
that leads to the encoding of netiquette rules. They need to instigate and
participate persuasively in discussions about what constitutes appropriate
and inappropriate behavior on line—seeking to define in concrete terms
what constitutes "flaming," for instance, since women and men are likely to
have different ideas about this. They must be alert to opportunities (or make
their own opportunities) to write out guidelines for suggested list protocol
(or modifications to list protocol if guidelines already exist) and post them
for discussion. No greater power exists than the power to define values,
and the structure of the Internet—especially now, while it is still evolving and
seeking its ultimate definition—provides a unique opportunity for individual
users to influence the normative process.

Indeed, it may be vital that we do so if women's on-line communication
styles are to be valued along with those of men, and if we are to insure
women the right to settle on the virtual frontier on their own—rather than
on male-defined—terms.

NOTES

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author.

1. A notable exception to this generalization is the work of Sherry Turkle in
the 1980s on how women and men relate to computers.

2. For an extreme example of this phenomenon that took place on the
soc feminimus Usenet newsgroup, see Sutton (1994).


4. All names mentioned in the messages are pseudonyms.

5. This problem is discussed in Herring (1993a).

6. For example, Kiesler et al. (1984), Kim and Raja (1990), and Shapiro and
Anderson (1985).

7. The idea of politeness and communication ethics here is an abbrevi-
ated version of that presented in Herring (In press a, In press b).

8. For other practical suggestions on how to promote gender equality in
networking, see Kramarae and Taylor (1993).

9. Cases where this was done, both successfully and unsuccessfully, are
described in Herring, Johnson & DiBenedetto (In press).

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press).


hen a youngster logs onto a computer terminal, he or she is welcomed into a vast new world of information that will revolutionize how we all learn and work in the future. This worldwide web of computer connections represents an information explosion unprecedented in world history. This information revolution may rival the invention of the printing press and broadcasting in terms of how it will affect our daily lives. The evolving telecommunications infrastructure known as the Internet will link homes, businesses, schools, hospitals and libraries to each other and to a vast array of electronic information resources. Imagine a student in Hastings, Nebraska, being able to tap into the computer database of a University in Budapest, Hungary, more easily than walking down to the local library.

But there are some dark side roads on the information superhighway that contain material that would be considered unacceptable by any reasonable standard.

The U.S. Senate will consider my proposal, the Communications Decency Amendment, to lay down some basic guidelines on the information superhighway. I want to make this exciting new highway as safe as possible for kids and families to travel. Just as we have laws against dumping garbage on the interstate, we ought to have similar laws for the information superhighway.

My amendment to the Telecommunications Reform Bill will toughen penalties for people who actively "transmit" pornographic and harassing material, boosting the maximum fine from $50,000 to $100,000 and increasing the maximum jail sentence from six months to two years. We need this added deterrent so that those who would pervert the network will think twice. We already have laws to prohibit obscenity over the telephone or pornography through the mail. My amendment extends to computer users the very same protections against obscenity or harassment that now partially protect telephone users.

The legislation does not make innocent "carriers" of electronic messages liable for inappropriate messages, nor does it by any stretch of the imagination require system operators to "snoop" on electronic messages. To do so would be the equivalent of holding the mailman liable for the packages he delivers.