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in CMC is how to

Flaming Wars: Internet Aggression

The Internet has fundamentally changed the way people communicate. E-mail has become a standard practice of written communication for many individuals and most businesses and organizations. As in verbal and other forms of written communication, norms regarding acceptable use continue to be established.

Netiquette
Netiquette, as defined by Wikipedia, is a "catch-all term for the conventions of politeness" for e-mails, listserv mailing lists, instant messaging, group forums, message boards, blogs and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Primarily, these rules govern standards of respectful interchanges. Individual websites often have standards of behavior appropriate for that specific community, just as acceptable formal and informal spoken language changes depending on context. In addition, each mode of Internet interaction listed above may have its own rules.

Amongst people of the same cultural group, verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as tone of voice and body posture act as cues to the full meaning of the verbal exchange. So too are their shared understandings of appropriate and aggressive behavior on the Internet. First time email users need guidance from experienced users to point out acceptable and unacceptable means of interaction. USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, for example, is considered "shouting" and potentially aggressive behavior. A new member to a message board may unwittingly use all caps to emphatically state an idea, not realizing the implications. In one study, a significant number of people were overconfident about their ability to communicate clearly over e-mail. Sarcasm and humor are problematic to convey, yet the sender's egocentrism assumed that the receiver would interpret the message not as offensive or provocative. (Kruger, et. al, 2005)

Flaming
"Flaming" is a word used to describe aggressive communication behavior via the computer. Netiquette websites and books provide a reference for users to learn and review guidelines for behavior and expression and aim to curb unintentional flaming and prevent hostile exchanges. Rereading any post or email before clicking "Send" parallels anger management strategies which encourage engaging in reflection and role-play prior to a planned interaction.

A growing body of research is exploring the dynamics of flaming from the standpoint of communication theory, social and organizational psychology, and aggression theory focused on the individual. Often true for any emerging field of study, a standard definition of flaming does not exist. Various researchers take into more or less account factors such as content of message, context of message, intent, and relevant Internet subcultural norms. The concept of flaming as one type of traditional communication not necessarily out of bounds is described by www.albion.com: *"'Flaming' is what people do when they express a strongly held opinion without holding back any emotion."* Thus, a strongly stated opinion in and of itself may be perfectly acceptable. Flame wars, however, are universally unacceptable. These occur when people engage in sending a series of hostile messages back and forth as in a verbal exchange that escalates. For online communities, these exchanges similarly affect the group-as-a-whole and can be mediated by peers and leaders in the community.

The anonymity of the Internet may encourage honest and personal exchanges as well as impulsive and intentional aggression. One of the complexities

(continued)

in CMC is how to distinguish between mismatched interactions that are the result of: simple miscommunication, vague and ambiguous language, ignorance and outspoken and rebellious messages that don't cross the line into hostility; and intentionally aggressive attacks.

Core Rules

As in other forms of social interaction, there are certain "rules" that can make communication more productive and engaging. Virginia Shea in her book *Netiquette* points out guidelines for individuals to use while communicating on the internet. They include:

1. Remember the Human

By communicating electronically, all you see is a computer screen. Be aware that there is another person on the other end who is not able to see to see facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. All he/she has are the words.

2. Keep Flame Wars Under Control

Flame wars -- a series of angry e-mails, most of them from two or three people directed toward each other, can dominate the tone of a chat room discussion group and destroy the camaraderie. These "wars" are unfair to the other members of the group. And while they can initially be amusing, they get tedious very quickly to people who aren't involved in them.

3. Make Yourself Look Good Online

"Pay attention to the content of your writing. Be sure you know what you're talking about -- when you see yourself writing "it's my understanding that" or "I believe it's the case," ask yourself whether you really want to post this note before checking your facts…
In addition, make sure your notes are clear and logical. It's perfectly possible to write a paragraph that contains no errors in grammar or spelling, but still makes no sense whatsoever."

Sources:

⇒ Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J. and Ng, Z. (2005). "Egocentrism over e-mail: can we communicate as well as we think?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89 (6), 925-936.

⇒ O'Sullivan, P.B and Flanagin A.J. (2003). "Reconceptualizing 'flaming' and other problematic messages," *New Media & Society*, 5(1), 69-94.

⇒ In wikipedia.org. "Netiquette."

⇒ www.albion.com and Ross, Seth T. (1990-2005). Netiquette: the core rules of netiquette.

(This newsletter article was done with the research/writing assistance of Alice Miele, LICSW)

FROM OUR FILES:

Prejudiced by Anger

A psychological experiment was done to show how easy it is to manufacture targets of displaced anger. Just by reminding people about past experiences of anger, the experimenters were able to provoke unthinking hostility against a social group that did not even exist before the experiment created it.

Volunteers took a bogus personality test. Then they were divided at random into two groups and told that they were either "overestimators" or "underestimators"- a meaningless distinction with no intrinsic emotional connotations. The groups were given different color wristbands to wear.

The next step was an experiment called *evaluative priming*. Words with favorable or unfavorable connotations called primers were flashed on a screen, followed almost immediately by a picture of a person from one of the two groups. Subjects had to indicate as quickly as possible which group the person belonged to.

After practicing this procedure for a while, the subjects did some autobiographical writing. One-third were asked to write about an event in their lives that had made them very angry, one-third that had made them very sad and one-third an emotionally neutral event. They recorded any resulting feelings of sadness and anger.

Then the subjects returned to the evaluative priming experiment. Those whose anger had been aroused were now quicker to identify one of "Them"-overestimators or underestimators-after priming with a negative word and quicker to identify one of "Us" after priming with a positive word. Sad and neutral memories did not have the same effect.

The researchers explained these findings by suggesting that anger is an adaptation for responding to conflict and competition for resources. Whatever its cause, it can make anyone not belonging to one's own group seem hostile. This response is not even a prejudice because it involves no explicit thought or judgement. It comes into play especially in dangerous situations such as those faced by police and soldiers.

(Taken from Harvard Mental Health Letter, August 2004: DeSteno, D. et al. "Prejudice from Thin Air: The Effect of Emotion on Automatic Intergroup Attitudes," Psychological Sciences, (May, 2004): Vol. 15, No. 5, pp.319-324.
For more on this subject, including tests that readers can take: Www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias)