Reach Out and Touch Someone: Networking on the Internet

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"REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE"
WOMEN NETWORKING ON THE INTERNET

Lena Sorensen PhD

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Reach Out and Touch Someone: Women Networking on the Internet
Lena Sorensen PhD

This paper reports on two related research projects: 1) the focused interviews with women users (staff, administrators and faculty) of e-mail at a women's college, and 2) an analysis of interactions on an electronic Public Bulletin Board at the same college observed over a four month period. My study originally included focused interviews with twenty-four individuals (both men and women) and identified themes of how individuals used e-mail, why they used it and with whom. The decision to focus this paper on the women users was made because of an awareness of the importance of social interactions in women's lives (Gilligan 1982) and a recognition that women often use technology in different ways than originally planned for because of their unique needs in their social and work lives (Rakow 1992; Koch 1996).

This particular college environment was selected for study because of its clear physical and social boundaries (a private women's college community) and because e-mail had been introduced as a form of communication for all members of the community. E-mail was not the mandated medium of communication, but only one choice of many that all individuals could use to communicate with people inside

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I also want to thank the many women and men at the college who shared their time and experiences with me. Their generosity and insights made this project.
and outside of the college. Because educational institutions require a high level of interpersonal interactions among members of the community, they are ideal contexts in which to identify interactions which are enhanced or negatively affected by electronic exchanges.

The following questions are explored: How CMC (whether e-mail or bulletin board) affect women’s styles of relating to others? What happens to their sense of community and group network when connecting using CMC? How do the electronic boundaries of “virtual spaces” affect women’s experiences of the real institutional and social spaces on this campus?

Introduction:

Computers have permeated almost every aspect of our daily lives, from the way we write our documents using word processors to the way we access our bank accounts with ATMs. Now we are being deluged with promises of more direct, person-to-person connections using computers, promises of accessing a world that has no boundaries, “no races, no genders, no ages, no physical disabilities” (MCI TV ad 1997). This new place, the Internet, is commonly called the Information Superhighway, or Cyberspace; it is a new technological medium that is being promoted as a “virtual community”, a “virtual reality”, different from “real communities” and “real life”. We are told that we can now achieve equality in these new communities because they transcend geographic boundaries and allow us to access information resources and connect with diverse groups of individuals, making connections that were previously impossible. The Internet is being promoted as a utopian tool that will connect us with everything and everyone.
The Internet is a major force in today’s society. It is estimated that more than 30 million people use the Internet and that this number increases by 10 per cent each month (Negroponte, 1995). Recent studies have looked at who uses the World Wide Web (WWW), the “browser tool” that assists people to navigate around the Internet: the First WWW User Survey (GVU 1994) estimated that 150,000 new people logged on to the Internet each month, and that more than half of the respondents using the WWW were between the ages of 21 to 30; 94% of these respondents were men. Although there continues to be a disproportionate number of men using the Internet, the percentages are steadily changing. The Fourth WWW User Survey (GVU 1995) found that 29.3% of the users were women, and that the average age of users had increased to 32.7 years of age; by 1996, in the Fifth WWW User Survey (GVU 1996), 31.5% of the users were female, although average age remained the same. The Internet/WWW is obviously a medium that is gaining in popularity and usage in extraordinary ways, and the function within the Internet that is growing quickest is electronic mail (e-mail).

E-mail is a form of communication that is different from other forms in that it transcends time and space, it is sent at high speeds across multiple physical boundaries and it is asynchronous (one can send and receive e-mail on one’s own schedule independent of the other person’s availability). E-mail has become so popular over the last several years that it is now one of the main reasons that people use the Internet.

How will this electronic connectivity affect the ways that we relate to other people, people we work with, our friends and family? Will the quality of the
communication change for better or worse? Will it change the status and power
dynamics of our relationships and roles in society? Will it change the ways we
learn or develop in our jobs? Little is actually known about how electronic
communication affects the ways we relate to other people. What do we really know
about the people who use this function of the Internet? Why do people use e-mail,
and when and why do they choose the electronic medium over other communication
systems (telephone, mail, fax)? Will e-mail change the ways that information is
shared? Who will have access to it? Do people of varying ethnic, economic or
geographic identities use this medium in different ways? Will women use e-mail
differently from men?

What is Information Technology?

There are two kinds of results that come out of the use of any new
technology: those that are planned and intended, and those that evolve over time in
actual use. The latter are the unintended or secondary consequences of technology
This paper focuses on these secondary consequences, consequences that only
become apparent when the technology is used by real people in real environments.
The primary objectives of electronic communication were to provide increased
access, speed and accuracy in transmission of information across geographical
boundaries. The information network was first developed in the military, then
expanded to include research centers and universities, and then made available to
corporations. Very little attention was ever given to designing this new technology
for social interactions. Yet it is the unintended social and relational effects that are
most significant, because these reflect the use of the technology in the context of our social and political environments, and in our daily experiences.

Technology encompasses more than the hardware, the terminals and keyboards, or the programs that make communication and other processes possible. In the broadest sense, it encompasses also the culture that evolves from its diffusion into our social networks. Information technology is a system of social relationships and practices that results from the intents and purposes of powerful social actors and becomes part of the material and social structure of our daily lives (Rakow 1992). Electronic communication serves not only as an effective medium to transmit information across spatial boundaries but also provides a means for making social contacts and for seeking out supports and validation for who we are as people. Thus it is important for us when we are discussing information technology to understand it as a tool, and a tool which is shaped by the social and political context, and by the existing and evolving relationships of power.

**Literature Review:**

Because of the rapidly permeating infusion of e-mail into many aspects of people's lives, it has been suggested that e-mail is creating a new form of communication culture (Leslie, 1993). Previous research on this form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tends to fall into several general categories: 1) studies that look at the impact of electronic communication systems in work settings, 2) analysis of cultural styles of communication (differences due to gender & identity cues, and role functions affected by electronic interactions), and 3)
documentation on the accessibility of the technology.

**Electronic Communication in Work Settings:**

Sproull & Kiesler (1991) found significant variations in the number and identities of participants in discussions and decision-making sessions when people used computer networks rather than face-to-face exchanges. They suggest that the decrease of status cues, as well as the asynchrony of the medium, are the reasons for the increase in numbers of people who participated in electronic discussions. Other studies that look at CMC support this notion that this medium has an equalizing effect on worker interaction because of the decrease in hierarchical cues (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Galegher, Kraut & Egido 1990) and because it is able to cross physical boundaries (Malone & Rockart 1991), allowing for greater ease and access to communication throughout an organization.

Some researchers suggest that it is not actually an equalizing effect that the CMC has on group discussions but rather a change in social and work rhythms of interactions due to the asynchrony of the electronic network (Hesse, Werner & Altman 1987; Wright 1987). Mantovani (1994) counters the idea that CMC overcomes social barriers or increases openness and "de-individuation." Although he agrees that CMC, especially e-mail use, alters the "rhythms and patterns of social interactions in ways both powerful and pervasive," he feels that the significance of this change is shaped by relationships within the local contexts in which they are used. Mantovani criticizes Sproull & Kiesler's work as taking a technological deterministic view of the changes. He and others (Gattiker 1994) propose that
future research that explores the effects of CMC on society must study its use in specific social and organizational contexts, incorporating the history of that context into the analysis of the change.

Cultural Styles of Communication--Gender:

Culture is reflected in language systems, and it has often been suggested that men and women are raised in different cultural systems. A number of studies have found that men and women use language differently, both in their styles of communication (Tannen 1990, 1993 & 1994; Mulvaney 1994) and in the amount of talking in face-to-face interactions (Tannen 1993). Tannen (1990) suggests that women tend to communicate in a more cooperative, intimate style ("rapport") while men tend towards a more informational giving style ("report").

In a study that analyzed the postings on two electronic academic bulletin boards on the Internet, Herring (1993) found significant gender communication differences. She found that women and men had recognizably different styles in posting to the bulletin boards and that they had different communicative ethics. Moreover, she suggested that men and women value different kinds of online interactions as appropriate and desirable. For example, 68% 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. Men were more likely to represent themselves as experts when responding to postings. Fewer women directly participated (posted messages) in discussions on the bulletin boards, and those who did, displayed communication
styles of supportiveness (characterized by expressions of appreciation, thanking, and community-building activities that make other participants feel accepted and welcome) & attenuation (characterized by hedging and expressing doubt, apologizing, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions) (Herring 1993). Similar gender differences in communication styles have been documented elsewhere in the electronic exchange, and these parallel differences also found in face-to-face communications (Shade 1993).

Because electronic communication systems superficially eliminate the visual cues that identify gender and appearance, a number of researchers have explored specific changes in communication styles in a variety of electronic forums. Bruckman (1993) conducted research looking at the social interactions in text-based virtual environments, MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions) and found that even when the gender of the electronic writer was not evident, or when the writer actually swapped her/his gender for another in the role played, players could identify who was a male writer vs. a female writer by the style of writing interaction. Gladys We (1993) conducted a study surveying a number of UseNet newsgroups and mailing lists on-line to find out how men and women compared communicating on-line versus face-to-face interactions. She found that cyberspace allowed some women to feel more assertive in their style of communication on-line, while others reported instances of being harassed by men, thus questioning the reality of the equalizing or neutralizing effect of social cues. Other researchers have reported that women experienced forms of harassment on the Internet similar to behaviors experienced in everyday life (Truong 1993; Shade 1993; Stone 1993).
Access to Information Technology.

At this time, it appears that the Internet (and computers in general) tend to be more accessible to young men of relatively moderate means, as was stated above (GVU 1996; Anderson et al, 1995; ). Some have suggested one reason that men are more active users of the WWW is that the resources on the Net are more geared towards men's interests. In a study that asked men and women "technical experts" to imagine future technological developments, researchers found significant gender differences:

The women envisioned devices that connect people, improve communication and collaboration, integrate public and private lives, and improve upon existing technologies.... Men imagined unlimited power, tremendous speed, and absolute knowledge. The men were fascinated with the equipment itself and sought major technological advances (Koch 1994).

It has been proposed that if computer-based communication systems are to become a common mode of information exchange, policies have to be established that make the technology not only affordable but also available in diverse forms and diverse areas so that the greatest number of people can have access to it. Some authors have also questioned the relative safety or friendliness of on-line networks for women users (Kramarae & Taylor 1992; Herring 1993; Mulvaney 1994; Shade 1993; Truong 1993). On-line networks continue to be dominated by men, in both numbers of users and because their style of communicating tends to dominate the
discussions (Shade 1993; Tamosaitis 1995; We 1993). Yet when a bulletin board is set up within a given institutional environment to encourage women to discuss specific issues relevant to them, the numbers show significant use, and the content and style of the communications are personal and collaborative (O’Hare & Kahn 1993). These observations may not be unique to this form of technology, but may actually be inherent in technology itself since, as some researchers have asserted, technology is a masculine phenomenon in its history and its current shape (Wajcman 1991; Zimmerman 1983). Perhaps it will take an active cooptation by women of this technology to make it more relevant to women’s needs (Haraway 1991).

"Reach Out and Touch Someone" Project

Many questions remain unanswered despite extensive research on information technology. As new technologies develop that allow for geographically-free contacts, are we really enhancing the connectedness between people or are we contributing to the "saturated self" that Gergen (1991) discusses? Does networking result in the same quality of communication whether done face-to-face, via the telephone, the FAX or via e-mail? How is information received interpreted, acted upon and responded to? How do gender and ethnicity contribute to the way that technology is used and how information is exchanged?

Relationships do not develop along linear trajectories. Complicated cues and dynamics work simultaneously to attract or repel people; they work and relate smoothly, perceive differences, develop conflicts or affinities based on a wide
range of cues and information. Culture and gender are significant factors in how people relate and talk with each other. Feminist psychologists have shown that women develop their self-identity differently than men. The relational realm is a significant factor in women's development (Belenky et al, 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982) and continues to be a significant component in adult roles on the job (Kanter, 1977; Tannen, 1994) and in the ways that women communicate within those settings (Tannen, 1994; Turkle, 1984; Zuboff, 1988).

The "Reach Out and Touch Someone" project challenges the traditional ways in which we evaluate the success of a new technology. Traditionally the qualitative assessment of technology has focused on the ease of use: if it is "user friendly", it is determined to be "better" than previous applications. Technology must be understood as more than the physical materials that make up a given product. Technology is also the knowledge, ability, and resulting human activities that evolve from its evolution within any given context. Exploring the experiences of information technology among a group of women within a specific context allowed me to identify successes and failures in communication and relationship formation as this technology was integrated into their working and learning lives.

Technology is not neutral. It is developed and disbursed within a social and political context. Traditionally technology has been developed within a male culture, relying heavily on linear assumptions and an ideology that support quantitative structures of enquiry (Wajcman 1991; Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986). Yet we must not let linear structures guide our understanding by insisting upon empiricist/quantitative methods. Methods of study must consider the influences of
gender, race and class through qualitative research. The chosen methodology must allow the phenomenon to generate the realities. In this study, I focused on the language and tone that women used to describe their experiences, using women's own voices to shape the foci and outcomes of the research project.

**Methodology**

This exploratory descriptive study relies upon qualitative feminist research methods to explore the realities of women's experiences in using information technology. Feminist research methodology advocates using qualitative methods that approach knowledge via the inductive method, thus validating narrative data through women's own voices. The researcher becomes part of the process, acknowledges her own values and approaches, and collaborates with participants to understand new ideas through grounded concepts.

The first part of the study reports on focused interviews with twelve women members (faculty, staff and administrators) of a private women's college conducted during the academic years 1993/1995. Participants were selected from across academic disciplines and hierarchical positioning (tenured & non-tenured faculty from the sciences, humanities and social sciences; administrators, secretaries and professional staff). Each participant was asked about their history with computers, history at the college, status and history using e-mail. Specific guiding questions were included that asked about the numbers of e-mail messages received and sent in a given day, with whom these interactions were made and what the content of the messages were. Because this group of participants have access to a variety of
communication mediums (telephone, FAX, voice-mail, written memos/letters, face-to-face contact) to interact with colleagues and students. They were asked to state why they chose one form over the other. They were also asked to talk about what they like best and liked least about e-mail. Each interview lasted from 1/2 hour to 1 hour and a half. A content analysis was done of each interview and themes were developed from this analysis. This paper reports on the twelve women who participated in this study. An attempt has been made to maintain the authenticity of each woman’s voice in discussing each of the themes raised.

The second part of this study reports on data gathered by “listening” in to electronic discussions posted on the Public Bulletin Board over a four month period during the fall of 1995. A content analysis was conducted of selected discussions over this time period, noting the themes raised, how much personal identity of the sender/poster was disclosed in any given message, and the status of the sender (year of student, major, dormitory residence for location). Discussions were selected for their length of interaction and the content of the discussion (relevant issues from current events within the college or in US society; issues dealing with social interactions). The goal of this analysis was to explore ways that female students within a college community use an electronic bulletin board to deal with issues relevant to community building and learning. Eight discussions were downloaded in the order of postings and each discussion was analyzed for content themes, duration of discussion postings, identity disclosures within postings, and quality of language interactions.
Discussion of Results

Electronic Mail (e-mail)

Across the spectrum of respondents, women talked about how e-mail had changed the way they relate to others, in quality of content, numbers of people communicated with, and in the formation of networks of relationships. This complex picture cannot be reduced to simple conclusions about positive or negative effects of information technology, and this study raises more questions than it answers. By identifying and clarifying these questions, we can begin to have a greater understanding of how information technology fits into our work and social lives.

E-mail is the most direct and personal form of computer-mediated-communication (CMC). It is asynchronous—it can be sent at a time when the intended receiver of the message is not logged on, and it can be read at the convenience of that recipient, at any time of the day or night, at home or in the office, and, if at home, in any state of dress or undress. One woman I interviewed said that her favorite time to log on to her e-mail was late at night, after the kids had gone to bed and she could sit with her feet up and a beer in her hand. E-mail is fast and can be sent to either an individual or a group of individuals simultaneously. And unlike the phone or voicemail, an e-mail message can be saved or printed, or forwarded to any numbers of other individuals or groups without the knowledge or permission of the original sender.
Accessibility.

As noted earlier, accessibility has been discussed in many studies. E-mail has been described as the Great Equalizer; many researchers have reported that electronic communication (whether e-mail or larger discussion groups like bulletin boards) increases the degree of participation among all users regardless of their status. They suggest that this is because of the lack of visual cues that identify our ascribed and achieved identities (age, gender, race & ethnicity, physical appearance and social status). Without these immediate cues, e-mail supposedly levels out the hierarchy to make all users equal. But is this egalitarian behavior real or an illusion? How can anyone imagine that this is possible in a text-based medium, to say nothing about the individual idiosyncrasies of habits of writing and communication? Language has never been neutral, and it seems to me that this utopian notion ignores the context in which technology is used. Though many theorists view the Internet as a space where the boundaries are not fixed (Turkle, 1984 & 1995), and where the limits of the self and world are renegotiable (Bruckman 1993), my studies to date suggest otherwise. The cultural norms of behavior and subsequent reactions that result from breeches of these norms clearly shape the impacts and uses of this technology.

The most simple way to talk about accessibility is the actual physical availability of the medium. The college studied in this project has been a forerunner in this respect. Even before the introduction of the Internet to the college computer system, the original DEC 20 computer system (introduced in 1978) had a mail program as one of its functions. Although not everyone on campus was connected
to this main-frame computer, those who were, particularly the faculty and staff in
the sciences and computer disciplines, began to use this electronic mail program to
make appointments, or to seek out information among themselves. In 1988 the
college introduced a more comprehensive electronic mail system. The college
administration quickly realized that if e-mail was going to be a medium that would
facilitate communications within the community, people had to have a networked
computer in their offices, and ideally, right on their desks. Unless the computer
was as accessible as the telephone, its potential benefits would not be realized.

Once everyone on campus had access to the electronic medium, the idea of
accessibility raised more complicated questions: who controls accessibility and what
are the assumptions that develop from the sense that everyone is available? One can
send a message when a need arises, and once sent there is an impression that a
contact has been made with someone else. The illusion of privileged access to all
members of the College community has implications for our sense of urgency of
need and for our expectations of where boundaries begin and end. Most of the
women I spoke with talked about how e-mail allowed them to control some of this
accessibility: they chose the times when they sent, read or responded to messages.
Because a high degree of collegiality is expected in this college’s work
environment, the ability to control the timing of interpersonal contacts at least
electronically often helped respondents to feel less “stressed” and better able to
spread out their interactions. Some women said they felt that “had to be prepared”
when answering a phone call or meeting with someone face-to-face. Depending on
the issue or their own state of well being on a given day, being able to delay and
compose a response often helped.

One administrator, referring to the very large numbers of people her job required her to be available to, talked about how she uses e-mail primarily for "one on one" contacts or occasionally for messages to a group of committee members. She can then reserve the actual times she needs to meet face-to-face with people for discussion of more complex issues.

She states: "I use it at least once a day, usually as early in the morning as possible and then later in the day. E-mail is always my communication of choice for casual messages or queries...[It] has made me more communicative more easily, and more accessible to many different people."

(emphasis mine)

Another dimension of the increased degree of accessibility depended on the numbers of messages received at any given time. Some women who were in positions of leadership, (administrators, chairs of departments, heads of committees) talked about the numbers of new messages and noted that if there were too many, even the sense of controlling the timing of use did not relieve their sense of work load, but instead contributed to a feeling that there was never any "down time", never any time away from the responsibilities of the institution. One woman talked about how she tried to control this:

I don't want to be connected at home on purpose!...When I am here it is pretty intense. [referring to students, she says]教育ally it is important to teach them that some things are emergencies and some things are not. Remember they are adolescents...Being able to take another
person's perspective is not something that an adolescent is given by
nature. Learning to live in a larger community is equally part of the
process of education that we have to deal with [even on e-mail]."

But how do we go about educating people in these social skills in this new
medium without stifling the positive gains? How do we remind people to take
another person's perspective into consideration when there are no immediate cues to
remind us? And is this need for learning social skills within electronic spaces
limited to adolescents?

Another woman talked about how the illusion of her 24 hour availability to
her students actually helped to decrease some degree of stress within her classes:

*I feel like what it allows me to do with my students is respond to their need
and their sense that I will respond to them much more quickly than I used
to. When I first got here, some kid came up to me and said, "I was
looking for you and you weren't there." And I said to [the student] "Well,
did you come during my office hours?" and [she] said, "Well, no..." and I
said, "Well you know, I don't live there; I go home." ...But [now] E-mail
allows them to yell "Mom" on the computer, essentially whenever the need
arises. So I can calm down the sort of hysteria that students have
because they can't get a hold of you if you are not [on campus] or over a
weekend..

But even with this immediate response to needs, will the aggregate results
from the illusion of having ones needs gratified immediately contribute to a culture
that expects accessibility from all people at all times? What happens when someone
does not answer an e-mail message in the "quicker" time period one has grown accustomed to expect? Is this, then, interpreted as that person is not going by the standards that have been established and that they are unwilling to "talk" to you? Or worse, is the "slow respondent" labeled unavailable? Because there are no cues that help us to know the reasons for this lack of response, do we project on to them a label that is unfounded in actual fact? (Did the message actually go through? Is the person overwhelmed with messages and has not had time to respond? Had they assumed (perhaps incorrectly) that the message did not require a response?) What kinds of cues or interpretive skills must we now learn so as not to let the technology determine our social interactions?

Identity.

The majority of the women I have talked with spoke about how e-mail decreased the degree of formality between themselves and others, often in a good way. Because this medium allowed them to speak more candidly, in colloquial language, without the formal constructions, they often felt more comfortable using it to make initial contacts with people; it allowed them to feel less vulnerable socially. The present culture among e-mail users is fairly forgiving of typos, grammatical errors, and candid expressions. One woman states:

*In e-mail there is more spontaneity, not thinking about differences. This is just colloquial English. [One] shouldn’t be expecting a grade on perfect English...Just getting the idea across is acceptable.*

Yet the informality of the written text does not always help. One woman
who uses e-mail frequently for making appointments and casual contacts said that she prefers face-to-face communication. She feels that it is precisely because the e-mail contact is in a written form that it is more easily misunderstood. When she talks to someone face-to-face, she can be more assured that her message is understood in the way she intended:

A lot of times my written speech is misunderstood anyway .... if I have to write something I usually pass it by someone else [to make sure it is clear].....that is the nature of written language. But [it may] also be something that is idiosyncratic to me because I write like I speak.

Several other women also spoke about how difficult it was to transmit emotional, angry, ironic or humorous meanings through electronic text. Many people have resorted to what is referred to as Smileys or Emoticons: those symbols that suggest a smile, a wink or a frown to name just a few. But even with these symbolic qualifiers, some content is very difficult to relay in text form.

**Face-to-face contact: Creating Community**

To what extent does this affect face-to-face contact? Contrary to some reports that CMC decreases the need for face-to-face contact, this group of women almost unanimously reported that there was no significant change in the amount of face-to-face contact as a result of their using e-mail. In some cases face-to-face contact had actually increased and not necessarily to clarify content but to develop relationships. Some talked about their need to actually see the other people with whom they "spoke" with via e-mail: both inside the college and with those that they
communicated with outside, through e-mail, bulletin boards or listservs. For several of the women, the electronic medium provided the means for the initial contact with the intention of the subsequent face-to-face meeting. E-mail provided them with a degree of boundary that, in spite of their shyness, enabled them to initiate reaching out to others. One woman talking about how when she first came to this school, e-mail helped her to get to know people, and for them to get to know her. There was never the intention on her part to stay invisible and to maintain her relationships across this electronic space.

Well...I am a case study... Because I am shy, [I] have [always] been shy. E-mail created a community here for me that I hadn’t had before. It is easier for me to get in touch with [someone] who I didn’t know through e-mail, through a written form because I probably write better than I talk. So I began to form connections with [people] through e-mail that I might not have formed face-to-face...Just the ease of making a lunch date....For me it has really meant integrating a lot more into this community."

Another woman tells why e-mail has helped her in relating to large groups of others at the college:

People think I am an extrovert which I am not, I am [actually] a very private person. ...I like to be by myself. ...I am not a touchy feely kind of person....So I can maintain a level of gregariousness through e-mail....for short periods of time with large groups of people that I couldn’t do otherwise...It allows [me] to be private yet outgoing."

Despite the stereotype of the loner who chooses to limit social contacts to
this electronic medium, the women that I spoke with clearly describe how e-mail was a means for creating the face-to-face relationships. In this way, a sense of community was built. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that with “community” come additional responsibilities and interactions. While many aspects of these are positive, the sheer volume, intensity and immediacy of electronic communication raises important institutional questions about workload, stress and the increased possibility of misunderstanding.

**Electronic Bulletin Boards:**

But what happens when CMC is used in more public forums, on electronic bulletin boards? These electronic bulletin boards increase the numbers of people who connect with others in a public forum rather than the private forum of e-mail. We now move from the individual making contacts with other individuals or chosen groups of individuals, to a diverse community interacting in public with an undefined group at any given time. “Talking” in public makes the content of that “talk” available to anyone within “earshot” or in this case within “electronic-sight”.

In public physical spaces, there are some controls available to the individual to limit the access to their interactions or at least for those astute enough to see or sense who is present at the given moment of speech. On the other hand, electronic communications eliminate two important dimensions of public interactions: the non-verbal cues of who is present and thus “hearing”, and the temporal cues that limit the speech to a given moment. On electronic bulletin boards, a posted communication can be “listened” to by anyone who chooses and who has access to
that network. Further it can be "listed" to over extended periods of time, out of the control of the individual who posted it.

How does this medium affect the quality of these interactions when the communication is not intended for one person but for many and often for many unidentified "listeners" or "lurkers" as these people who only listen but do not contribute have been termed in the Cyber--culture-world? There are ways to identify the one who posted the message but no way to identify the "lurkers".

Now the written word has an even greater burden: it must now be clear enough to be understood by a diverse group of people. Some of this burden is relieved by the expectation that this electronic forum should be interactive, and that postings are not intended to be free standing but to be responded to in the same forum. But even with the expectation of a response, how does the degree of language style get defined within this electronic public forum? We know that electronic communication encourages some degree of candor in expression; yet the appropriate styles of speech are often specific to our identities-- our age group norms, class and ethnic norms, or language sophistication. What happens to the degree of spontaneity that the women described earlier? Does that spontaneity change or does the electronic bulletin board allow for the same degree of forgiveness of awkwardness in styles?

In any medium that provides a space for discussion, whether physical spaces like cafes or classrooms, or electronic spaces like Bulletin Boards or MUDs (which are real time chat groups), norms of interaction get defined by complicated mechanisms within the social context. There are both stated and assumed purposes.
of what that space is for and by the style standards of the user-group personality that evolves within any given space. How the electronic space is defined can be more or less controlled by the degree of formality expected. Just as one's class of students develops its own style of interacting, or group-personality, an electronic space develops its own unique electronic/group-personality. Neither type of group personality is formed by the structure of the bulletin board or the participants alone but by the multitude of interacting forces that each part brings to the environment. The medium itself, whether physical or electronic, does not define the outcome, it only provides the means to that outcome.

The Public Bulletin Board is an electronic bulletin board where anyone in the college community can post a message. These messages range from simple exclamations like: "Hey, my big sister is RAD", or simple questions like: "Does anyone know how long it takes to get to Ithaca?", to very complicated discussions of current social and political issues like the Million Man March in Washington or the more recent results of the New Hampshire Primary. Any issue can be raised but it depends on the interests of the group "listening" whether or not an issue is developed into a discussion. Many postings only require one response (like the answer to a question) or no response at all because they are posted to inform the larger community of a specific event or policy. The college's Public Bulletin Board becomes very multi-dimensional when an issue actually stimulates opinions and a discussion ensues.

Although it is open to any member of the college community (staff, faculty, administrators, students), the Public Bulletin Board tends to be dominated by
postings from students, especially freshman and sophomores. And not surprisingly, the discussions are between and among these students. Very rarely does a faculty or staff member enter into the discussion but some do "lurk" or listen. On any given day during the academic year, 200 or more messages are typically posted. Messages are posted and responded to at all times of the day and night. That means that there are a lot of things to read, and that takes a lot of time. Anyone who uses this or any other form of electronic communication, quickly learns how entice someone to read their message; they must use the Subject: section of the message well and often creatively. There is no way any one person has the time to read, even if scanning, 2-3 or 400 messages-- unless of course that person does nothing else...

The style of communication on the Public Bulletin Board is very much geared to other students, using their acceptable forms of slang and styles of confrontation. It is not unusual to see postings/messages like:

Hey B & A, your words are so beautiful... I feel so proud.

or

Hey get a life, E...what the f***k,.. don't you people have anything better to do..

How are these received or interpreted by those reading these postings? can only propose some hypotheses at this time. One's responses depend on one's identity and how closely one shares the norms of these styles of talking. For those who share the norms of this younger group, the postings are probably "heard" the same
way as any flippant, casual remark is made in other public forums. Others seem to suspend judgement and dismiss the emotional emphasis of the words to that context and some people seem to be offended by some of it.

At times there is also some group-regulating that goes on. Sometimes a student will take on the role of peace maker, or confronter by responding to someone whose posting sounded particularly rough, harsh or hostile; this student tries to explain any underlying circumstances with the assumed intention of clarifying or actually stopping this hostility in a given discussion. There by misunderstandings are confronted but it is unclear if they are resolved for all who participate either actively or passively, through “lurking”.

Is this what is referred to as “flaming” - the uninhibited ranting of insults that some authors have suggested electronic communication encourages because of its lack of social cues to control antisocial behavior? From my preliminary analysis of these postings, they read more like what the faculty and staff previously called “colloquial” speech to describe their own e-mail interactions. This harsh or abusive language rarely persists more than one or two postings without someone (usually a peer) confronting it.

The one component of the electronic forum that may provide some constraint is the automatic listing of the user’s name whenever a message is sent; anyone who posts to this Public Bulletin Board can be identified and confronted in person if need be. But even despite this automatic identifier, many of those who post messages, also sign their names. Thus we can suggest, as several of the faculty and staff have said about e-mail, that if a person is anti-social or abusive in
e-mail or on the bulletin board, they are usually someone who is anti-social or abusive in the face-to-face contact as well. The medium does not create anti-social behavior.

These electronic discussions are often characterized by a high level of maturity, depth and sensitivity. In October 1995, a lengthy discussion, during one week, developed among a group of more than 35 students (and one faculty member) across the campus about the Million Man March (MMM). The discussion revolved around how each person felt about the march and questions about details of what had actually occurred and what was said. Not only did this discussion include their own personal opinions but reflected a wish for more sustained analysis and discussion of issues. One self-identified African-American student shared how she had discussed the March with her own father and described how he felt about the march. She not only shared his impressions but also some history of how the Nation of Islam had evolved in his life-time. From this, the students went on to suggest comparisons between the MMM and their experiences within the college community.

Although the specific racial identities of the students who participated were not evident, their own self-descriptions identified them as a diverse group--African-American, White, and Jewish; obviously an even more diverse community was listening. Because anyone could "listen" in to this discussion, it had a far reaching affect on raising issues, teaching ideas, and airing a variety of opinions. Few physical environments facilitate the sharing of sensitive issues in a comparable way. Perhaps because the physical cues of social control were not present, a greater
freedom of expression ensued.

In a more recent discussion, a student forwarded a message entitled the “Things you may not know about Overseas Asian Women” from a commercial dating/escort service in Hawaii that specializes in introducing white men to Asian women. Not only did the ongoing discussion raise cries of outrage by both self-described Asian and non-Asian students, people also suggested ways for others to let their outrage be heard by the original sender—the commercial dating service. Students posted the company’s e-mail address and World Wide Web site address for others to use. People were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the intentions of the service and let them know what they thought about their so-called “knowledge” of Overseas Asian Women and their posting in general. Because of the capability the technology provides them for “reaching out” to a multitude of people, these young women are using this electronic medium as a way to get others to act on issues, to take a stand. It is quick, and easy to type out a message and send it. It is quick and easy to let someone know what you think about a given issue. Perhaps a political “voice” is growing from these postings, and not just one voice but many.

As teachers and administrators, we may find this forum messy and hard to control. We may not share either the students’ modes of discourse or the energy in which they communicate with peers at all times of the day and night, and we may very well wish that our students spent more of their time in the library reading books. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the ways in which electronic media contribute to the this college community and provide open spaces for a
broad, diverse and potentially inclusive group to create a forum.

Conclusion:

It was clear from the interviews with the women workers at this college that when they had a choice in which form of communication technology to use, they were able to make clear choices that enhanced their working lives. They chose e-mail when they wanted to make quick, informative contacts with people &/or when they wanted to begin an initial contact with someone they did not know or knew only superficially, to be to make a more personal face-to-face contact without feeling so vulnerable. E-mail did not decrease their face-to-face contacts but in most cases enhanced them. And e-mail did make them accessible to a much larger group of people on all levels of the hierarchy within the college. This had both positive and negative effects. Thus, it was important for each woman to feel that she was able to control other’s access to her through this e-mail (when she answered messages, where she logged on etc.). There was a strong commitment by each person not to let it overwhelm their work and at the point of these interviews, each woman seemed able to manage this.

E-mail was also not for all things or for every person. Individual style and comfort of communicating with others played an important role in when they chose face-to-face or more indirect technologies. This emphasizes the need for people to have choices of which type of electronic communication medium to use. The fact that e-mail is text-based may affect the comfort and success one feels with this form of interaction. As one woman stated, her form of conversation incorporates many
colloquialism that are often misunderstood without the facial and body cues.

The use of the Public Bulletin Boards also provided this community with enhanced networking abilities. It was evident from the numbers of postings, the variety of students users, and the topics raised, that students used this medium to make connections with each other and to discuss issues that were often difficult to initiate face-to-face. While the women workers tended to use e-mail in more structured interactions with some comparison to written interactions, younger women students were freer with their speech and quicker to make themselves vulnerable in this public forum. Much of this may be due to the developmental age of the students and some of it is due to the ease of making one’s feelings known without having to get immediate feedback or disapproval. But it was also evident that some of the same monitoring that goes on in face-to-face contacts of keeping people “in-line” with appropriate behavior, manifested itself in this electronic milieu as well. It was also evident that the students did not intend these interactions to keep them separate or unknown to others, but rather to increase their identities across the campus. This kind of use of the Public Bulletin Board may have a strong potential for developing a sense of community among these students.

Computer-mediated communication has clearly affected this college community’s life. The impact of information technology is complex, but it is evident that when women have choices about how to communicate, CMC can play in enhancing relationships and building networks.
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