

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND ITS SPECIFICS

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ABSTRACT

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The presented study is focused on the Internet mediated communication, mainly in comparison to the face-to-face communication. The aim of the study is to review some publications and researches on how the perception of another person proceeds in electronic communication, how we perceive ourselves, our identity, what language we use, how this language differs from the language of face-to-face communication, and whether the style of both types of communication is different.

Key words:

Electronic communication,
e-mail communication,
face-to-face communication

Introduction:

The internet as the means of communication is with no doubt a new phenomenon with an unbelievable expansion in last years. The number of users of the internet is rising constantly and this grow has not ended yet. According to the printed news from the researches carried out by the agencies DEMA and Acron Communications (DEMA, 2001; Acron Communications, 2001) there is 15 to 20 percent of the Czech Republic population communicating through the internet, which seems to be a good reason to observe this topic. The internet is further a newly growing social field, which deserves to be explored, reflected and treated by scientists, who should try to find out and describe the way people communicate through the internet, how is their mutual perception carried out and why these phenomena proceed this way.

The aim of the study is to present the way of thinking about the electronic communication, inform about the results of the chosen researches and describe the differences between the e-mail communication and the face-to-face communication.

THE INTERNET AND SELF-PERCEPTION, ILLUSIVE SELF

New approaches and definitions of Self-representation, relationships among people, social groups, society and the whole culture are brought forth by studies of the internet as the new way of communication. The internet afford users an opportunity to play roles of alternative Selves, as we know them from Psychodrama, through electronic discussion groups (chats), multi users' plays (MUDs Multi User Dimensions) and other technologies. However the internet is not only about the fantasy, it is also about serious relationships, from those strictly professional to the love as well (Gackenbach, Ellerman, 1998). Virtual communication is drawing on the diffusion of old models - models of mass communication as well as mopdels

of face-to-face communication. however, till now there is one question to be answered: Is here growing something within the boundaries of these models or something totally new?

The authors of the mentioned research suppose, that the development of the internet is closely associated with the development of the postmodern society and the grow of the individuality, which brings new demands for the activity of the individual, his creativity and invention. On the other hand it is necessary to know, that the more powerful, complicated and cohesive the internet with all its institutions and individuals is, the bigger has the ruling class potential for more powerful control. We cannot adjust, what will happen, if the technology gets out of men's hand. Even now, we can tell, that the technology already is a little bit out off our control as the authors mention. "The technological images of man are different than they desire, they are uncontrollable, it is the world of its own."

Elizabeth Reid (Reid, 1998) indicates that it is a mistake to see the internet as entirely democratic environment advancing personal freedom. The environment of anonymity and relative physical security can produce the aggression and the cruelty. The author compares the power of the internet-groups' authority to the power of the medieval masters. Further she compares the medieval punishment by the public ridicule ("charivari" practiced in France) with the frequent punishment in some virtual communities - the pillory in a public. The punishment in these communities is becoming the ritual of degradation - not different from that mentioned medieval castigation.

On the other hand Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 1998) suggest in his book, that virtual reality helps "the escape from the reality", which might help people to overcome their problems in real life. Turkle speaks about virtual identities as about the aid for coping with real pitfalls.

The very important aspect of creating virtual identities seems to be the fragmentation of the personality. Namely, some authors see this fragmentation as inhibiting the development of flexible and integral personality (Reid, 1998). Virtual relations lack the explicit continuity; it is only too easy to leave the relationship. Though, virtual communities support multiplicity, which is so common in real life when seen from the point of view of playing roles, but the flexibility is due to this fragmentation of personality missing. Another aspect recognizable in virtual communities is the aspect of the mistrust, which is growing out off the bold anonymity of the internet environment. This mistrust makes the environment of internet groups "fragile and ill". Elizabeth Reid believes that for this reason the less anonymity would be good for the environment of virtual groups.

INTERNET - THE ENVIRONMENT WITH NO CONSTRAINTS

The internet is characteristic by being the environment without any constraints. This feature in itself can serve as one of the possible explanations of the phenomenon called "flaming". This term is used for the aggression in the environment of discussion groups (Smahel, 2000). This no-constraints-environment has positive as well as negative effects on the environment of the real life, education, research and the commerce on the internet (Joinson, 1998).

It is certain that people suffer from less constraints in the ambience of internet-communication-tools possibilities than in real life. We can identify the absence of social anxiety and the loss of the fears from the self-revelation (Joinson, 1998). In the environment of the internet people care less about other people's opinions, the need of self-presentation is reduced. The researches show, that the above mentioned aggression (flaming) is four times more frequent in the environment of the discussion groups on the internet than in real-life discussions. The question is, to what extent the "flaming" is mere manifestation of the freedom of the internet and to what extent it is an inconvenient feature of the manifestation of aggression.

The research dealing with the candour of the respondents filling in the questionnaires showed that respondents were significantly less anxious when filling the questionnaires through the internet than when using so called „pencil – paper“ method (Coomber, 1997). Nevertheless, this result was carried out with observance of one condition - the anonymity. The effect disappeared as soon as the anonymous environment was disrupted.

The ground for the environment without constraints, which is growing on the internet, can be found already in the classical concept of Gustav Le Bon, who is dealing with deindividuation in the environment of the mass hysteria during French revolution. Le Bon claims, that the crowd does not have the characteristic which could be obtained from averaging characteristics of all the individuals as the crowd bears completely new and fully specific attributes. In the collective „soul“ of the crowd, intellectual abilities of people are effaced and so is their individuality. Unaware characteristics dominate. The individual gains the feeling of overwhelming power in the crowd, which enables him to release instincts which would be inhibited if he was alone. Since the crowd is anonymous, the individual lets these instincts go - the more so because the dragging feeling of the responsibility is. We can say, that the anonymity of the internet is even stronger than the anonymity in the human crowd and that the internet itself can be in certain circumstances seen as a „crowd“. Joinson even indicates the environment of the internet as the one without constraints as well in the case when people there have their names and thus are less anonymous. However she is not amplifying this problem further and there is still a question, if she speaks about virtual nicknames or names of the people in real life.

Another theory, which is dealing with the electronic communication, is the theory of social proximity (Short, Williams, Christie, 1976). This theory is built up on the predication that different communicational media imply different social proximity. They claim that the maximal proximity is reached in the face-to-face communication while during electronic communication the proximity is always smaller. They work with the term „the quality of communicational medium“, meaning precisely the degree of social proximity. According to this theory, the lower degree of social proximity is leading for example to the lower attention of the participants of the communication and to the depersonalization.

An interesting idea how to view the electronic communication, is the theory speaking about „the two components of self-concept“ in electronic communication (Matheson, Zanna, 1988). These components are the perception of my Self and the perception of my Self by the others. The authors noticed that during the communication through computer the perception of the self is much stronger and the perception of the others much lower than in the real life. They prove this on the research, in which the patients were due to describe their symptoms. When writing them down by means of the computer they found statistically significantly more symptoms. This theory is dealing with the component of the public self-awareness, i.e. how the others perceive me, how they evaluate me, what they think about me, and the component of private self-awareness, i.e. the orientation on myself, the knowledge about my Self and my goals, the perception of my own motivation. According to this theory in electronic communication the component of public self-awareness is itself significantly lower than in real life and the other way around - the component of the private self-awareness is itself higher on the internet.

Another theory concerning the topic of the electronic communication is so called SIDE model (Social Identity Explanation of Deindividuation Effects). The authors of the SIDE model (Postmes, Spears, Lea, 1998) claim in their work, that although electronic communication is sometimes presented as something, which enables to trespass social barriers and liberates individuals of social pressures, it can on the other hand in some cases strengthen these barriers and give them more power. According to these authors in extreme cases it is shown, that the use of electronic communication can lead to deprivation under influence of

deindividuation, i.e. in the way it is described in the social psychology. However the influence of deindividuation cannot be generalized. They try to show by their other researches that electronic communication doesn't have to lead in general to the better quality of communication and democracy in communicating group. Though the anonymity associated to the electronic communication might influence liberation of the relations, it doesn't have to necessarily lead to exceeding social bonds - barriers. It seems, that conformity with the group rules can be stronger in electronic communication than in common communication.

Another research shows the tendency of the members of virtual groups to feel more negative bonds to the members of other (non-member's) groups. The authors find an argument again in strengthening the feeling of belonging to the group. An interesting finding was, that in electronic communication the feeling of the dominancy toward woman was strengthened in men - the men were acting during the communication with woman in more „superior“ way. The authors deduce from this phenomenon that deindividuation influences strengthening of the behavioral stereotypes. The degree of deindividuation depends very much on the way of communication - if the real anonymity is assured or if the participants of the communication know each other in real life etc. The authors summarize their research as follows:

„Cyberspace may provide the ideal opportunity to create a new virtual society, but if people fall back on the tried and trusted categories of the old world and actively carry over the constraints of their own everyday identities, this new world will rapidly resemble the old one.“

The following part of this text will be centered on the analysis of the perception in the communication by the means of e-mail in comparison to the face-to-face communication.

THE PERCEPTION IN THE E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

Lets concentrate on the difference between the perception of the person communication with us by e-mail and the one communicating with us face-to-face. I divided the problem into two parts - the problem of the process of the perception in general and the problem of the different aspects of the e-mail communication.

The main patterns of the perception process can be described as follows (Rezac, 1998):

- **the law of selection** - from the objects, which are in the field of view of the individual, we are able to perceive only some parts;
- **the effect of the primarity** - those objects, better to say their parts, which are received first, are usually more important for the formation of the entity than information accepted later;
- **the law of the interference** - during the perceprion process we use our experience, i.e. the selection of the objects can be not necessarily consciously influenced by the previous perception;
- during the perception we construct **subconscious rating standpoint** connected to the perceived objects;
- the perception process is the **subjective** process, in which whole personality takes its part;
- **the level of the senses and the sensitivity** of the individual is one of the basic assumptions of the perceptioin.

These laws can be applied generally, as well in case of the perception of the other person by the means of the electronic medium. Although some of these laws can be weakened and some of them strenghtened by an electronic „filter“. For example, it is practically worthless to speak about „the level of the sences“ of the individual provided we know other person and just perceive by the means of electronic medium, where the only way to perceive the partner is (most often) through the written text.

E-mail Receiving

The effect of the primarity described above functions also when we receive e-mail messages. The first impression, which we construct about the sender, is based on his name (nickname) and e-mail address. The way the addressee perceives this address seems to depend strongly on his experience with the internet and his technical knowledge (Smahel, 2000). The user of the internet - the beginner, concentrates often mainly on the impression of the nickname, while the more advanced user of the internet looks better on the e-mail address and tries to judge wheter the name seems to be known to him; he is interested mainly in the part of the address which bears the information about the domain (with the commercial mark - @). From this domain part of the address, he is able to deduce where was the mail sent from, if the sender is anonymous or not or even what may be his status. The address of the e-mail in itself can help to construct perceptual schemes, on the basis of which the receiver then communicates. The first impmpresion gained from the name and the address of the sender helps us to construct the frame of the further communication, its norms, the conception of roles etc.

Lets look into the situation, when we have already had a chance to meet a sender in some way, from previous electronic communication or from real life. We already associate his name with some specific frame of communication, with the group norms set for this communication, with his status as we know him from real life and as well with specific conception of roles operating between us. In this frame development the communication through e-mail is very similar to the face-to-face communication. The same way as in the face-to-face commuication, the frame is modified during communication, the construction of the subconscious evaluation criteria which have basic meaning for the further communicatin are constructed in the similar way. The law of selection is probably slightly weakened as the amount of information which we have to follow is much lower than in the reality. The less we know the sender, the bigger space there is for bad interpretation as an effect of false perception and projections, which fill in missing information. The sender is becomming closer to our ideal, he is more fysically attractive, brighter, more empathetic etc. There is as well more space for bad interpretation of the emotion, which the sender is suppose to feel during writing e-mail; here as well instead of the reality we fill the space with our projection, which assimilate his emotion to our present mood, the ideal etc. This is valid as well for the people we know in the reality. We communicate with a person we "want" to communicate with. Without the feedback from intonation, gestures, expression, eye contact etc., we estimate the sender's emotion with mistakes more often then we would do it in the reality.

Sending e-mail

We can devide sent e-mails into those which have new subject of the message and into e-mails replying just to yet set topic. There is a minimum of the "first" mentioned, the most part of e-mails is made by replies to previous mails. We can compare this to the situation in the real conversation, when the opening of the discussion is shorter then the continuance and the plot of such discussion. As for the opening of "e-mail discussion", the first we usually write the address or the address of the receivers. Some computer programs for sending e-mails even force us to such way of sending mails. Another attribute of e-mail communication is that the beginning of the discussion is always driven by the motivation to such communication (it doesn't matter what kind of), there is practically no "random" communication as it is in the real world. Moreover, this motivation is often positive.

When we send the mail, we know in advance who is the receiver of the message and that's why we can think through the frame and the style of the communication. Again we follow a certain group of rules and roles associated with the receiver or the group of receivers of the e-mail. In general, we can say that the pressure of these norms is to a certain extent weaker than in the reality. The perception of the receiver's personality is set up not only by this group of norms and his status, but as well by the projections evoked by the missing information about the personality of the receiver. These projections strongly take in hand with the anonymity of the receiver of the e-mail.

LINGUISTIC RESOURCES OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

As for the linguistic resources, the electronic communication is very specific. Namely, it brings entirely new - till the creation of the internet totally unknown - elements into a written word. For example with the expansion of the internet new English abbreviation have been constructed to stand for frequently used collocations.

It appears that the very use of different linguistic resources in the environment of electronic communication could be the key for understanding the substantial level of distinction between electronic and face-to-face communication. The interesting is mainly the use of the resources, which help to express emotions of the author, that's why I concentrate on them in the following part of this study.

Emotional Expression in Electronic Communication

"Emoticon" is the abbreviation for "emotional icon", i.e. for what helps users of the internet - as they claim about themselves - to express their emotions by means of signs. - In words of one of users: "Emoticons are just the other communicational possibilities - supplying the intonation to the antecedent sentence, word. When I speak in the real life, I can add the sense, which I want to, to the sentence with the use of the tone of my voice, gestures, expression. Emoticons are providing me the crutches in this case" (Smahel, 2000).

Emoticons can be divided into two basic groups - icons expressing positive ":-)" or negative ":-(" emotions. Though we can find hundreds of various emoticons with different meanings on the internet, the majority of people doesn't practically use more than five different kinds of them. The possibilities of expressing the type and the intensity of the emotion are thus very limited and considerably simplifying. As there is no codex designating which particular emoticon to write for expressing specific emotion, the interpretation of emoticons is often very individual. Let's have a short look into the way accessible "instruction", posted by advanced users for less advanced one on the internet describe emotikons. As these are anonymous texts, I don't indicate the authors of these instructions.

According to the first instruction the emoticon ":-)" means: "The basic laughter. It expresses the joy, wit, irony", according to the other: "The basic 'smiley'. It refers about the happiness of the sender." and according to the third: "Joy, laughter, helpfulness, good temper". As we can see, even in case of the basic emoticon the opinions of the "specialists" vary. One thinks, that basic emoticon can express irony, other two don't think so, they have some other emoticon to stand for the irony. The certain disproportion in the meaning is also between the second and the third explanation. What is clear is that ":-)" express positive emotion, although the meaning can differentiate. Likewise, the similar result can be obtained if we look into the explanations of the second basic emoticon for negative emotions. If we concern ourselves with other, less applied emoticons, the differences are immense in case of pretty each of them.

The paradox is, that when you ask the internet users for their opinion, the big majority of them believe they know the exact meaning of emoticons the way they and the others write them. Shifted meaning is somehow "lost" in electronic communication (Smahel, 2000). Everybody interpretes the emoticons the way he uses them, how he feels them in the moment, what is his common scheme for perceiving others etc. As well as we can misinterpret the gesture, facial expresion, voice intonation in case of face-to-face communication, we can also misinterpret the use of emoticons, the meaning of the written sentence. There is significantly more space for these false interpretation in electronic communication than in face-to-face communication. The basic human patterns for understanding gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation are inherent for the majority of the people (within the same culture), but this cannot be said in case of understanding emoticons.

CONCLUSION

This paper doesn't propose to give a complete survey about the problem of electronic communication; the more detailed elaboration of particular themes would call for individual publication. I tried to present the results of chosen works, researches and the way of thinking about the topic.

The question is, what will be the validity of these results with the quick development of technologies. It is not known, if we will in few years stil use the actual forms of electronic communication. The technology is developing toward the transfer of still more complex data representing the men, better to say his virtual image. However, the odds are that we cannot ignore the researches of "the new sociality" claiming that the reality will be totally different in few years. The intuitive and factual knowledge of the problems of the postmodern society and the psyche of the individual is developing together with the scientific work.

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SUMMARY

The aim of the study is to review chosen publications, researches and the way of thinking about the topic of electronic communication. The study is focused mainly on the perception of our Self and our identity in electronic communication, the description of the internet as the environment without constraints, the perception within the communication through e-mails in comparison to the face-to-face communication and the linguistic resources of electronic communication.