

# Network and Netplay

## Virtual Groups on the Internet

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## Foreword

In 1984, in the introduction to *The New Media: Communication, Research and Technology*, I argued that the development and diffusion of computer-mediated communication (CMC) would not only stimulate new research approaches and theoretical perspectives, but should also be the focus of familiar approaches and perspectives. While it is true that, as some claim, some writing on CMC still lacks analytical rigor and theoretical grounding, there has been a gratifying growth in serious, innovative, and rigorous studies of CMC. This is partially due to the groundbreaking conceptual and survey research by the pioneers of CMC studies, the increasing acceptability of multiple approaches (such as triangulation, use of computer-collected usage and content data, in-depth interpretive studies, communication flows and content), and the recent widespread access to and use of the Internet. *Network and Net Play* represents one of the best examples of this generation of research.

*Network and Net Play* involves a creative and challenging variety of foci, data sources, analyses, discussions, and examples of how CMC fosters scientific communication and collaboration.

Some of the primary areas emphasized in this collection of related studies include the growth and features of the Internet and the nature of networks (such as demographics of online users, and styles such as graphic accents, signatures and "flaming"). Other chapters consider network norms and experiences (such as CMC features that influence the development of electronic community and use of traditional news media, online behavior at virtual parties, why some people persist in "unsafe" computing practices, how online social norms and communication conventions arise and are debated, and how the "virtual" nature of online interaction uncovers some of the deepest assumptions about what otherwise might be considered to be rape in a "real" situation). And a third set of chapters considers conceptualizations of the essential nature of network communication (telelogue compared to monologue and dialogue, "typical" messages represented by sets of highly associated message aspects, and patterns and flows of interaction across messagers, messages, and time).

The studies in *Network and Net Play* should also stimulate readers to become better aware of the wide array of data sources available to students of new media. A variety of online services, such as electronic messages, bulletin boards, newsgroups, listservs, real-time "chatting," and gaming environments provided the sources for a wide range of data types. These include online transcripts, usage statistics, online surveys, follow-up online and personal interviews, ethnographic participation, massive message databases, use of graphic accents and message signatures, use of editing and insertion features, case studies of use of CMC systems in recent political events, relationships between other media forms such as music CDs and online communication behaviors, message threads or messages that refer to prior messages, discussions about offending postings, demographic differences among users, and frequency probabilities of message characteristics. Any researcher who shuns the study of a medium that can provide all these (and more!) sources and forms of data, on the grounds that CMC is "faddish" or "just technology," is like those who avoided studying the "technological toys" we know as the telephone, radio and television.

Further, access to such a wide variety of data sources and to such large bodies of message and usage data requires more innovative and complex ways to retrieve, store, and analyze such data. These include various functions available in most systems to search, request, and retrieve particular files, usage data, messages or discussion groups, and database programs for qualitative analysis, style analyzers, and indexing capabilities. Other approaches included here include coding large message databases for theoretical, technical, and emerging aspects of online communication; neural network analysis of typical associations among these aspects across thousands of messages; grouping and interpretation of non-textual content such as graphic accents and signatures; and the development and distribution of online interactive surveys. Just as with all research methodologies—from analysis and representation of ethnographic field notes, to statistical analyses, to summaries of focus groups—one must become well-trained and familiar with appropriate ways to obtain, organize, analyze, represent, and summarize evidence and argument.

The range of disciplines, data sources and types, and analytical approaches, naturally leads to discussions. Some of the topics considered include: the extent and role of gendered communication in online contexts, rhetorical devices such as recounting and reframing in online arguments, formal and informal representations of personal and organizational identity through signatures and graphic accents, and how online cross-national networks interact with changing geo-political boundaries and tensions. Other topics include: the salient dimensions of listserv usage, the tensions between mass and community societies and the very nature of "media use" in such contexts, aspects of CMC that foster playfulness—and perhaps "online" rape—and alter

frames for interaction, tensions between security/standards and freedom/pri- vacy in online communication, possibilities for definition and enforcement of offending online behaviors, how teleologic communication differs in nature from traditional as well as other online communication forms, and how and why "interactivity" perhaps represents the essential nature of network communication.

Finally, there's a sort of recursive discourse implied, and sometimes explicit, throughout *Network and Net Play*. This occurs on two levels.

First, the research reported here used the medium that was studied as a way of obtaining samples and collecting data. Thus, as I argued in a 1987 *Journal of Communication* article, CMC can be considered both in a traditional way as a communication medium, but also as the content itself of the process being studied—such as diffusion of innovations, or online communication. So, for example, studies that use CMC to obtain usage or content data can also be studies of the nature of CMC systems, and vice-versa.

Second, *Network and Net Play* represents a significant implication of CMC and online networks. That is, as described in the introduction, these (and other) reports were conducted by groups of researchers, across the globe, communicating through the very systems they were studying. The data were collected, organized, coded, re-organized, analyzed, debated, summarized, written-up and edited, and co-authored through the Internet. Indeed, the editors are from Australia, the United States, and Israel, and the authors range from Russia to Southern California. I, for example, obtained the draft manuscripts from Fay Sudweeks from Australia while in New Jersey, discussed the book with her at the International Communication Association conference in New Mexico, prepared and emailed suggestions from Utah, received her responses during her trips back to Australia and then Mexico, and provided my finished draft while back in New Jersey. As Hiltz and Turoff, Lievrouw and Carley, and many others have suggested, the very nature of invisible colleges and scientific communication is being transformed through CMC and global communication networks. It's clear, from discussions with the authors of *Network and Netplay* that such capabilities have both positive and negative aspects. It's equally clear that people can engage in both work and play, in traditional and new ways, using the Internet and similar networks.

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