

Cultural Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies provide new opportunities for people to converse across space and time. Today, people connect with others from around the world by participating in chatrooms and discussion lists, by joining global game communities and virtual worlds, by authoring and reading blogs with an international scope, and by a variety of other means. In the work domain, firms are establishing global teams with members from a diverse set of nations who meet via an array of media including audio, video and text. Bridging nations via technology does not, however, guarantee that the cultures of the nations involved are similarly bridged. Mismatches in social conventions, work styles, power relationships and conversational norms can lead to misunderstandings that negatively affect the interaction. For the past few years, my students and I have been exploring the ways in which culture influences computer-mediated communication. Our goal is to develop a theoretical understanding of how culture influences computer-mediated communication and to inform the design of new tools to enhance cross-cultural communication.

In this talk, I will first provide an overview of the theoretical framework guiding our work. Then, I'll present three examples of cultural differences that we predict will influence CMC communication styles, individualism vs. collectivism, and peripheral awareness and describe the laboratory, field and survey studies we have conducted to test these predictions. I'll then discuss several projects we are doing that aim to improve cross-cultural communication through training cultural sensitivity and by intervening in dialogues when problems arise. I'll conclude with some thoughts about how research on culture and CMC can be extended into new domains, such as support for communication in developing regions.