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1

Introduction

Public Internet forums: A neglected genre?

Public Internet discussion forums appear to offer limitless opportunities for communication across linguistic, geographical and cultural borders. Newspaper websites propose forums on a vast range of topics from current affairs to crosswords. More specialized sites provide the hobbyist or professional with discussion on everything from Fender guitars to giant pumpkin-growing to cardio-thoracic surgery. Whatever your penchant, Internet discussion proffers the prospect of interaction with people from around the world, in a myriad of languages.

This apparent wealth of possibilities for authentic language practice and intercultural contact was the starting point for this book. Clearly, public Internet discussion forums provide language teachers and learners with a valuable and accessible educational resource. Curiously, however, we found very few references to these vibrant cultural spaces in the literature on language learning and technology, and very little awareness of the possibilities for their pedagogical use. While language educators have been quick to take up some of the opportunities for intercultural contact provided by the Internet, notably learner-to-learner exchanges, the possibilities offered by public Internet discussion remain largely overlooked.

This neglect suggests that taking advantage of opportunities to move out of the classroom and become part of online communities in a foreign language may not be as straightforward as it at first appears. While asynchronous written communication online makes some things easier – from finding available interlocutors in the foreign language to consulting a verb table mid-sentence – it seems to exacerbate or produce other difficulties. For teachers and students of foreign languages and

2 Introduction

cultures, the issue is how to alleviate these and foster successful online participation. But simultaneously, the pitfalls and obstacles encountered allow us to plot the form of the problems and so elucidate more general questions of negotiating intercultural communication in an online environment.

The book has thus shaped itself around the question ‘How is intercultural communication negotiated in online discussion?’

While the answers are of interest to those in many fields – from armchair travellers to managers of multinationals – we explore the particular implications for those in the business of teaching and learning intercultural communication, and specifically foreign language communication. In contradistinction, however, to many other studies of online communication in the area of language learning, our focus is not on learner-to-learner interaction. Rather, choosing a specific genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC) – discussion forums attached to media websites – we examine it as an authentic, culturally grounded practice. We study instances of intercultural communication on these sites, some of which involve self-identified learners, in order to derive principles of how such interaction actually takes place. It is only then that we can suggest some guidelines for teaching with and for the use of such sites. That is, our starting point will be understanding online discussion forums as cultural practices. Successful participation in such practices, we might hope, is that to which learners aspire.

In order to arrive at such an understanding, we must consider the interconnections between culture, genre and technology. While new information and communications technologies (ICTs) have made possible novel forms of human contact, the technologies of themselves do not determine the ways in which they are understood and exploited. Technological innovation is necessarily accompanied by cultural innovation as the technologies are appropriated by users and integrated into their repertoire of genres of communicative practices. Our project works at this interface between culture and technology, at the pivot points where cultures take up technological innovations, adapt them and adapt to them. It seeks to understand better the processes by which cultures modify existing genre-related and communicative conventions to accommodate new technologies and, conversely, put pressure on technological constraints to accommodate existing cultural practices. It is through understanding that uniformity of technology does not mean uniformity of cultural practice that we can start to understand some of the adaptations necessary when communicating interculturally online.

This brief introductory chapter outlines the book's scope and its usefulness to teachers of language and intercultural communication. It explains the methodology: a detailed ethnographic observation of the online discussion forums attached to media websites and the analysis of critical incidents, particularly in relation to intercultural communication. And it sets out the division of the book into two parts:

- *Part I (Chapters 2–4)* provides the theoretical basis for the book, analysing cultural differences in online communication and the ways in which they can be understood, and raising doubts as to whether these differences can be expected to disappear over time.
- *Part II (Chapters 5–10)* explores ways in which Internet discussion forums can be used to develop intercultural communication competence among language learners. We focus on specific examples of real learners using public Internet forums in a foreign language, and analyse the questions and difficulties that arise. From these very particular examples are elucidated principles which can be applied elsewhere, in other teaching/learning contexts.

Those readers whose interest is more in the area of cultural difference in engagement with emerging genres can read Part I before Part II. Those whose concern is predominantly pedagogical practice are invited to start with Part II, before turning back to Part I to investigate the underpinnings of the approaches advocated.

Public discussion sites

From the multiplicity of genres of CMC, we have selected public Internet discussion forums attached to media websites as our field of enquiry. Firstly, for reasons outlined below, the genre lends itself to the kind of interrogation necessary to answer our research questions. Secondly, and again for reasons which will be developed more fully later in this section, this is a genre of discussion to be recommended to learners and other interculturalists.

Media organizations today require a web presence and that presence typically involves some facility for readers to share their views. This may amount to little more than an electronic version of letters to the editor: a selection of messages is published on the website with very limited opportunity for discussion between contributors. The term 'discussion forum', however, usually indicates that reader-participants are able to post to an ongoing discussion, with the expectation that

all messages compliant with site rules will be published. Across the sites surveyed and over the length of our study, forum rules vary (for example, with respect to contributions from non-subscribers; contributors' rights to start discussions and choose topics; the period during which a discussion is open or is available in read-only mode), but all the forums are characterized by asynchronous, threaded, publicly available discussion. While there may be official moderators, some of whom make their presence felt more than others, discussions are dominated by interactions between peers who do not represent the media organizations concerned. Similarly, the forums with which we are concerned do not feature question and answer sessions or debate with special guests or experts (although such discussions may be offered separately from 'reader' forums). Finally, it should be noted that although online newspapers have become multimodal, the public discussion forums they host remain resolutely text-based: they do not contain images, videos or audio-files. At the most, a participant may include a hyperlink to a page featuring multimedia in order to comment on it.

As would be expected, the 'core business' of such forums is the discussion of issues related to current affairs, and several of the sites studied make some explicit commitment to 'quality debate'. However, the extent to which contributions confine themselves to news-related topics varies, and indeed, some sites have shown changes over the period covered by this study. From our observations, it seems that for many publications the run-away success of the discussion forums entirely exceeded original expectations about the volume of messages which would be contributed. The profusion of postings clearly has become an issue to be managed, with not insignificant resource implications. Thus, we see some sites introducing a subscriber-only policy for contributors; attempts to enforce adherence to moderator-imposed topics; or, most radically, closure. User reaction to these changes, which ranges from the migration of discussion elsewhere to inventive attempts at flouting the rules is testament to the extent to which forum discussion has quickly established itself as a part of many lives.

Our investigation centres on high-profile Francophone and Anglophone discussion sites, particularly those of media organizations that might be considered logical ports of call for outsiders seeking cross-cultural contact (see Table 1.1). The postcolonial legacies of France and the UK ensure multicultural readerships for many of these sites, as does high immigration to the US. The status of French and English as international languages, and widely taught foreign languages, also encourages participation by non-native speakers. While regional spin-offs are

Table 1.1 Media sites monitored

	English language	French language
Newspaper and magazine sites	UK daily newspapers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *<i>The Guardian</i> • *<i>The Independent</i> 	French daily newspapers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Libération</i> • *<i>Le Monde</i>
	US daily newspapers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>New York Times</i> • <i>Washington Post</i> 	French weekly magazines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *<i>Le Nouvel Observateur</i>
Radio and television network sites	UK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *BBC 	France <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TF1 • M6

Note: The sites marked with an asterisk provide the bulk of the examples for discussion. *The Independent* no longer offers forums. The column headings 'English language' and 'French language' indicate the predominant or default language of the sites. Some accept contributions in other languages.

possible – *The Independent* readers organizing a face-to-face (FTF) meeting in Utrecht, for example – these localized subgroups are not typical. More visible are the disparate individuals with little in common but a desire to communicate with others about matters of interest to them.

For teaching purposes and in terms of an investigation of culturally determined behaviour online, such media-site discussion facilities recommend themselves for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they are general interest forums hosting discussion on a wide range of topics between participants from a diversity of backgrounds and so very specifically sub-cultural norms are avoided in favour of more general patterns of usage. These highly visible sites attract a high turnover of participants, meaning that there is an ongoing process of initiation of new members, along with the observable instruction that initiation entails. More generally, the high volume of discussion provides a rich source of data. Furthermore, this discussion is archived (for at least a year in most cases) and therefore is available to the teacher, learner and researcher. Finally, these forums are in the public domain, which provides two sets of advantages. For the researcher, many of the usual ethical difficulties associated with studying interpersonal communication are avoided. For the language teacher, the use of these sites requires neither the creation of the discussion facility nor negotiations with online partners. Having justified our

choice of sites, we now move on to look more closely at the use of such sites by language learners.

Public discussion sites and advanced learners

In terms of teaching and learning, public Internet discussion has much to offer more advanced language learners. The book will review some of the technical/procedural features of the sites, pointing out how they share the affordances of other non-FTF forms of CMC which have proved appealing to learners and teachers, principally the opportunity for 'authentic' communication with native speakers. Unlike the two modes of CMC dominating language learning, 'keypals' exchanges and web-based discussions between classes in different countries, the public discussion forum offers learners the opportunity to move beyond the relative shelter of activities designed specifically for them. Here they can engage with native speakers who are seeking interaction on topics of mutual interest: at any time of the day or night – in whatever time zone you happen to be – there are discussions available on an immensely varied set of topics. Extraordinary opportunities exist, therefore, for students to build on their own expertise and interests to engage with wider communities of target-language users, developing linguistic and rhetorical competences while also being exposed to 'other cultures' 'takes' on the topic of discussion and their points of reference in the debate. Finally, it is not only the prospects for learning of useful skills which advocate for the use of Internet discussion forums. Thorne (2006, p. 20) reminds us that 'for many students, performing competent identities in second and additional language(s) may now involve Internet-mediation as often as or more often than face-to-face and non-digital forms of communication'. The focus shifts from what you can learn through discussion on Internet forums to quite simply learning to participate in a widespread and popular cultural practice in another language.

Exploiting this potential is, however, not a matter of simply indicating addresses to students as if ignorance of specific URLs were the only barrier to successful participation in discussion. Differences in cultural conventions need to be intelligently negotiated for learners to make the most of the opportunities. What are the obstacles, how can they be surmounted and is it worth the effort? What do we need to teach our students, and how do we need to frame an activity in order for it to result in learning? Most importantly, what makes for successful engagement both in terms of acceptance by other participants and in terms of learning? These are questions which will be taken up in the second part

of the book. In attempting to answer them for teachers and learners, we endeavour to encourage reflective practice, rather than to provide a tool kit of ready-made activities; exactly how instructors and learners engage with forums will depend on their particular objectives.

Throughout, rather than maintaining a neat division between forums for the general public and educational forums, the book shows how forums for the general public can be used for language learning. Rather than separating the sociological from the educational, the book shows how understanding the cultural conventions of a public Internet forum can become an important pedagogical task, with pay-offs for intercultural learning. Finally, rather than dividing instructed learning from non-institutional learning, the book focuses on the continuity of these situations, and the ways in which instructed learning can prepare students for effective non-institutional learning.

Approach and design of study

Our project is shaped by three main principles. Firstly, it is informed by contemporary theorizations of culture, genre, identity and difference. Secondly, we pay close attention to the ways in which Internet users represent their own practices and make sense of what they do, in order to study the cultural uptakes of the technology. Thirdly, the work is driven by a commitment to explore the practical consequences of our findings for educators and trainers. Our primary interest as teachers contemplating the use of forums for foreign language instruction was the idea of involving students in an accessible cultural practice. Successful involvement requires an understanding of how the chosen practice and intercultural communication function. Such an understanding can be gained only through observations of the forums in use.

Our approach combines elements of ethnography, cultural studies and discourse analysis. The method is dominated by a search for critical incidents in the lives of the forums studied. This provides the basis for qualitative analysis of predictably overlapping data sets related to the three themes which emerge as important: genre, identity and culture. A series of research assistants regularly monitored a total of a dozen public discussion sites from 2000 to 2004, with later updates from the authors, in search of such incidents (see Table 1.1).

A first source of data can be found in the site rules/user guides/codes of conduct, which are not part of the forums themselves but are published on the sites to regulate discussion: these are the official versions of how forum participation is construed and constructed. We are interested

in moments when rules change, and how these changes are explained and justified. Our major data source is, however, the forums themselves and the contributions posted by discussants. Here discussion of the *genre* might take the form of

- *Explicit commentary on the appropriateness of contributions*: intervention by a moderator (official or self-appointed); identification and discussion of offensive behaviour; discussion of appropriate length, subject matter or style; mention of expectations regarding forms of debate; discussion of a forum's purpose.
- *Implicit commentary on appropriateness of contributions*: responding to a message but not engaging with its content.
- *Informal induction of newcomers to the forum by seasoned contributors*: explanation or justification of cultural/generic practices; attempts to make explicit unwritten conventions.
- *Comparisons made with other genres and situations*: is the forum seen to resemble a soapbox or a letters page, a café or a boxing ring, the French *Minitel* or SMS messaging?
- *Instances of protest or conflict*: site users explicitly react to changes in forum appearance/policy/function, and so on.

At the same time, an absence of commentary can also be significant: complete lack of engagement with a message suggests its unsuitability for the forum. On the other hand, if an apparently aberrant message attracts no comments on its non-standard nature, we can make some assumptions about tolerance of difference in discursive conventions, regarding, for example, digression, register (formality/informality), explicitness, framing of personal opinion, authority to speak on an issue.

Moments of negotiation of the appropriate forms of participation on the sites allow us to understand

- the ways generic conventions are adapted to cultural conventions of participants (cultural variation between apparently similar sites);
- the ways cultural conventions are adapted to suit the generic and material/technological constraints of Internet discussion platforms;
- the ways material/technological constraints are stretched by cultural and genre-related pressures;
- the ways particular forums are culturally and institutionally defined.

From our study it appears that one of the points of greatest difficulty for learners is that of personal *identity*, and its relations to the speaking positions created by the genre. For this reason, we collect data on the assertion, deployment and challenging of identity on the forums. The emergence of identity as a focus is unsurprising given that one of the often-cited differences of CMC with respect to FTF interactions is the apparent liberty the former provides where identity is concerned. The insistence with which these claims are made, and their at times startlingly revolutionary nature means that we will return to questions of identity repeatedly in the following chapters.

In particular, we are interested in clues to identity which lead us to view particular exchanges as *intercultural*. Identification relies on a combination of indicators such as non-native errors, speaking position, pseudonym and explicit self-identification (see Table 1.2).

Given widespread expectations about online fraudulence, it could be argued that our methods for determining cultural affiliation are unreliable: surely false claims about identity are easily made. However, problems of accurate identification are not limited to CMC and may occur in any study where researchers rely on their subjects' word. Conceding then, that we can never be entirely sure if (for example) 'Alain Rudaz' is who he says – 'a Frenchman living in the UK' (Independent Argument, 2003–2004) – the successful deployment of this persona nonetheless relies on accurately reproducing cultural and linguistic traits. These are so varied and numerous that it is often just as

Table 1.2 Indicators used to identify intercultural exchanges

Markers used to identify intercultural exchanges include

- *Explicit self-identification as a cultural outsider*: information provided on participant profiles; apologies for linguistic errors; questions as to the eligibility of foreigners as participants; expressions of ignorance of cultural practices.
 - *Implicit self-identification*: speaking position, use of 'us' and 'them'.
 - *Linguistic behaviour*: atypical language errors; use of non-standard language; use of a foreign language; comments on linguistic accuracy.
 - *Cultural labelling by other participants*: for example, 'That's sooo Parisian!' 'You're clearly no Brit!'.
 - *Names, pseudonyms*.
 - *Knowledge of current affairs and cultural practices*.
 - *Cultural allusions*: repertoires of assumed cultural knowledge.
 - *Instances of miscomprehension of a message*.
-

difficult falsely to assume another cultural identity online as offline. The question of online fraudulence in a genre where participation is largely anonymous is discussed at length in Chapter 7.

Moving beyond the issue of purposeful deceit, it must still be admitted that none of our indicators is entirely trustworthy alone. Yet a cluster of such clues points to outsider status, even if the precise cultural affiliation may remain unclear. Now it is true that, in the absence of self-identification, an accomplished linguist may go unnoticed as a non-native speaker/writer. On the other hand, prolonged discussion can lead to disclosure of relevant personal experiences and other identifying information, enabling the study of communication between interlocutors of different cultures.

Focusing then on the specifically intercultural aspect of interactions, we can ask,

- When does cultural identity become an issue? How is it asserted, requested or challenged?
- Are there cultural patterns in strategies for dealing with intercultural interaction?

Working in the knowledge gap identified above with respect to intercultural communication online, our aim is not to deliver detailed descriptions of cybercultures associated with, say, *The Guardian* or *Libération* or even of Francophone or Anglophone online behaviour as discrete forms of practice. Rather, we choose to look at what happens when culture becomes an issue online. This, we imagined at the outset of our project, would manifest itself when cultural conventions clashed or were questioned, when cultural affiliation was invoked or challenged, that is, when cultures online had to deal with the intercultural. We therefore aimed to analyse the kinds of problems that arose and their consequences, whether and how they were resolved, and the role of other contributors (official or self-appointed moderators) in determining the outcome. What emerged, however, was a much lower rate of observable protracted intercultural exchange than we had anticipated. This can be explained through interactions between genre and culture and their effects on noticeability and frequency of intercultural communication.

Firstly, intercultural encounters may simply go unmarked and unnoticed, one reason for this being the way in which identity, including cultural identity, is deployed. In these discussion sites, revelation of personal detail tends to be used sparingly and strategically: successful

exchange between participants of different intercultural origins does not necessarily require those origins being signalled or discussed.

Our data suggest, however, that it is not a mere matter of a hidden world of flourishing intercultural encounters. Despite the similarities listed above, these forums are ruled by very different cultural conventions. Getting to the stage of challenging cultural norms, spurring clashes and so on requires some form of participation. However, the nature of those differences may be enough to dampen keenness for cross-cultural excursions. To take but one example, that of message length, if your delight in debate lies in the exchange of witty brevities, you may be inclined to view 500-word contributions as boorish pontification. On the other hand, if what you value is thoughtful exposition, rapid-fire one-liners may smack of buffoonery and will certainly not seem interesting enough to encourage attempts at intercultural communication. Judging these differences by the standards of one's own culture and not seeing them as part of the intercultural experience sought will discourage participation.

And thirdly, our analyses will show that successful participation is rather more difficult than it appears at first glance for reasons to do with three recurrent themes which we have indicated above: genre, culture and the identities which learners are prepared to assert.

Preview of chapters

This book falls into two parts: the theoretically oriented Part I, where the aim is to arrive at a comparative cultural understanding of the genre of Internet discussion forums; and the more practice-oriented Part II, which seeks both to understand successful intercultural participation on the sites and to see how this understanding might facilitate successful forays into such discussion boards by advanced language learners. As stated earlier, Part I can be read before or after Part II depending on the reader's centre of interest.

Following the present introductory chapter, Chapter 2 offers a critical survey of the substantial amount of work on intercultural CMC which has emerged since 2000. It reveals divergent understandings of how these differences arise, how culture and technology interact and thus of the role culture plays in shaping online communication. Questioning these assumptions enables us to elaborate our understanding of 'culture' and our theoretical approach regarding the interaction between culture, genre and technology.

This approach is then applied in Chapter 3, a detailed cross-cultural study based on ethnographic observation of Internet discussion forums on four high-profile media sites (*Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *The Guardian* and the BBC). Significant differences in the cultural conventions of communication are revealed. However, and crucially, these differences are not simply predictable from a knowledge of other French and British communicative practices. Rather, we find different cultures using different generic templates as a basis for participation. Data from the period when the Internet discussion forum was still relatively new allow us to witness first hand the negotiation of cultural practices, particularly in contributors' explicit commentary on their participation. And in the complex interaction between cultural, technical and contextual constraints, we see new, culturally specific ways of communicating emerge from more established genres, leading to an understanding of the means by which cultural differences arise in supposedly global forms.

But has Internet discussion use evolved since its rather self-conscious early use? Chapter 4 examines the evolution of online practices and, specifically, the hypothesis that the passage of time will see the convergence of cultural conventions: perhaps cultures started out engaging differently with the technology, but exposure to these other practices through the cross-cultural communication they make possible has dulled difference? Returning to the French and British media websites mentioned in Chapter 3, we see that while there has been change over the five years of our study (in response to the huge success of the discussion facilities and rise of other online genres such as blogs), this has not had the effect of erasing cultural difference.

Internet discussion forums therefore remain sites of vibrant and lively practice which appear to offer limitless opportunities for communication across linguistic, geographical and cultural borders. We thus turn in the second part of the book to the question of language learners and intercultural Internet discussion. Chapter 5 considers the uptake of Internet-based technologies in foreign language education, and discusses the additional possibilities offered by public Internet discussion forums, their distinguishing features and specific affordances, along with potential obstacles to their use. The chapter also functions as an introduction to a series of case studies of learner-participants on discussion forums in the following chapters.

Chapter 6 goes to the heart of the topic of language learners online, presenting a case study of four self-identified cultural 'outsiders' on the forums of *Le Monde*. The two participants who attempt to deploy the rules of many tandem/telecollaboration partnerships – introduce oneself

and invite language practice – are rather less successful in gaining acceptance as forum members than two other outsiders who position themselves as debaters. Whereas the earlier chapters made theoretical points about the importance of genre for understanding cultural practices, this case study shows the practical application of these ideas by forum users, whose commentary to our newcomers relies on mutually defining notions of genre and culture. We also see successful participation critically dependent on engagement with the aims and conventions of forum discussion. Neither language proficiency nor overtures of friendship (often the priorities in learner exchanges) will compensate for a failure to do so.

Chapter 7 pursues more thoroughly the question of self-positioning raised in Chapter 6, exploring the ways in which identity is constructed and used. Using examples of ‘identity challenges’, we suggest that the identity which can be asserted on a forum is bound up with the genre’s stakes and that when debate takes hold, these are about making a case. That is, identity becomes a tool used to prove a point. Noting how rarely the type of self-presentation inculcated in language classes is used in online debate, we suggest ways of alerting learners to alternative, more strategic modes of self-description. Such exploration of speaking positions not only enables them to engage productively in online intercultural discussion but also develops their interactional skills in a second language.

Successful use of identity in online intercultural discussion is however no simple matter. Chapter 8 will show independent learners on a ‘learner site’ so obsessed with their status as language novices that rather than talk the language they would prefer to talk about it. Unable to imagine other ways of being in their new language, they elect practice, in the sense of rehearsal, over performance. We explain this in terms of default speaking positions. While they exert a powerful attraction because so obviously available, they are not necessarily the most useful for sustained and enriching intercultural contact. If learners are to survive beyond the sheltered waters of learner-only sites, they need more flexibility in the way they position themselves. Analysis of a prolonged and productive intercultural discussion on one of the forums of *The Independent* shows speakers positioning and repositioning themselves in response to the postings of other contributors. The interactional strategies identified provide a model for successful intercultural communication in general.

Chapter 9 reports on an advanced university-level French course, implementing the principles for teaching suggested by preceding analyses. Following discussion of the integration of forum participation into

the course, the alignment of assessment requirements with the forum genre and the description of preparatory tasks, the chapter focuses on the responses students received to the messages they posted, and the intercultural and linguistic lessons available from this feedback. Particular attention is paid to the need to train students to recognize and learn from the feedback offered. Finally, suggestions are made regarding the application of the pedagogical principles to other teaching contexts.

In the last decade, the focus of research in language learning and technology has shifted from an emphasis on improving language proficiency to a concern for simultaneously developing interactional and intercultural competence. Part of this shift has been a new focus on identity issues, with identity seen as mediating the communicative practices of language learners online. Chapter 10, which concludes the book, stresses the opportunities provided by public Internet discussion forums for developing awareness and skills in all these areas.

Wider applications of this study

If new technologies merely connect up people who are unequipped to manage communication appropriately, their potential remains unrealized. While widespread access to the Internet opens up intercultural contact to new groups of users, this ease of access gives the illusory impression that intercultural communication online is similarly unproblematic. We assume that 'they' will just be like us online, ignoring the possibility of cultural variation. This book suggests that we ignore such variation at our peril.

One site for learning about cultural variation in communicative practices should be the language classroom. And while our most pedagogically oriented chapter, Chapter 9, takes as its context tertiary language courses, this is certainly not the only place where this project can be applied, particularly in a context of increasing globalization. The lessons of this book could, for example, find their place in modules on intercultural CMC built into business training courses.

Although we are working in our languages of expertise, benefits are not limited to French–Anglophone relations: our case studies in these international languages involve a range of cultural backgrounds and the principles elucidated are of wide application. For example, interlocutors who might have confidently supposed that all participants in online negotiations model their messages on verbal interaction may learn to look for clues in others' postings to see if this is indeed the case, or whether instead the expectation is that intelligent contributions should

be patterned on writing. Sensitized to issues such as degrees of formality, optimal lengths of contribution and inclusion of the personal, online communicators will be equipped to relativize 'atypical' online communication patterns in terms of other standards of culturally appropriate behaviour rather than as negative individual traits (such as overfamiliarity, pomposity, standoffishness, rudeness). While work exists on cultural difference in many other aspects of intercultural contact, its inflection of CMC is rarely if ever discussed in intercultural training manuals.

In elucidating these dynamics, the book contributes to our understanding of communication in an era of globalization. The utopian discourse of the borderless world predicts that ease of communication through shared technologies will erase cultural difference. Studying intercultural Internet exchanges gives the lie to this myth.

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