

## 3.6: Membership in Digital Groups

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify dangers involved in moving from one communication environment to another
2. Identify major features of digital groups and what they imply regarding their members' behavior

*Unlike you, Phil, I hate computers. So I'm writing this in full view of my computer in order to torture it. - A friend of one of the authors, in a letter written by hand in 2004*

*You think because you understand "one" you must understand "two," because one and one make two. But you must also understand "and." - Sufi Tradition*

### Different Strokes for Different Folks

The term "code-switching" is used by linguists to describe how bilingual speakers sometimes sprinkle expressions from one language into another. The title of a classic article about code-switching provides an example of the phenomenon: "Sometimes I start a sentence in English y termino en español". Sometimes I'll start a sentence in English y termino en español: Toward a typology of code-switching (Poplack, S. (1980) In J. Amastea & L. Elías-Olivares (Eds.), *Spanish in the United States: Sociolinguistic aspects*, pp. 230–263. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press).

Anyone who has come to command more than one language can attest that each of them transmits thoughts and emotions in unique and distinct ways. Code-switching can sometimes lead to serendipitous insights, but it can also bring about awkward moments. Combining two languages, as the Sufi adage above suggests, is not just a matter of adding one and one.

The slang expression "different strokes for different folks," which was popular in the 1960s, indicated that it's fine to have diverse opinions and styles in society. Today, just as half a century ago, different folks use different methods of communicating depending on the groups they're members of. In the same way that mixing parts of whole languages may yield unexpected results, switching between sub-vocabularies within one language may produce happy surprises or difficulties. A story will illustrate how.

The father of one of the authors was raised in a traditional family in the American Midwest. Just after high school, as World War II was coming to a close, he was drafted into the army and sent to the Philippines. Almost all the people with whom he spent the next three years were other young American men like himself.

Part of army culture in those days was that soldiers of equal ranks routinely peppered their talk with profanity. Perhaps this shocked some new recruits, but most quickly overcame their initial reaction and got used to using blue language with everyone else. For virtually all the enlisted personnel, a "code" of foul language became habitual.

When the author's father completed his tour of duty and returned to the U.S. in 1948, he spent some time at home before going off to college under the GI Bill. Just a few days after his joyous return to his hometown, he and his parents and younger sister were eating lunch in their dining room. Conversation was lively but routine. At some point, in a polite tone, he said, "Mom, please pass the f-ing butter."

### Nature and Implications of Social Media

In Chapter 1 we defined social media and considered how they may affect people's interactions. Whether we employ them individually or with others as part of a group, such media generally permit or even encourage broad communication. They make it easy for us to spread information about our personalities, interests, and activities as broadly as we wish—even to total strangers.

Among the positive points of social media which we mentioned in Chapter 1 were that they 1) allow people in different places to collaborate on projects; 2) permit people to maintain contact with each other when they're not meeting formally; 3) enable group members to identify and collect information pertinent to their aims; and 4) focus attention primarily on messages instead of "status markers."

We noted that people using social media may commit unintentional or good-natured mistakes which lead to awkwardness or embarrassment. What we didn't mention then is that some people may purposely employ techniques via social media to hurt others. Ivester (Ivester, M. (2011). *Lol...omg!: What every student needs to know about online reputation management, digital citizenship and cyberbullying*. Reno, NV: Serra Knight Publishing) identified many examples of such intentionally harmful social media communication. Among others, these included "flaming," which is sending abusive messages with an intent to enrage someone;

impersonating another person; “outing” an individual’s personal or secret information; spamming, or sending large volumes of unwanted material; and mashups, which are alterations of digital content in such a way as to humiliate someone.

Social media, as we’ve seen, are wide-open spaces. Like the American “Wild West” 150 years ago, they can be unfettered and unpredictable territory.

## Characteristics of Digital Groups

Now let’s put aside our discussion of social media and think about what it means to be a member of a group connected by older and perhaps tamer forms of computer-mediated communication. In particular, let’s consider digital groups that communicate solely or in large part via email, online discussion forums, or synchronous audio or video conferencing.

First, here are some notes about the nature of the kinds of digital groups we’ve just referred to:

Digital groups are pervasive. As of the end of 2011, nearly one of every three persons on Planet Earth had Internet access. In their guide to email, Shipley and Schwalbe (Shipley, D., & Schwalbe W. (2007). *Send; The essential guide to email for office and home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf) indicated that trillions of email messages are sent each week in the United States alone. At the Federal level, they noted, the National Archives was expected to receive more than 100 million email messages from the Bush administration when it left office.

Digital groups range widely in their formality level and longevity. Some are casual, whereas others are more official and rigorous. Like other secondary groups, they may also be temporary and directed toward short-term goals or permanent.

Digital groups are, at least at face value, egalitarian. Assuming they can access the Internet, all the members of a digital group have an equal chance to enter and communicate in its discussions.

Digital groups come in all sizes. Many, if not most, comprise more than the eight individuals that lots of authorities deem to be the upper limit of a “small group.” This can be deceiving, however, since once something gets shared within the group it may very well be sent outside it, either intentionally or not. Given that nothing on the Web is ever really “private,” it’s probably wise to assume that messages in digital groups are shared either with no one or with everyone.

Digital groups may communicate via either “rich” or “lean” media (Waldeck, J. H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. (2013). *Business & professional communication in a digital age*. Boston: Wadsworth). Although it’s possible to be brusque or even rude in any digital medium, some media tend to be better able to convey signals of civility than others. Rich media, such as audio or video conferencing, tend to permit or facilitate understanding because they transmit non-verbal as well as verbal communication cues. Lean media such as email or text messaging, which depend on written communication, are by their nature less capable of doing so.

Asynchronous feedback sent in digital groups may be limited, untimely, or otherwise inadequate. Because group members who use email or discussion forums usually don’t see or hear each other immediately, “personalness” may be less than it would be if they were face to face. Without immediate cues to respond to, people sometimes shorten their messages or fail to include pleasantries that can promote easy understanding.

Regardless of the relatively intimate size of digital groups and the mutual familiarity among their members, the impact of asynchronous messages within them is always invisible. By this, we mean that someone who sends a message can’t see and hear how its recipient responds right when that person reads, sees, or hears it.

Unlike what happens in face-to-face groups, when individual members write to someone about something in a digital environment it’s possible that others may be doing so without their knowledge. Thus, the positive or negative impact of individually innocuous or mild messages may be magnified many times.

## Advice for Members of Digital Groups

Even those of us who use computers all day long at work or school for serious purposes may participate in informal digital groups there or elsewhere. Usually, we move back and forth between these communication worlds easily and without causing ourselves or others any problems.

Still, we run the risk that, like the author’s father, we may accidentally transfer habits and practices that are appropriate in one environment to another in which they don’t fit. Here are some tips on how to minimize this kind of risk and others associated with communication in a digital group:

First, know your group’s norms. If you’re not sure about something, ask. When in doubt, don’t.

Second, be especially careful about sending or responding to any message if you've just been in a physical or digital location with different norms. Depending on your interests, you may be part of some social media in which most messages are snarky. In fact, digital forums exist in which participants try to outdo each other at being mean. Why? In order to attract attention--which is, after all, one of the chief purposes many people use social media in the first place.

Third, be aware of potential gender-related communication differences. According to research by Susan Herring, for instance, many men find using aggressive language to be amusing (Shipley, D., & Schwalbe W. (2007). *Send: The essential guide to email for office and home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf). Women, on the other hand, may take such communication at face value and be put off or feel threatened by it.

Fourth, try to empathize. The physical distance inherent in digital communication can make us less sensitive to other people's feelings. Try to imagine the person(s) you're writing to sitting in front of you.

Finally, think twice about using what you consider to be humor. Use what Matt Ivester (Ivester, M. (2011). *Lol...omg!: What every student needs to know about online reputation management, digital citizenship, and cyberbullying*. Reno, NV: Serra Knight Publishing) calls "the 'Get It?' test" and ask whether your message might be misinterpreted. What seems clever or witty to you may come across very differently to those who read it. Be particularly wary of using sarcasm (a word which, incidentally, comes from a Greek term for rending or tearing flesh).

Because of their electronic foundations, digital groups offer their members convenience and efficiency. Being a successful member of a digital group, however, requires focus, patience, and attention to the results of one's actions in a way that membership in a face-to-face group does not.

## Key Takeaway

Members of digital groups need to understand the nature and implications of those groups and act accordingly.

### Exercise 3.6.1

1. Discuss these questions with one or two classmates: When considering communication in digital groups, is it truly possible to distinguish between personal and professional communication? Why or why not?
2. Think of a permanent digital group you're a member of and a temporary one. How, if at all, do the styles and contents of messages in the two groups differ?
3. Describe a misunderstanding you've experienced that resulted from the characteristics of a digital group using a "lean" rather than a "rich" medium.

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