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Interpersonal online relationship development

Face-to-face interaction, with its shared space and time, allows people to self-disclose via the human voice while observing each others' reactions in real time. It also includes touch, gesture, silence, paralanguage and other nonverbal cues. Proximity to interlocutors affords full opportunity to be present with each other, increasing the probability of genuine listening as well as the possibility of relationship development. Such rooted dynamics provide the foundation of solid interpersonal communication.

Online interaction entails significantly different dynamics, and 'Interpersonal Online Relationship Development' (IORD) provides one way to recognize and manage the changes by understanding what happens relationally when the foundations of face-to-face interaction are missing. IORD is an interpersonal online model of relationship development that may be useful in: (1) understanding how relationships develop online, (2) assessing the efficacy of such and (3) applying wisdom in using digitally mediated communication for social purposes. Combining the increasing levels of intimacy noted by the Social Penetration model (Altman and Taylor 1973) with the upward and ongoing movement towards integration and bonding of Mark Knapp's (1984) steps of 'Coming Together and Coming Apart', IORD moves in orbits of interaction that resemble the movements of waves.

The ebb and flow of relationship

IORD operates on the premise that each relationship is unique and mysterious, creating the unsteady awkwardness that most people experience at the

start of a relationship. The lack of predictability is like a wave, and so, too, interpersonal relationships online remain rather fluid and murky. Relationships are influenced by numerous variables, including their environment. Within a wave, water molecules remain separate, loosely connected, and yet, they move in a circular motion along the surface of the water; they are so completely enmeshed and connected that they are impossible to separate with the naked eye. So it is with the individual participants using social networks and online dating sites to communicate. Although many tech-savvy participants in online social forums are aware that their posts may easily be reproduced and shared, they underestimate how their media environment includes continuous data mining, anonymous 'lurkers' and phishing expeditions. These environmental variables easily elude awareness, as they are largely invisible.

Note, here, the swell of the ocean is affected by the pull of gravity, a pull that is differentiated by the various depths of the water in multiple places along its surface. It is there, in the orbit of water's molecules that energy gathers, creating waves of varying strength and power. So, too, it is with interpersonal relationships. Just as a wave ebbs and flows, rushing forward, slipping quietly back, gaining strength as it builds, then crashing on the shore, it always returns to the vast undulations of the ocean itself. This movement is underpinned by the law of gravity, and in relationship development something similar occurs. Whether romantic relationship, friendship or familial communication, the ebb and flow of online communication behaviour is similar to a wave, in that the interaction often proceeds with a great speed and its trajectory is ambiguous, expanding and integrating in many different directions.

Online relationship development

Online communication behaviour not only provides people with new benefits, but also presents an unforeseen set of tensions. This is primarily due to the limitations of the online medium itself. The medium, in fact, becomes an integral part of the message in online situations (cf. McLuhan 1964). Online, as a wave of interest builds in undulating rhythm, the potential for relationship builds simultaneously and yet amorphously and at an uneven pace. Sometimes calm and lulling; other times full of rage and thunderous commotion, online interpersonal relationships must manage rocky waters. A healthy, enduring, intimate relationship begins with each self setting itself as an anchor. To ensure possibilities for healthy online relationships, interactants should present an honest representation of themselves. IORD posits this honest representation as an *authentic self*. Individual grounding for each is necessary. Thus, the first basic premise of IORD is an 'anchored' self. Without this sense of anchored, authentic self, online relationship development is easily cast adrift, lost at sea, thwarted by mirages, or naively set up to be 'catfished'.

Online, communication may take place as part of the exchange of information, but relationship development is much more complex than merely accessing and analysing facts about a person or believing what they say about themselves. Interior opposing and dialectical needs and desires present themselves in relationships developed online just as in face-to-face relationships. Only here, carefully curated bios and manipulated/filtered images add layers of complexity to the management of identity. Text responses and 'likes' in many social media platforms reveal aspects of personality that ignite desire or repel a potential friend or lover, yet these symbols and signs function much as a cross-current does in the sea, moving unpredictably against a stronger current,

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appearing chaotic and dangerous, particularly if one is an inexperienced swimmer. As a relationship moves from the point of its initiation to small talk and initial private messages, the action is represented more as a flow than as a step, for there is much movement, backwards, upwards, deeper and shallower through the continuing process of self-disclosure and uneven construction of shared meaning. In *all* relationships, these opposing needs often appear seemingly out of nowhere, much like a wave that swells and gathers momentum before it breaks upon the shore. The ongoing dialectical tensions in every relationship and will always be present as a relationship progresses. Even if two people share similar values and are completely compatible online, these tensions might be discovered more slowly or in an accelerated fashion (Baxter and Montgomery 1998).

Three factors

Having observed the growing ubiquity of online communication and moving through an era where online relationship development did not exist, I have seen the dynamics of this revolution in communication develop firsthand. Among the many new dynamics that have evolved over the last 30 years of communicating in computer-mediated communication environments, I observe three main factors have altered the landscape most significantly.

With IORD the interaction must reckon with many new dynamics including 'the mobility factor'. This means that people must no longer be situated in a synchronous time and space to communicate. These advances in communication technologies allow much greater breadth and room for communicating across many miles, often helping people in relationships 'stay in touch' with more frequency. Yet, with this development, the assurance that the other is actually engaged and listening becomes less certain. The dramaturgical action occurring on what Erving Goffman posits as a stage is rooted in place when face-to-face communication occurs, but the mobility factor creates an environment in which interpersonal online relationship develops on what may be described as murky water. Thus, when one attempts to build a relationship with another through online interactions, the difficulties in establishing solid ground are myriad – much more than for relationships in proximity. The mysterious reflective surfaces seen while surfing the web alter the dynamics involved in finding oneself attracted to someone or engaging with that person. Intimacy and relational maintenance is made even more complex by online situations.

While the language is still at the base of any relationship's progress, dynamics (such as whom else is watching, listening in and responding) creates new information that would otherwise help those attempting to relate to discern what is real and true from what is false or capricious. This dynamic is part of the 'privacy factor' (along with the continual background noise of anonymity) that greatly influences relationship development online. Online monitoring (Google Home, Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri), and numerous other information-grabbing efforts make what was once called a 'private conversation' more of an ambiguous, many-levelled, public spectacle.

As Neil Postman has noted in the case of all technologies, the '*immediacy factor*' of instant communication adds something to the way relationships develop, but it also changes everything. When one interrupts someone fifteen times a day to text the message 'what's new?' how much interest remains for a private one-to-one conversation at the end of the day? Or when plans can

be made 'on the fly' at the push of a button, what sense is there in carefully planning a romantic date? Along with these three key factors that influence online relationship development there exist numerous variables that affect its ebb and flow.

Below, I will discuss three of the more significant variables. The first involves *intentionality*. If one has no intention of relating or knowing the other, a close, lasting relationship of value and duration is not possible. Information may be exchanged, but relationships are not advanced. The second involves an ongoing practice of *self-disclosure*, the backbone of human relations. When online, the type of information disclosed is the key indicator of intention. The disclosure may involve photos, text-based information about oneself, images with quotes, memes, emojis and a flurry of ever-evolving ways to share personal information. As the relationship intensifies and spreads out, it expands like a wave, covering more personal territory as the partners integrate. This action advances conversational migration to other channels along with 'liking' behaviour, such as replying with a 'heart' emoji to the shared photo. As self-disclosure between two people intensifies, it continues to feed not only the growing relationship, but the sense of self, then pours back again towards the other for reflection and feedback. Self-disclosure strengthens the well-anchored self through feedback, reflection and desire to be known. This in turn builds into the ongoing construction of meaningful relationships with friends, lovers, siblings and potential others one may come across online. Finally, if relationships are to develop beyond the surface they must morph from online platforms to face-to-face engagement. The need for this *migration* does not nullify the outstanding encouragement and reality of relationships that may be discovered online, for example, when disabilities limit human contact. However, advancing relational communication to physical proximity creates greater opportunity for relationships to develop into enduring, well-rooted healthy ones.

Although relationship development is one of the most natural behaviours in which people take part, relationships are also among the most complex and mysterious of human ventures. Whether online or face-to-face, interpersonal relationships are replete with conflicting purposes and dialectical motivations. IORD has much in common with relating to others in face-to-face situations, but the dynamics are different enough to warrant the use of some new vocabulary for analysis. Now that interpersonal communication has become pervasive and available to conversational partners independent of time, space or proximity, new metaphors must arise to help us make meaning. Heuristic metaphors such as Altman and Taylor's 'onion' and Knapp's 'staircase' model provide a sturdy foundation for advancing the study of relationship development in online platforms and other mediated situations.

An ocean's wave is an image that envisions online relational communication as enmeshed and integrative as well as a type of communication that cannot be apprehended or perceived outside of understanding its wider context. Human touch is essential to the flourishing of relationship. The sound of the human voice is an echo of our nascent, pre-social selves; we long to hear the voice of the other. Shared life, whether as a part of the same home or in the midst of social activity, is a necessary part of the beauty and joy of all that it means to be human.

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