

## *Theories, Boundaries, and All of the Above*

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The challenge on the horizon for computer-mediated communication has to do with the refinement of theories. The most important refinement we need has to do with the articulation of boundary conditions: implicit boundaries that have always been there but which we have ignored or failed to investigate, and explicit boundaries being foisted upon us by technological developments that may limit (or maybe revise) the scope of our extant frameworks.

We have reached an important landmark in the intellectual development in the field: We can now appear to college students just as stupid as many more established disciplines, in their textbooks. We can talk about how online social interaction phenomena were accounted for in the 1980s in reference to Cause A; in the 90's, other researchers claimed it was due to Cause B's dynamics, and they did an experiment where they did X and Y to show how B was correct and A was not; but in 2002 Yin and Yang argued that the phenomenon was actually due to Cause C, and lo and behold, their sophisticated study which isolated factor D showed that C was in fact true. I am not sure how proud we should be when the correct answer is E: All of the Above.

The field faces the problem that corporations faced in the 1980s: Inconsistent performance based on weak foundations for some entities made them prone to takeover.

Here is an example that is close to home for me. When I offered the social information processing approach to relational communication online it held a weakness, much like one of its epistemological forbearers, uncertainty reduction theory. SIP predicted that with sufficient interactions, interactants – no matter how many – would come to develop affinity via CMC. The theoretical basis was in interpersonal information exchange via language and text. More exchange, more depth of impression (a strong assertion, IMHO) and more nice relations (a naïve assertion). In another part of the theoretical forest, theorists were explaining how CMC affects perceptions in groups, due to distinctly group-based and decidedly not interpersonal factors. SIDE theory goes so far as to say that when interpersonal impressions emerge, the game is over; interpersonal perceptions occur in random, idiosyncratic patterns, not uniformly positive ones. And so a problem: Two theories, with discordantly different fundamental mechanisms posited, predicting the identical outcome in terms of attraction in CMC.

My bad. How naïve. Berger got his come-uppance and I got mine. If a sophomore was to notice this cute little theoretical problem, what else could he say, but, E: All of the Above.

There are two ways a business can go from a juncture like this: Conglomerate or Diversify. In diversification each entity focuses on its core strengths, bringing value to the product, rather than attempting to possess some kind of monopoly. But few topics have yet adopted that strategy.

At one time our colleagues were interested in allocation: positing boundaries to the group identification effect. We read once that SIDE effects would not be expected to obtain in dyadic email—not enough group to kick in the group effect, you know. Too dyadic, too interpersonal, there you have it.

Less so now. Just as the social identification theory virus has run an epidemic course through social psychology, the same arguments are applied to CMC. When you communicate online you do so as a member of some group (unless you see a picture), and that's it.

Certain review essays promulgate the conglomerate takeover: Social identity theorists, with newfound accomplices, claim that others' experiments actually triggered group processes, and support not the theories others thought they were testing but social identification instead. This would be a marvelous allegation in that, were it true (or even if it might be), it should trigger astute re-analysis of previous works and data, and prompt careful attention to conditions and measures and designs that could, in principle, lend data analytic support exclusively to one or another position under certain specifiable circumstances. Unfortunately, the charges offer little more than selective interpretations of findings. They ignore methodological features on both sides that challenge simple comparisons (e. g., measurement aspects, temporal variations, and even the radically different role of communication in these studies, issues that are too seldom the focus of our discussions but are inseparable from our work). We are left, unfortunately, with recommendations for a uniform perspective of online dynamics, claiming to stake a unique balance between technological effects and human agency, damning other approaches as "technological determinism" as though it is something to scrape off one's shoe, ignoring the vastly deterministic nature of its own calculus.

The beauty of the social identification approach is its powerful accounting for some important aspects of online communication. Lots of the things on the Internet are exceptionally groupy, and in some respects the Internet is getting groupier by the day. My colleagues and I have recently listed many instances where there is much to be learned by application of these principles, in many of the Web 2.0 applications so many of which make prominent peer-based commentary, recommendations, and rating systems. If RateMyProf.com postings and eBay seller ratings are not SIDE phenomenon, I don't know what are.

I believe SIDE is bigger than its boundaries. The boundary SIDE acknowledges is visual anonymity. You see someone, their video, their photo, and it's back to the world of idiosyncrasy. I doubt this. I believe that web-based online illness support groups are influential even if users' photos are displayed, precisely because those pictured are all the same kind of people, and that is why they are there.

At the same time, I believe SIDE is less than it has claimed to be. A perspective that is decidedly group-cognition and deindividuation-based is a hard fit for the increasingly prominent interpersonal media that appear on the landscape. I reject the assertion that social identification is the basis for online relationship development.

Our responsibility is to diversify. Research needs to think quickly about cross-contextual assumptions and then dispense with them when they do not fit. Rather than maintain that a group is a group and never was or will be a collection of dyads, we discern when and how a group indeed becomes a collection of dyads, and whether or how and under what circumstances and with what inducements online communication facilitates it. Or not. We need to find whether IM and texting are what they are not (only) on the basis of whether their users sense they are common groupies, but in terms of the way their affordances of time-, place-, and circumstance-busting, and what they facilitates in terms of amusement and escape or whatever it is. Essentially, as Thibaut and Kelly might have asked—those guys who wrote about the interpersonal basis of group relations—in what way might they reduce costs and increase rewards relative to other ways to have a relationship?

We need theoretical boundaries and we need them bad. As Ramirez and I have recently asked, what are the theoretical boundary implications of emergent systems? Does Second Life personify or anonymize? Does the selectivity of a Match.Com profile map on to hyperpersonal processes for the sender if not the receiver, and if so what can we learn about it? Do the abundance of new platforms that boast photos and images blow away all our no-physicality theories, or are any of them adaptable to mixed-mode relationships, as strongly or more weakly? Online communication is becoming too mainstream for the cutting edge of understanding to be stuck in one-size-fits-all thinking, or indistinguishable application of everything we have thought of. We need to focus on discovering when the answer is A, when it is B, C: None of the Above, or D: It depends. The correct answer is D. Essay question: On just what does it depend?

### ***Author Biography***

Joe Walther is a Professor in the Department of Communication and the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies & Media at Michigan State. His research focuses generally on the use of alternative communication cue systems in the dynamics of relationships and their outcomes, with a particular focus on computer-mediated group and interpersonal interactions, areas in which he has published original theories and empirical research articles. He has held appointments in Psychology, Information Science, and Education and Social Policy at universities in the US and abroad. Formerly a division chair in the Academy of Management and the International Communication Association, his honors include the National Communication Association's Woolbert Award for an article that has stood the test of time and influenced thinking in the discipline for more than ten years.  
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