Egos, E-mail, and Internet Trolls

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A practical rule of thumb for all e-mail communications might be: Assume you will be misunderstood, perhaps as often as half of the time, and especially when you're trying to be sarcastic or funny. So concluded a recent study by two business professors in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The full title of the study is "Egocentrism Over E-Mail: Can We Communicate as Well as We Think?" The authors of the study claim that we overestimate our skills when communicating with e-mail, instant messaging, and even in interactive chat rooms. We make these incorrect assumptions because we don't bother leaning over and looking around our own egos.

The Study

Psychologists Justin Kruger (Stern School of Business, NYU) and Nicholas Epley (Graduate Business School, University of Chicago) began with a simple observation: "Social judgment is inherently egocentric." We only have one reference point that we understand with any real intimacy--and that's ourselves-- so when we try to judge the understanding of others, our perspective gets blocked and we can't get out of our own way.

When we try to focus on something like e-mail, our social nearsightedness is complicated by an additional set of problems. Kruger and Epley point out that "without the benefit of paralinguistic cues, such as gesture, emphasis, and intonation, it can be difficult to convey emotion and tone over electronic mail (e-mail)."

This can happen in countless ways, but let's look at an obvious example. Suppose you get an e-mail that has the following advice in it: "If you think the clerk in accounts receivable is rude, you should see the boss." The sender knows what she means. But is she saying the boss will help solve the problem, or does she mean the boss is an even bigger pain in the neck than the clerk? How can you tell without some kind of emphasis placed in this sentence? The phrasing is definitely ambiguous.

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Along with the other obstruction--that people see and hear things through relatively fixed filtering systems that are uniquely their own--with e-mail, you have a recipe for amusing, embarrassing, and even catastrophic interpretations.

The Kruger/Epley e-mail study used five experiments to help define the limitation that our egos impose on reading e-mail--a medium the two professors describe as "one of the most successful computer applications yet devised."

Beginning with the thesis "social judgment is inherently egocentric," the authors then quote from a music tapping study done by Elizabeth Newton in 1990. Participants were "asked to tap the rhythm of a well-known song to a listener and then assess the likelihood that the listener would correctly identify the song." As unrealistic as it sounds, the tappers expected that 50% of listeners would guess the song. Only 3% actually were able to. So what accounted for the really poor judgment on the part of the tappers? They were hearing the music, all of it, even though they were only tapping part of it, and this prevented them from seeing beyond their own experience. It wasn't that they thought their tapping was so artistic--they only had their own experience to go on. It's difficult to climb out of your own skin and walk over to the other side of the room to hear what you're tapping (or saying–and how you're saying it).

The series of five tests in the study progress from establishing the problem with egocentrism to attempts to raise the blinders by making people aware of what they were doing. The first test asked the participants to send e-mails that included sarcastic and serious statements. They were asked to predict whether the recipient could tell the difference between the statements. Test two compared their ability to predict sarcasm e-mailed and sarcasm spoken to another. The third test added sad and angry sentiments to be expressed in e-mails. The fourth had a blind test built in, and test five introduced humor.

And the results? "In each [study], participants overestimated their ability to communicate over e-mail. This was true regardless of whether participants were trying to communicate sarcasm, humor, or some other emotion or tone." The cause? "We reasoned that when people try to anticipate the perspective of their e-mail audience, they focus excessively on their own phenomenology or experience and insufficiently consider the audience's perspective. Along the way, we also found that participants overestimated their ability to interpret e-mail."

Much of the problem of miscommunication is caused by our self-imposed myopia. But there's also an inherent problem with e-mail. It's neutral–lacking (in the parlance of psychological analysis) paralinguistic cues. You can wink or frown while you're writing, but these gestures won't show up in the delivered e-mail. You can add emoticons–those little faces made of type that can be cute :-) unhappy :-(sly ;-) or any number of other things, but few people do. Maybe it's because this lexicon of cues has gotten out of control. Visit www.emoticonuniverse.com and see how many of the 300 or so emoticons currently in use you recognize.

For now, though, while we're waiting for spoken e-mail to arrive with its far richer context, it might be best to keep in mind that we're probably not very good at getting across subtle content in e-mail.

Trolls--A Footnote

Wired magazine and Slashdot, a discussion website that bills itself as "News for Nerds," both recently expressed interest in the Kruger/Epley study. They saw in it an explanation for flame wars online. A flame war is a nasty series of insulting messages that occasionally break out in online discussion groups or forums. These exchanges are common enough that there is a name for those who deliberately instigate these rude eruptions--they're called Internet trolls. The word can also mean the message itself because, as a verb, "trolling" is the act of throwing out these insulting offerings to draw others into an exchange.

Wired quotes Nicholas Epley's explanation. "That's how flame wars get started. People in our study were convinced they've accurately understood the tone of an e-mail message when in fact their odds are no better than chance. People often think the tone or emotion in their messages is obvious because they 'hear' the tone they intend in their heads as they write."

Odds no better than 50/50--that's not good. Maybe it's time to take another look at those goofy little emoticons.

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