

Gender Issues in Information Technology Communication

by Esther Kuntjara

One of the mailing lists I have been part of for over a year now is a women's list-group called *perempuan* [woman]. While the group was discussing a certain issue, one member (tagged CP) jumped in and suggested that one of the discussants (tagged DH) had to be a male despite the obviously female name used. According to CP, who acknowledged herself as female, because DH was always critical in her/his messages regarding the issues discussed and was aggressive in asserting his/her ideas, DH had to be a man. CP also attributed her suspicion that DH was a man to the language DH used. While the sexual identity of a member of a list-group may be concealed, apparently, some can still detect this through the language the person uses.

Many researches in gender and communication studies contend that women and men do differ in their language. In many situations, women's language is considered more cooperative, submissive or sensitive to others' feelings, lacking in self confidence, passive, unaggressive, and more polite than men's. Men's language is characterised as aggressive, assertive, full of confidence, matter-of-fact, and critical; in addition, men interrupt more frequently (Tannen, 1990). These findings suggest that women's language is powerless, a reflection of women's subordinate status in the society (Lakoff, 1975).

Women thus end up using polite language to raise their status and gain respect from others. Men, on the

other hand, with their usually higher social status, have more freedom to choose the language style they want. They are not compelled to show excessive politeness or "good" language style in their speech (Tannen, 1990). Although these findings cannot be considered universal in that they apply to all men and women, regardless of disparate socio-cultural backgrounds, these perceived differences reinforce gendered stereotypes of men and women. No

wonder CP, in the example above, suspected DH, who was often critical and voluble, to be male.

In computer-mediated communication, especially in the widely accessible multi-participant discourses, participants may contribute simultaneously and are liberated from the need to secure the next speaking turn or to forestall interruption by other participants. This causes the proliferation and overlapping of messages more than other written media. Such relative freedom increases the chances of hostile and abusive messages, known in Net jargon as *flaming*. While *flaming* is often considered masculine because of the widely held notion that males more easily get angry and tend to use abusive language than women,



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the women, whose identity are comfortably concealed in IT communication, might also yield to the liberty of flaming without the risk of being branded a(stereo)typical. Hence, when users' names are obscured, both men and women might be persuaded to use a language without thought to its gender-based appropriateness (Herring, 1994).

Indeed there is Netiquette to observe for anyone who joins a list discussion group. Some personal information may also be requested before one is granted access to the discussion group. However, the nature of this futuristic technology is that it seems to free users from the limitation of the physical world, including the stereotyping of gender characteristics. It suggests a more democratic society that would subsume racial and gender boundaries.

Several studies, however, show that even when a user's name does not clearly show the owner's gender (atypical names), other users are usually able to sense this from the mes-

sages he/she posts. Recent linguistic studies of computer-mediated discourse have illustrated that statistically and qualitatively, women and men have different ways of conducting themselves electronically. Male users are known to dominate mixed-sex electronic conversations. They have also been found to be the more frequent instigators of online sexual harassment. Another study found that the men, even in Cyberspaces overtly formed for discussions on feminism, pre-empt the women discussants by employing the same techniques they use in face-to-face interaction. It has even been found that the masculine discursive style in electronic conversations is seldom found between strangers conversing in the real, real-time world. Meanwhile, the women who deliberately use harsh words do so apologetically (Hall, 1994). For instance, CP, who "accused" DH of being a man, she further said: "if I am wrong, please forgive me. . . Again I apologise for my impudence or even my stupidity. For other users, if I am wrong, please don't regard this, ok." CP's message shows her apprehension lest by her suspicion, she is hurting somebody. Her civility is rare in another mailing list I am a member of where the men are blasé about their cynical comments. The contrast is illustrated in a university-based discussion group (the names are abbreviated):

PP (male): "NYONYA MENEER-MARKETING ROAD SHOW TO CAMPUS" GRATIS

The first generation gave birth,

The second generation built,
The third generation destroyed!

BL (male): An interesting seminar. I wonder in what generation are we now?

TT (male): Why wonder, BL... we are in the fifth generation...:-)))

FI (male) : BL's question could have been a good topic for a seminar or like TT's answer, we're already the tenth generation of "I know what I want"?

BC (male): . . . "I know what I want" is the slogan of the present generation or next generation? Cause I know the present young generation's slogan is "Pu tauw [a kind of drug] is what I want". He... he... he...

TT (male): 'lieur' [confused, and ignorant] generation...

OY (female): Wow, Mr. TT, only Mr. A [a colleague who happened to be someone who comes from the same ethnic group as OY and uses the same language as TT and OY have used.] and I understand, what about the others?

LK (male): As an introduction we'd better read the

book "The history of Nyonya Meneer herbs company" published by PT Grasindo. I happened to get the book from Mr. Charles Saerang himself when he attended the opening exhibition of TA PPKAI last night. It's quite interesting since it contains a lot of family intrigues in order to gain power over the company.

PP (male): *Sorry, this announcement is an invitation. I didn't expect it to be a discussion about us. This is a seminar on family business, so it isn't proper to be referred to us. We don't do business... or perhaps I am wrong... are we really doing some family business?...*

In this instance, the discussion began with PP's announcement of a seminar, which he meant to be an invitation to all university members. But the response elicited from the other male members was mostly snide comments. The only female member (OY) who joined in chose to respond to TT's disparaging use of a foreign word—*lieur* [confused and ignorant]—to refer to the young generation's fascination with *pu tauw* [a kind of drug]. OY concluded that only two of the discussion participants, herself and Mr. A besides TT understood the context of TT's comment. She then suggested this was not fair to the others. No one responded to OY's comment. The next message came from a man

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who tried to bring the discussion back to the invitation being disseminated.

Not only are women more cautious in their postings, they also tend to act more like a moral advocate in joining a discussion. OY in the above assertion might have wanted to join in posting snide comments like the other male discussants by referring to the word *lieur* to comment on, since the word is often used in the figurative meaning referring to drug users or abnormal people. However, OY did not really relate her comment on the meaning of the word itself. Instead she used her comment about the use of the word for a different purpose, i.e. to remind the list group that it was not fair to use a language that was not understood by most of the list members. Other members might have felt uncomfortable with OY's remark but were reluctant to admit that the use of the word is indeed unfair. Perhaps they might have been reluctant to comment on a more serious posting

in the midst of their snide comments. Or, they could have felt useless to prolong OY's posting which did not seem to follow their mood. Hence, even when a woman has posted her comment, the replies are often not responded similarly as when the men respond to other men's postings.

Besides the frequent apologies, the women also tend to write shorter messages and gently reproach those that wrote long messages. They contribute more overt expressions of agreement, appreciation and support. They also hedge and present their assertions indirectly as suggestions. Another research found that a small male minority dominates the discussion in terms of amount of talk (Herring, 1993). When women do attempt to participate on a more equal basis, they risk being ignored by the men. Because of social conditioning that makes women uncomfortable with direct conflict, they are intimidated by these delegitimation practices and instead avoid participating.

The gender differences observed in online conversation suggest that women prefer a "rapport" style, which is cooperative and intimate, while the men generally speak in the tone of a "report," that is, their postings sound as if they are simply providing information (Tannen, 1990). The postings in another cross-gender mailing list of a Christian group I joined a few years ago confirm these discrepancies in speaking style of men and women. The men's postings were mostly on political debate and discussions of


Christianity (in one month, the men generated a total 546 postings on politics and questions on Christianity, and the women, a combined eight postings). Many of the women's postings, moreover, dealt with health problem or information about certain events. Hence, men seem to be more confident in making arguments or debates about more thought provoking issues, women are more confident in narrating experiences of domestic concerns which show more solidarity spirit than making arguments like men do.

Discussion groups of international scope open up more opportunities for cross-gender online communication, and this can be seen even in student-based groups that link members to their peers in other countries (Michel, 1992). In such spaces, the differences in social status and gender are less marked, and the boundaries of a student community are indeed broken. A participant does not need to break into any particular clique or take social risks in order to hold a conversation with someone she/he would normally not talk to.

A study of young women in virtual communities found that these women fully realised that by their participation in discussion groups, they were breaking away from gendered roles (Kaplan and Farrell, 1994). With the men, a common reason for their participation in online discussions was to avoid face-to-face personal communication. But for the women, they joined online discussions precisely to

supplement and enhance their communication with others. The study stresses that as more and more women grow up with new information technologies forming part of their everyday reality, the stereotyping of technology as a masculine domain and practice will necessarily fall apart. The premised breakdown of gender boundaries offers a radical shift in our ways of understanding the complex intersection of gender, technology and culture. Women's representation on the Internet could help increase their involvement in social development (Ekelin, 1999).

Various researches suggest that when women's representation is no longer biologically based, as it sometimes happens on cyber space, the Internet can be empowering to women. It allows women to be active and constructive. It allows their voices to be heard, and serves as a mechanism for the consideration of their ideas and insights. The Internet could contribute to the construction of knowledge by both men and women.

However, the Internet can also be seen as a place where the same stereotypes of gender identity are recreated. It could end up yet another medium reflecting the constraints imposed by a society dominated by capitalism and patriarchy, and therefore, still another problematic site for women. 

Esther Kuntjara got her Ph.D. from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. Her main interest is in the study of gen-

der and language. She is currently a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia.

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