



A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Joseph Walther,
creator of Social Information Processing Theory**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOXbYj0I1cE>

Griffin: I'm talking with Joe Walther from Cornell University. Joe is the author of Social Information Processing Theory. Joe, what's the theory about?

Walther: Social Information Processing Theory is about how people get to know one another and develop relationships when they communicate over computer-mediated communication. This would be through e-mail, text messaging, computer conferencing, and systems like that, that we now see commonly over the Internet. And the theory suggests that, while we don't have the nonverbal cues at our disposal that we traditionally rely on to size up one another, make judgments about one another, and to exchange, give off, a lot of social information about who we are and how we feel, the people adapt to the restrictions of the medium by not only looking for clues in the language that people use as they read messages from other people, but they adapt their emotional and their social expressions to the language they have available. And that dance and that negotiation of identification and relationship development takes place more slowly, but eventually, through the language-only context of computer-mediated communication.

Griffin: Is it possible that all this information transfer helps us form the impression, and so CMC may be just as good as face-to-face, but that face-to-face is better in the drawing close after the impression is made?

Walther: That's an interesting contention. I think the question has to be answered from what kind of intimacy and what kind of relationship is it. I think obviously in the case of romantic love and physical affection there would be a point at which just chatting online would never get us past a certain point. Obviously the species would not continue if we did not get together at some point. [laughter]

Griffin: I've thought of that.

Walther: Yes, as we fall in love. And, yet, in some research we find people like each other better as they work together online than the groups in parallel who are working face-to-face. So, not all intimacy is equal. And we don't yet know what you can't do online. It is amazing that people are not only falling in love online, but experiencing sexual arousal with one another online. So, I don't know that we have really seen the upper limit of what's possible yet.

Griffin: There's an old joke about a long-distance relationship where the fellow wrote the girl a letter every day for two years, and she finally married the postman.

Walther: Right.

Griffin: Could that happen in CMC? I mean, could they develop affection for their computer because of the message?

Walther: I wouldn't go so far as to say falling in love with the computer, but could they fall in love with the medium? Could they think CMC is the greatest thing? You know, we have anecdotal cases – not me personally, but are some published accounts, many accounts on the internet – of people who will tell you that the internet is the greatest way to meet people ever discovered. There's no risk; you don't have to put it out there and embarrass yourself; people fall in love with you because of your mind and not your body. And, so, people have become enamored with this medium as a way to socialize. Interestingly enough, people also hate the medium when it gets in the way: it's too slow; you can't tell what somebody is really like; people will lie to you online. So, people distrust the medium rather than distrusting the people who are using the medium. So, I'm not sure people will fall in love with the computer the way this person fell in love with the postman; but people develop very strong attitudes about the medium, either for good or for bad, rather than thinking about the people behind it. I find that very amazing.

Griffin: How about in terms of whether it's good for us or not? I interviewed a theorist six years ago who talked about the ice cream "Death by Chocolate," saying that if she had the chance, she'd eat it all the time, but it wouldn't be good for her. Could that be true on Internet usage? That you could love it, but that it really would not be good for you.

Walther: Studies are not quite conclusive. They seem to suggest that people who already have problems, who are escaping from those by spending a lot of time online, are not in fact doing themselves any good. It doesn't help to offset the social deficits that they had in the first place. So, it may be like the ice cream "Death by Chocolate;" it's too attractive but bad for you in the long run.

Griffin: My students, knowing that I was going to interview you, made a list of things on the Internet that are worrisome: Over 50% of e-mail is spam; web blogs that lie; identity theft; sexual predators; pornography being rampant; people portraying who they are when they aren't; flaming and occasionally fierce viruses spreading. Given all this, what is your code of ethical behavior that you recommend?

Walther: Well, it's a scary world on the Internet. It's like a big city, isn't it? I mean, there are frauds, there are hucksters, there are advertisements everywhere in a big city with people speaking different languages. One should approach the Internet the way you would approach a big city where you don't know your way around, and that's with caution. There will also be a lot of culture in a big city and a lot of interesting people to meet also. But I think it's important to remember to know in which environments you are playing and know in which environments you are not. The Internet has a lot of great places to play, where people are almost encouraged to

experiment with identity, to see what it's like to not be yourself, to exaggerate about certain attributes, and to hold back things that you may not like to disclose. Adults don't get to play with identity in very many places the way kids in a sandbox get to. And that's where I think a code of ethics becomes very important... knowing when you are playing and knowing when people are counting on you to be truthful about yourself, and what you're going to deliver when you've said. Ultimately, when it counts in relationships, professional or personal ones, delivery and people's vulnerability to your delivery is what's going to define your relationship and the quality of the kind of person you are. Those I think are important ethical codes. The Internet partly is for play, and it's partly for work and for trust. Keeping those arenas distinct is probably a good ethical approach.

Griffin: Do you have advice for the person who wants to move from CMC alone to meeting in person?

Walther: Share information with other parties that someone else can corroborate. If you can point to a photo on your company's web site or your college's web site that somebody knows you didn't doctor or you didn't select. That's probably going to be more valuable information for someone who wants a photo than one you just send as an attachment to an e-mail message. So, information that is not manufactured by yourself but reflects you nevertheless, that helps people trust that they have real perceptions of one another. That's important before the face-to-face meeting.

Griffin: Would social information processing or the hyper-personal perspective have something to say about a relationship where you meet first and then maintain the relationship through CMC?

Walther: The theories are not designed to cover those instances.

Griffin: But if the theories weren't designed to talk about multi-mode relationships, isn't the scope of the theory very narrow?

Walther: That's an important question. That's, of course, one of the things we like research to do. And research should show us that the scope can be enlarged or is, indeed, more narrow than the theorist first anticipated. That's why we're still plugging away at this. Well, if the theories can help us understand people become acquainted up to the point where they finally meet face-to-face, that's still not bad. At the same time, if it only applies to people who have never met face to face, that would be a limitation scope. It's exciting to see that they might expand or they might collapse.

Griffin: Is being a theorist a dangerous occupation?

Walther: It's risky.

Griffin: Risky but not dangerous.

Walther: I've had some enjoyable sessions with my students and colleagues as we've worked on some other projects, as we've tried to hypothesize through. On more than one occasion we've reached into our wallets and pulled out a dollar and thrown it on the table and said, "I betcha we're gonna see this;" and somebody has countered and said, "I betcha we're gonna see that." And we realized that hypothesis-generating is a gambling game.