

LOL: Humor Online

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I am often asked whether or not it is dangerous to try to be funny online. Are you more likely to be misinterpreted if you crack a joke or use a witticism in email, instant messaging, or on a newsgroup or blog, than if you attempted humor face-to-face? A survey of guides on netiquette would suggest that, indeed, being humorous online could be a risky business for a number of reasons [2].

First, and most obviously, because the vast majority of online communication continues to be text-based, we have fewer cues available to signal our humorous intent when online. Second, humor communicated face-to-face tends to be tightly coordinated between the speaker and the listener. The would-be online humorist, however, doesn't always get timely feedback as to whether their recipient "got" the intended humor. This is especially the case in asynchronous forms of communication, such as email and newsgroups.

But as anyone that has actually engaged in online communication knows, our online conversations are often rife with humor, jocularity, irony, wordplay, puns, etc. For example, when we asked people in our studies how often they used humor online, over 85 percent said they used humor frequently. Although there is surprisingly little empirical research concerned with humor online, what research there is suggests that humor is indeed quite common in email, synchronous messaging, Internet chat, newsgroups, and mailing lists. In fact, in one study participants interacting in an instant messaging type environment produced about five times more ironic humor (e.g., sarcasm) than people interacting face-to-face, despite talking



Figure 1. Graphical emoticons available in current instant messaging systems

about the same topics [1]. If the risk associated with using humor is so great, *why* do people produce it so frequently online, *how* do they go about doing it and what principles should we follow when designing interfaces to help support humor online?

Humor can serve a variety of functions that may be especially important in mediated interactions. For example, it may represent an important means for conveying relational information in text-based settings. Humor can also function to enhance bonds between individuals by highlighting a shared sense of humor or common ground, which may be especially important when other methods of demonstrating bonds or ties, such as shared fashion styles, are inhibited in text-based interactions. It seems that when we do not have the usual trappings of face-to-face interactions to convey interpersonal information, humor may be used to compensate.

But how do participants express and understand humor online? Humans are remarkably adaptive communicators and

have developed a number of conventions to overcome the deficit of nonverbal cues available in online communication spaces. Perhaps the best known convention is the emoticon, which originally involved using punctuation to represent facial expressions (e.g., ;) , but more recently, communication software allows users to select from a bewilderingly wide range of graphic representations (see Figure 1). Users can attach an emoticon to a message to signal its humorous intent, although research suggests that the actual pragmatic effect of emoticons appears to be quite weak [3]. A second convention is the playful use of punctuation, such as ellipsis (...) or multiple exclamation or questions marks, to highlight that a message may be ambiguous or humorous [1]. In a sense, punctuation can be considered the prosody of online communication. Indeed, our research tends to suggest that humor, perhaps because of its subtlety, is more frequently tagged with playful punctuation than with emoticons. Finally, the specialized nomenclature of online discussion that consists primarily of abbreviations (e.g., “lol” for “laugh out loud” or “j/k” for “just kidding”) is an important convention for expressing humor, and perhaps even more importantly, for responding to it. As can be seen in Figure 2, many of these abbreviations function as backchannel responses, which come so easily in face-to-face interactions (e.g., smiling or chuckling in response to a pun) and provide relatively lightweight evidence to the speaker that the addressee has detected the humor.

How might these observations inform design? First, it is clear that the cues that have been developed so far for expressing humor online are quite rudimentary—surely we can do better than emoticons? For example, given that nonverbal signals (e.g., facial expressions or laughter) are not generally part of humorous messages per se but instead tend to *frame* them, then perhaps designers should look to aspects of the interface that frame online communications, such as the border of an instant messaging window, to provide signals for humor. Second, designing more effortless backchannel methods for providing feedback about the comprehension of humor may be particularly important. Allowing the addressee to more easily signal appreciation of the humorous intent of a message should reduce miscommunications and those occasionally worrisome moments when we wonder whether or not our humor was understood.

Even without these kinds of design advances, however, we seem to be surprisingly good at being humorous online. So if users ever ask you whether it is safe to use humor on the net, just tell them to go online and be funny—everyone else is.

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ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION	ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
BG	big grin	LMSO	laughing my socks off
BWL	bursting with laughter	LOL	laugh out loud
EG	evil grin	LSHMBH	laughing so hard my belly hurts
FOMCL	falling off my chair laughing	LTM	laugh to myself
G	grin	ROTFL	rolling on the floor laughing
GD&R	grinning, ducking and running	SETE	smiling ear to ear
GOL	giggling out loud	SOL	smiling out loud
J/K	just kidding	SWL	screaming with laughter
LHO	laughing head off	VBG	very big grin

Figure 2. Online abbreviations related to humor