Negotiating cross-cultural difference in electronic discussion

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Abstract
Although a good deal of research exists both on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and on cross-cultural communication, rarely are the two areas brought together. In practice, however, extrapolation from one context to the other is common, with the internet and email being increasingly used to teach cross-cultural communication. What assumptions about the transfer of culture into cyberspace inform these practices? And are these assumptions well-founded? This paper explores practices of discussion on French and British internet media sites to determine the extent to which they reflect communicative practices elsewhere in those cultures. The case studies underline the importance of attending to the interaction between culture and genre, and have pedagogical implications for the use of such sites in the teaching of cross-cultural communication.

Introduction
Although computer-mediated encounters between people of different cultures are an everyday occurrence, their outcome depends on largely unanalysed assumptions about the ways in which intercultural communication plays out on-line. Much turns upon the ways in which cultural conventions of communication and the constraints and possibilities of computer-mediated communication (CMC) impact upon each other, and yet studies bringing together the two fields are rare. In practice, however, extrapolation from one context to the other is common: cross-cultural communication skills, for example, are increasingly taught via email partnerships and discussion lists, as if there were a more or less direct transfer of culture into cyberspace.

This paper explores cultural differences in electronic discussion and questions the extent to which it parallels other kinds of interaction. Behaviour on discussion facilities attached to prominent British and French media websites provides the case studies.
Assumptions about internet communication

Firstly, however, we need to rehearse the prevailing assumptions about the role of culture in CMC, which inform teaching practices and which will be tested against our corpus. We can identify four conflicting views:

1. The borderless world: the internet removes cultural difference. In a carry-over from early utopian visions, the internet is seen as a space where old rules and identities can be left behind. It is viewed either as a culture-free zone, or as a culture in itself. This ‘internet culture’ may be multifarious or in flux, but can still be described as one (Scheuermann and Taylor 1997; Johnston and Johal 1999). From this basis, it is possible to explain such phenomena as the comparatively slow uptake of the internet in France by an apparent incompatibility between internet culture and French national culture (Evans 1998). The tenacity of this particular viewpoint can be seen as it resurfaces in Kirk St. Amant’s recent paper (2002). While his work helpfully indicates potential sources of cross-cultural difficulty in on-line communication, it assumes dominant on-line practices derived from U.S. mores, to which other cultures will be able to adapt with greater or lesser success. His suggested solution to cross-cultural confusion — the rapid introduction of an international on-line protocol (his comparison is with Aviation English) — effectively is a plea for enforcement of a supposedly culturally neutral cyberspace.

2. The internet as a superhighway to cultural difference. In complete contrast, the internet is understood to give immediate access to otherness by the many who log on seeking direct contact with other cultures. A typical example:

   By using the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW), students can have almost instantaneous access to a range of foreign experiences in their target language. The computer then serves as a gateway to the virtual foreign world where ‘real people’ are using real language in ‘real context’. (Osuna and Meskill 1988: 71–72).

While physical boundaries may be irrelevant, the existence of cultural borders continues to be asserted.

Despite the evident contradiction between these two commonplaces, they have been blended in practice, for example in courses aimed at diversifying students’ cultural experiences: through CMC we have access to our cultural other, but this other is assumed to be doing the same thing as we are — chatting, debating, courting — in the same way. The cross-cultural aspect of communication is restricted to the content, as
participants swap information about their respective cultures (e.g. Gunske von Kölln and Gunske von Kölln 1997; Wong 1995). From this point of view, the question of cultural difference inflecting communicative styles in electronic discussion does not even arise.

3. Internet communication consistent with other forms of cultural difference. Amongst the researchers who do leave space for cultural variation, many suggest that behaviour in CMC simply conforms to more general tendencies in cultural behaviour (such as those described by Hall 1977, Hofstede 1980 and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998) and reflects the cultural affiliation of participants. Thus electronic discussion is seen by Chen (1998), O’Dowd (2001) and Rice (1996), for example, as, if not identical to, then at least continuous with face-to-face discussion in its intercultural aspects. Any inconsistencies will be due merely to the internet’s perceived ‘reduced social dimension’ (Coverdale-Jones 1998, cited in O’Dowd 2001) or ‘restricted channels of communication’ (Rice 1996); in other words, the text-based nature of exchanges is understood to limit the aspects of behaviour that are culturally determined. With no non-verbal cues to worry about, there will be fewer ways for cultural difference to emerge. It’s just face-to-face without the faces. From this point of view, on-line discussion is understood to be inflected by pervasive norms of cultural behaviour, whilst the reverse—the impact of the mode of discussion on this behaviour—is dismissed.

Like the first and second, this third view is influential in areas of education where electronic discussion is used to teach intercultural communication. CMC is seen as training for in-country encounters, its lessons assumed to be generally applicable.² Key-pal ‘dating agencies’ (such as the International Tandem Network, Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections) reinforce the view that mismatches in cultural expectations (‘culture bumps’, Archer 1986) that occur on-line are just virtual versions of face-to-face culture bumps. A two-way extrapolation operates here: teachers expect wider cultural norms to manifest themselves on-line, and students expect what they learn on-line to apply to other modes of encounter. However, the assumption underpinning this extensive teaching practice has not been investigated thoroughly.

4. CMC is inflected by but also inflects cultural and genre-related expectations. There are occasional indications in the literature that cultural values do not map neatly onto electronic discussion. Ma’s study suggests that East Asian students adopt a more direct and explicit style on-line because of the medium (1996: 182). In a recent article, Ulijn et al. (2000) ponder whether implicit/explicit communication styles might influence the way the internet is used, but then hint that the influence may work
in the other direction, positing that the explicitness apparently favoured by the internet can be seen even in the on-line behaviour of the reputedly indirect Japanese.

This points to a fourth understanding of internet communication: that the nature of CMC is not simply dictated by cultural affiliation, but itself impacts on communicative behaviour, without this impact taking the form of universal conventions of on-line discussion. That is to say, while CMC might not elide all cultural variation, it might favour certain communicative practices.

In broader theoretical terms, this fourth hypothesis reminds us that the ways in which CMC manifests itself in a given culture need to be understood in terms of the interplay between cultural and generic rules. Yet little research considers the tensions between genre-related and cultural expectations informing the conventions of virtual communities and how these are or are not resolved. Following Freadman (1994: 4) and Swales (1990: 45–46), we understand genre as encompassing all aspects of a cultural practice, linguistic and non-linguistic, and including its cultural purpose. Our investigation will remain attentive to genre as it focuses on cultural differences on-line.

Our study

Let us move, then, to assess the validity of the hypotheses outlined above by analysing our corpus. Setting aside assumptions 1 and 2 as overly naive we shall relate our findings to the more culturally aware hypotheses 3 and 4.

Our findings are based on a study of internet discussion sites attached to four prominent media web-sites: those of the British Broadcasting Corporation, the French news weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and two ‘quality’ daily newspapers, the U.K.’s *The Guardian* and France’s *Le Monde*. The pull of such high-profile sites means that large numbers of participants, from a wide range of backgrounds, post messages as a means of participating in discussion.

Sites are comparable in that all address an educated public with an interest in current affairs. All are general interest sites, with moderators, subject to similar sets of rules prohibiting offensive messages, and with similar mechanics of posting. All accommodate informality and can cope – to varying degrees – with non-standard grammar and spelling. Finally, all four aim to facilitate discussion between participants. These are media sites that have moved away from what Light and Rogers (1999) call more ‘traditional models’ based on Letters to the Editor (as opposed to other readers), where many contributions are never published and the possibility of interactive discussion between contributors.
is severely limited (see their examples of the BBC and CNN sites at their time of writing, c. 1998).

Differences between the four sites are not simply binary (French versus British). We do not assume that French/British participants restrict themselves to sites of the same cultural origin, nor that participants invariably identify as French or (even less) ‘anglo’. Neither do we suppose that a language coincides with a culture: French and English are spoken in a variety of national cultures, and subcultural and professional affiliations overlap in diverse ways. Indeed the most obvious differences between exchanges on these sites reflect subcultural differences between reading/listening populations: political leanings, degrees of staidness or trendiness, censorship or libertarianism, tolerance of offensive language distinguish the sites in ways predictable from the media organisations concerned. However, despite this heterogeneity, there are marked differences in communicative strategies between the British and French sites, to the point where we can make some generalisations about anglophone and francophone internet discussion practices in such contexts.

Notions of discussion

Since all four sites aim to facilitate discussion, and lay claim to intellectual standards, we shall start by comparing the ways in which ‘discussion’ is defined and interpreted. Firstly, the labels given to the discussion facilities are revealing:

- **Nouvel Observateur**: Débats
- **Le Monde**: Forums
- **BBC**: Messageboards
- **The Guardian**: Talk

The *débats* proposed by *Le Nouvel Observateur* are debates in a quite precise sense: discussion starters supplied by the magazine invite polemical stances. In the overwhelming majority they are provocative, calculated to polarise viewpoints and indeed raise tempers as far as possible:

- ‘Trouvez-vous normal, ou pas, de limiter les libertés publiques au nom de la lutte contre le terrorisme?’ ['Is it reasonable or not to restrict public freedom in the name of the fight against terrorism?']
- ‘L’IVG − Vous êtes pour ou contre?’ ['Abortion − are you for or against?']
- ‘Oussama ben Laden, terroriste ou héros?’ ['Osama Bin Laden, terrorist or hero?'].

In this context, even questions that do not require a yes/no answer and appear less incendiary (e.g. ‘Que représente Walt Disney à vos yeux?’ [‘What does Walt Disney represent for you?’]) invite similar polarisation (in this instance, between pro- and anti-American sentiments). Discussion on the Nouvel Observateur site, unlike that on the other three, can only occur within the confines of the debates proposed.

Discussion at Le Monde takes place within the context of forums. These are defined by themes for discussion (Environment, Politics, etc.), the list being rounded out with ‘Tous sujets’ [‘Any topic’] (previously ‘Autres sujets’ [‘Other Topics’]). The use of ‘forum’ suggests that despite the absence of the word ‘debate’ these spaces are for the exchange of opinions, and self-reflexive commentary posted by participants explicitly distinguishes the notion of ‘forum’ from that of chat (cf. miaou’s fear that the forum would become a chat-room, quotation below). Although the seemingly indeterminate ‘Autres sujets’ appears far removed from the construction of opposition on the Nouvel Observateur site, it is striking how many times life on this forum was described in terms of confrontation, from the tennis match to the pitched battle, by way of the friendly punch up said by one participant to characterise the French modus operandi. It is only recently that this forum – and this one alone – has been opened up to include ‘le chat’ and ‘le small talk’. Previously, sustained interaction could only take the form of debate, as we have shown elsewhere with a study of two ill-fated English girls who attempted to use the forum as a penpal pool (Hanna and de Nooy 2003).

In sharp contrast to this unsuccessful gambit, learners of English who follow the BBC’s signposts to their very own messageboard will find that a simple ‘write to me’ message may unleash twelve pages of postings on hobbies, pets and ambitions (as was the experience of Anna K., who posted a short self-introduction to the ‘Welcome to our Message Board’ topic of the ‘Learning English’ section, 18:39 Feb 23, 2002). This may be an extreme example, but the interpretation of discussion as conversation characterises interaction on the BBC site. Unlike ‘debates’ and ‘forum’, the label ‘Messageboard’ gives no promise of an exchange of contrasting ideas and opinions.

While the house rules define the purpose of the Messageboards as ‘providing an atmosphere in which constructive and mature dialogue takes place’, such constructive maturity finds its voice in – conversation. On the homepage, the tagline to the label ‘messageboards’ reads ‘Daily conversations in the UK’s largest community’, the ‘Welcome’ message starts with the imperative to ‘Get Talking!’ and the topics menu is headed by:
300 + CONVERSATIONS, HAPPENING NOW!
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT?
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/messageboards/, Apr 24, 2002)

This emphasis on conversation is reflected in the organisation and selection of topics offered. Like Le Monde, the BBC makes room for discussion of an extremely wide range of topics (from World News to TV soaps to cooking to local weather), but unlike either of the French sites studied, discussion as debate is far from prioritised, although it does figure in a section entitled ‘The Great Debate’.

‘Talk’ is the title of The Guardian’s discussion site, and the ‘Talk Policy’ is revelatory:

We want The Talk to be the place on the net where you will always find lively, entertaining and, above all, intelligent discussions. The last thing the net needs is yet another site where any attempt at conversation is drowned out by a few people hurling mindless abuse at each other.
(http://www.guardian.co.uk/talkpolicy/0,5540,66799,00.html, Aug 15, 2002)

Once again, participation in such ‘intelligent discussion’ is construed as an ‘attempt at conversation’. The ever-proliferating discussions proposed by participants canvas such issues as ‘vacuous celebrity chitchat’, the comparative ugliness of Yorkshire villagers, funny Freudian slips, sad singledons, or indeed, ‘Anything’:

Anything on Anything
The arts — 1/7/02 03:26am
(Guardian Talk, Latest Discussions list, 03:27 am July 1, 2002)

Other sections are for seeking information or advice, but unlike the BBC, there is no specified area for debate.

Our evidence here supports some notion of cultural determination of the form that discussion will take: of our apparently comparable sites, the French ones display a tendency to view discussion as an opportunity for debate, whilst on the British ones, discussion means first and foremost the chance for a chat.5

Debate
This is not to say that debate is excluded from the British sites. Is it then possible to move between the Nouvel Observateur or Le Monde sites to
discussions on the *Guardian* or the BBC sites identified as debate and find uniformity within a precise genre of on-line debate? Apparently not. It seems that the overriding characterisation of internet discussion in terms of debate or conversation has consequences for all interaction on these sites.

Postings to the debates of *Le Nouvel Observateur* offer a large number of clear definitions of what contributors expect of interaction. Contributors frequently state that the forum is there for people to *express opinions* and to discuss them *seriously*. You are expected to formulate your ideas, make a point, develop an argument and discuss points made by others. Comments must be *pertinent* and *address the topic*, and personal attacks should be avoided. Apart from this last, which is constantly infringed, these rules of engagement are clearly shared by most participants and invoked regularly to criticise postings by opponents. Thus Frederic asks Lariflette exactly what his point is and suggests his contribution needs to be more relevant:

> *Vous n’avez ni argumenté ni rien apporté au débat.*
> *Si vous voulez participer au débat, il vous suffit de reprendre les points développés par d’autres et les discuter.*

[You have neither argued a point nor contributed anything to the debate. If you want to participate in the debate, all you need to do is take up the points developed by others and discuss them.]

(Frederic, 17: 26 Feb 25, 2002, *Les quotidiens gratuits* [Free daily newspapers])

At *Le Monde*, these same rules hold, confirming the status of the fora as spaces for debate. Eschewing low-grade insult swapping, factual and linguistic inaccuracy, participants describe themselves as there to debate, that is, to formulate an argument, to set out and defend their ideas.

- *On veut convaincre les autres de ses idées.*
- *On veut participer à un débat collectif et, à son niveau, même si on n’est pas journaliste, polémiste, homme politique, avoir quand même sa part des échanges et son mot à dire sur les grands et petits sujets de société.*

[We want to convince others of our ideas.

We want to participate in a collective debate, and, at our own level, despite not being journalists, polemicists or politicians, nonetheless play a part in exchanges and have our say on social issues great and small.]

(V. Graslin, 17:05 Feb 10, 2000, *Pourquoi des forums?* [Why fora?])
The BBC’s ‘The Great Debate’ can eventually be found under ‘News & Sport’, where it is divided into four sections (‘topics’): ‘World Views’, ‘The Front Page’, ‘It’s Your Parliament’, ‘Virtual Soapbox’. Again demonstrating that debate is not the central concern of the BBC site, ‘The Great Debate’ boasts few topics compared to other subheadings of the news and sport category: compare Football (5 topics), Five Live (other sports, 9 topics), Weather (5 topics, including notably the popular ‘Talk about the weather’). Moreover, the subtitle to ‘The Great Debate’ is (yet again) ‘Conversation for the Nation’, with readers encouraged to ‘come and join our conversations or start your own’. Far from being emphasised, there are only two reprises of the word ‘debate’ within the Great Debate section, occurring where the function of the topic ‘World Views’ is defined and clarified:

This is the place to debate world events. Let us know your opinions on the stories behind the headlines.
This discussion is for high quality, non-inflammatory debate […].
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-perl/h2/h2.cgi?x=y&board=greatdebate, Apr 24, 2002)

With ‘debate’, like discussion, being glossed as conversation, there is very little to distinguish the BBC Great Debate boards from message-boards that make no claim to hosting debate. In both cases, postings tend to be informal and brief (some consisting of simple interjections) and relevance to the topic is optional. In fact, it is quite difficult to find a discussion that a Nouvel Observateur contributor would recognise as a debate. ‘Debate’ seems to be best understood as a thematic label – conversation about current affairs.

As mentioned above, ‘Guardian Talk’ does not set aside a particular place for debate, yet it is not uncommon for participants to refer to their discussion as debate, particularly under the international topics and in more professionally oriented ‘talkboards’ such as ‘Education Talk’. Participant reference to ‘debate’ frequently coincides with efforts to monitor interaction, whether in reasserting the topic or in enunciating techniques of argumentation (citing sources, getting the facts straight). Such exchanges, however, are not separate from short chatty postings but alternate with them in the same discussion. It is not, then, that Guardian readers do not know what debate is, nor how it might be enacted: it is just not the dominant model for ‘Guardian Talk’, and takes place within conversations. Thus in the history folder of ‘Guardian Talk’ (a reliable source of sustained argument), we find in a discussion of ‘The Indo European Homeland Question’ the following:
Mornin’ folks (:–
check this out:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2174437.stm
(Velikovsky, 08:36 am Aug 9, 2002)
Morning Vel – give me a moment and I’ll get stuck into that!
(dru2107, 08:41 am Aug 9, 2002)

followed eleven minutes later by the latter’s point by point rebuttal of
the article referred to. If debate excludes conversation on the French
sites, the two coexist comfortably on the Guardian and BBC sites. It
seems that the overarching construal of participation as conversation is
the primary determinant of interaction on the British sites. This becomes
even clearer when we compare the range of tolerance of digression on
the various sites.

Tolerance of digression
At Le Nouvel Observateur, when discussion of punishment of crimes by
foreigners drifts from ‘delinquent foreigners’ to foreigners in general,
William capitalises his exhortation ‘REVENONS AU SUJET’ [‘Let’s get
back to the subject’] (WILLIAM, 21:24 Jan 25, 2002, La double peine
[Double punishment]). Strict relevance is demanded. On the same site,
Tommy’s response to Xtophe criticises the latter’s sanctimonious hypocrisy,
but still addresses the topic (Jean-Paul II’s papacy). He nonetheless
feels it necessary to apologise for reacting ‘en dehors du débat’ [‘outside
the debate’], assuring participants his conclusion won’t be ‘si décalé que
cela avec le sujet’ [‘as irrelevant as all that’] (12:11 Nov 14, 2001, Le
pape [‘The pope’]). Even such minimal digression is apparently cause
for concern.

This is a far cry from conventions at the BBC, where there is no sense
that sticking to the topic is essential or even desirable. This is clearly
illustrated by the wave of discussion that swept the site following the
introduction of a new format in the first week of May 2002. In every
section of every messageboard affected the change was extensively dis-
cussed. There was no sense that this topic should be treated separately
(under ‘Technical Terrors’ for instance – which would of course have
marginalised the discussion). We can contrast this with Forums Le Monde
where discussion of changes in format or registration is carefully pigeon-
holed in ‘Les forums – Vos questions’ [‘Fora – Your Questions’]. It also
fits with a wider pattern of behaviour on the BBC and Guardian sites in
which topics define not so much the subject matter under discussion, as
the community to which a contributor belongs. Thus, the topics dis-
cussed under World Views, The Front Page, Virtual Soapbox, It’s Your
Parliament overlap enormously at the same time as they evolve in unforeseeable directions. Once you have joined a community with a basic interest in world or British affairs, it seems, you can talk about almost anything.

The introduction of the new format is of further interest to our study in that the very changes it brought about, and their reception, relate precisely to the issue of relevance to the original topic. Under the new format, the various threads within (for example) World Views no longer all appeared intertwined as they had previously. They now had to be clicked on separately to be read. This was interpreted as ‘encourag[ing] people to post on topic’ (Bruce Robertson, 16:42 May 8, 2002, Outta here). Previously posters were all part of one very large discussion branching off in various directions (‘everyone talking at the same time,’ Eamon O Ceallaigh, 16:57 May 8, 2002, Outta here) whereas the new format aimed to separate discussions by topic. Protest indicates that this segregation was seen by many as restrictive and undesirable:

[The new format] does mess the flow of our posts unbelievably [...].
(Delia Jones, 16:48, May 8, 2002 Outta here)
i want to freeflow between discussions [...]. i don’t understand the production team’s obsession with keeping topics together. the people who post don’t seem to have any problem following threads.
(tripti paarthi, 18:16 May 8, 2002, Outta here)

The latter contributor felt that as a woman she was ‘capable of following more than one conversation at a time’ (17:54 May 8, 2002, Outta here), and typically the flow of discussion then went to women in power, to Margaret Thatcher and her minimal sleep requirements, to studies of optimal sleep times.

Similarly on Guardian Talk, it is not unusual for a thread to drift from theme to theme. Moreover a personal chat between regulars can surface as part of any discussion (see for example an exchange between shelagh53 and dreamsn about how the former spent Saturday night [01:31 – 01:45 am Feb 17, 2002, Asterix v Tintin]). Occasional comments about being ‘off topic’ are rarely complaints, but show awareness of detours:

This thread will have to settle down into being about something if it is to go anywhere
(Henry94 06.59 pm Jun 5, 2002, Time for another Reformation in the UK)

Thus, on the BBC and Guardian sites, there is no sense that digression is a problem, or that any postings after the first one need to relate to
the original topic. Topics do not define the discussion, and the point of
these conversations, unlike debate, is not to arrive at an answer or at
least a stand off in which all parties have laid out their arguments.
Rather, topics are conversation starters and the game is to keep the ball
rolling, or indeed passing over the net in a succession of entertaining
volleys, rather than delivering the winning, unanswerable smash. Hence
we find the *Guardian* thread ‘Killing off a thread’ about conversation
stoppers, initiated as follows:

> Does anyone else feel odd if their post is the last in the thread, i.e.
> noone posts any more? I don’t know whether to feel satisfied that I’ve
> had the last word, or to be embarrassed that I’ve killed the discussion.
> Also, starting a thread that no one subsequently contributes to is mor-
> tifying. (hint, hint!)
> (patrick1971, 12:32 pm Sep 18, 2001)

and boasting 12,000 postings eleven months later, including such phatic
offerings as

> … erm …
> (mijj, 07:20 pm Aug 12, 2002)

and

> go thread go
> (BuddhaPest, 07:51 pm Aug 9, 2002)

Although this is an extreme case, threads on the *Guardian* site are far
longer than those on the other sites studied and are typically peppered
with chatty digression, there being little to add in the way of new per-
spectives on a topic after the first thousand messages. At the other ex-
treme, and again demonstrating the importance of topic-driven exchange
over conversation on this site, *Le Monde* discussions are closed and ar-
chived as read-only folders after about 50 messages, which the modera-
tors consider sufficient to explore a topic thoroughly.

With the vagueness of the topic ‘Autres sujets’, it might have been
expected that this *Le Monde* forum could have taken the same meander-
ing form as the British sites, yet the commitment to debate described
earlier produces a general understanding that discussion is to be topic-
driven. ‘What is the subject matter of ‘Autres sujets’? asks Godlewski
(16:23 Aug 02, 2000, *Nom de la section … [‘name of the section …’]*),
opening the discussion thread and questioning why ‘sport’ is the only
suggestion. And when Eleanor, an English student, wants to practice her
French, she is advised to take a topic — any topic — and talk about it:
[Si vous désirez parler de n’importe quel sujet, la vache folle, l’évolution de la monarchie dans votre pays ou la construction européenne, n’hésitez pas!

[If you want to talk about any topic whatsoever, mad cows, developments with the monarchy in your country or the construction of Europe, don’t hesitate!]

(Lambda, 19:09 Feb 24, 2000, Welcome chez les grenouilles [Welcome to frog-land])

The role of ‘Autres sujets’, then, was to cover topics for debate that hadn’t been foreseen in the listed categories. Certainly, other kinds of messages found their way on to Autres sujets, but the occasional requests for penpals or various kinds of information were clearly treated as aberrant: even in a discussion called ‘Autres sujets’ it is possible to write off-topic. ‘Off-topic’ postings of another, more acceptable, kind were the exercices de style or stylistic exercises occasionally posted by regulars: the appeal of these messages to notions of cultivated wit, but also their authors’ status as regulars, earned by participation in debate, ensured that such pieces — be the subject matter so slight as bathroom tiling — were tolerated.

The arrangement at Forums Le Monde has changed somewhat over the course of our study. As mentioned earlier, Tous sujets [Any topics] replaced Autres sujets in 2001 and explicitly made a place for conversation, previously excluded:

Soulevez ici les thèmes qui ne rentrent pas, à votre avis, dans les catégories ci-dessus.

Le ‘chat’, le ‘small talk’ sont aussi admis. Mais seulement ici!

[Raise topics here that in your opinion do not fit in the categories above. ‘Chat’ and ‘small talk’ are also allowed. But only here!]

(http://forumselections.lemonde.fr/perl/wwwthreads.pl, Aug 13, 2002)

It is worth noting the use of English — an indication perhaps that these do not really belong to French discussion — and the exclamation mark emphasising the attempt to quarantine chat (a foreign interloper). In practice, although less weighty threads such as ‘Noeud pap blanc’ [‘white bow ties’] are found in this section, postings nonetheless stick to the topic, however flippant, in a way that does not happen on the Guardian and BBC sites.

Le Monde is alone amongst our four sites in providing a miscellaneous ‘Other Topics’ section, but the reasons for its absence elsewhere are not identical. Whereas Le Nouvel Observateur simply excludes off-topic dis-
discussion, in contrast, on the British sites, there is no need for a designated area: you can put your ramblings — or your entertaining attempts at keeping the conversational ball in the air — just about anywhere.

Cultural models and on-line behaviour

Let us return to the wider issue driving our research, and reflect on the extent to which our analysis supports a simple correlation between on-line behaviour and cultural behaviour in other modes of interaction. Clearly, the two opposing tendencies discerned in our data (debate versus conversation) can be linked with sets of more or less hackneyed generalisations regarding the cultures concerned: French passion, British reserve, seriousness of French engagement with forms of intellectual debate, British avoidance of social conflict. And what could the chattering classes, represented par excellence by the Guardian and BBC publics, do but chat? Yet we contend that, without the benefit of actually monitoring the sites concerned, one could join up the dots in a completely different way. The Nouvel Observateur discussion starters in translation might well evoke the English tradition of team debating, and in light of this cultural practice one might expect — accumulating stereotypes — sportingly serious debate, rather than the insistence on chattiness on the British sites. Conversely, the Guardian’s one-liners could be associated with the badjinage (wit and repartee) of French dinner-party discussions. In other words, whilst the on-line patterns parallel some norms of cultural behaviour, they do not reflect others: they hold up not a general mirror to the communicative practices of a culture, but a highly selective one.

On-line behaviour, then, is linked to other culturally determined modes of behaviour, but not in predictable ways. In order to explain the ways in which the patterns we have presented articulate with other cultural practices, we need to address the question of genre. The discussion forum posting is a recent genre in a relatively recent medium (CMC), and when a new genre presents itself, much rides on the ways in which a culture engages with it.

Freadman and Macdonald, in their detailed exposition of the concept and uses of genre, explain that a genre is not a set of features, but an interpretation of a cultural practice that is formative of that practice:

[L]abelling does not simply tag a given text for the convenience of knowing where to store it, but shapes it in the manner of a template for the purposes of a reading. (1992: 24)

That is to say, the labelling of a textual genre, rather than being dictated by the shared elements of a group of texts, actually shapes the production of such texts.
Genres take form as sets not of rules but of ‘regularities of practice’ or conventions, subject to modification, but with the inertia of ingrained habit (1992: 9). According to the authors, commentary – statements descriptive of practice – functions to entrench conventions or, on occasion, to modify them. Through the use of metaphors or allusions to existing forms, commentary interprets and moulds a practice in terms of a particular model or template. This function can only gain in importance in a situation where habits are not ingrained, as in the case of a relative newcomer such as electronic discussion on media web-sites. Conventions of participation can only be dictated from above to a very limited extent, and the direction the genre will take relies greatly on the conventions participants establish through the interpretation of their own practice and that of others.

So how do our forum contributors interpret what they do? We turn our attention to the templates, metaphors and labelling statements that appear in postings. Note that we are not concerned here with whether contributions actually resemble in fine detail other genres taken as models. As Freadman and Macdonald note, ‘[o]ne genre, taken as a component for another is transformed according to a function it must serve’ (1992: 25). Rather, our interest is in the force of these comparisons and metaphors in shaping both understanding and practice. Let us also remind ourselves that such modelling is not immutable but subject to change, that for a nascent genre it is a ‘precarious choice’ (1992: 21), and indeed we have already seen transformations such as the small-scale introduction of chat on the Le Monde site.

Written and oral templates

Despite the ‘messageboard’ metaphor, interaction on the BBC site is modelled on verbal exchanges and, above all, informal verbal exchanges. The same holds for Guardian Unlimited Talk, which dumps the comparison with writing altogether and styles itself a ‘talkboard.’ Participants frequently refer to what they are doing as nattering and ranting, listening and overhearing. The abundance of conversational metaphors is perfectly coherent with the manifestation on these sites of traits – such as the importance of community-building over topic – found in informal spoken interaction. And when they are not involved in chat, the models are still oral. An extended voicing of opinion on a subject is referred to as ‘getting on a soapbox’ and, in its Great Debate section, the BBC offers a ‘Virtual Soapbox’ where you can ‘speak passionately … and tell us why we should listen’. A posting to the Guardian’s ‘Politics Talk’ abundantly illustrates this modelling:
If you would like to get off your soapbox for a moment, I was not talking about whether Bush is legitimate or not. Frankly I don’t care, I have been bored to bloody tears on this site listening to you lot argue about it. People should move on.

I was just talking about the actual process of the election. It’s OK I will have the discussion with someone who can hold a rational conversation.

(twicken, 04:32 pm Apr 4, 2002, Why do people rant on about the US election supposedly being stolen? [our emphasis])

In contrast, on a Le Monde ‘Autres sujets’ thread discussing why people participate in on-line fora, various contributors clearly position internet discussion as a form, not of spoken debate, but of writing:

Ce que les forums de discussions permettent par-dessus tout c’est de renouer avec l’écriture comme moyen de communication. Les occasions d’écrire étaient devenues rares depuis l’apparition du téléphone, presque qu’anecdotiques en fait, mis à part une réclamation d’assurance ou une liste d’épicerie les opportunités de pratiquer sa prose, et de se faire lire surtout, étaient pratiquement inexistantes.

[What discussion fora allow above all is to take up writing again as a means of communication. Opportunities to write had become rare since the appearance of the telephone, almost the stuff of anecdotes, in fact, apart from the odd insurance claim or grocery list. The possibility of practising one’s prose, and especially of being read, was practically non-existent.]

(Joho, 13:42, Apr 13, 2000, Pourquoi des forums? [Why fora?])

This is far from an isolated example on the French sites. In the same discussion, V. Graslin writes:

- On veut briller par la qualité de sa prose […]
- On veut participer à un tout nouveau mode d’expression, avec la même griserie que les premiers émules de Gutenberg se sont mis à imprimer ou à lire des livres il y a quelque cinq cents ans ;

- We want to shine through the quality of our prose.
- We want to participate in a brand new means of expression, with the same intoxication as Gutenberg’s imitators as they set to printing or reading books some five hundred years ago.]

(17:05 Feb 10, 2000)
Les forums sont un extraordinaire moyen de réfléchir, et en plus ils obligent à exprimer, par écrit, ses idées.
[The forums are an extraordinary means of reflection and moreover they force us to express, in written form, our ideas.]
(12:27 Apr 13, 2000)

Far away from the evident care of these messages, in a *Nouvel Observateur* debate in which swipes are taken at participants’ linguistic abilities we find:

J’écris au vol et j’ai pas le temps de m’appliquer comme certains ou certaines, je n’utilise pas les accents et je ne vérifie pas ce que j’écris le principal c’est que mon messages passe, le reste n’a pas d’importance.
[I write on the run and I don’t have time to apply myself like some, I don’t use accents and I don’t check what I write, the main thing is that my message gets through, the rest doesn’t matter.]
(Kurupt, 19:39 Jan 11, 2002, *La double peine* [Double punishment])

Even here, where the quasi-literary delight of the *Le Monde* contributors is absent, there is still the insistence on participation as writing.

Neither tendency is absolute. The use of the dead metaphors ‘say’/‘dire’ and ‘talk’/‘parler’ to refer to the content of postings (as in ‘your message said […]’) is widespread on all sites. The BBC site carries a few messages clearly patterned on letters, perhaps for comic effect. *Guardian* readers collaborate to produce limericks/poems. And both *Le Monde* and *Nouvel Observateur* participants compare what they are doing to discussion at the bar of a café—the site of discussion of current affairs amongst equals. Yet it is only comparison: the web is like, but not identical to, discussion over a drink, because whereas oral discussion is ephemeral, interventions on fora

restent inscrits dans le cyberspace. Nos conneries accèdent à l’immortalité et à la posterité sans passer par l’académie.
[remain inscribed in cyberspace. Our bull attains immortality and reaches posterity without having to go through the academy.]
(Keemun, 12:11 Apr 14, 2001, *La libre expression sur Internet* [Free speech on the Internet], *Nouvel Observateur*).

It is, that is, written.

Tellingly, what suggests that these contrasting models (written communication for the French sites, spoken for the English) are not just
products of the particular sites studied, is the fact that when the Le Monde fora are referred to as places for conversation, as is from time to time the case, it is most often by an anglophone contributor. Examples include:

The Internet is a wonderful thing. Now we can read your newspapers and participate in your conversations, if you will permit it. (David Dalton, 01:30 Aug 30, 1999, Combattre le modèle américain [Fight the American model])

Parlant un français minimal (ou affreux), [...] puis-je joindre un ‘chat room’.

[Speaking minimal (or appalling) French, [...] may I join a ‘chat room’.] (Laura, 18:36 July 20, 1999, les étrangers, sont-ils bienvenus? [are foreigners welcome?])

This patterning of discussion on written or oral communication accounts for further differences between the French and British sites, in conventions of length and turn-taking for instance.

**Length and turn-taking**

On all four sites, messages from registered participants are posted directly to the site. On the British sites the potential for quasi-synchronous discussion is exploited such that the sites often function like chat rooms, with a fast turnaround between messages and lots of one-liners, or indeed simple exclamation marks or other forms of interjection by punctuation/emoticon:

Aha.

(finnegansawake, 02:06am Apr 30, 2002, Thread for extremist right-wing adolescents of any age (part 2), Guardian)

∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧| ∧ mijj hides behind fence

∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧|∧| ∧ mijj.

(mijj, 09:37 pm Jun 4, 2002, Spanking brand new (((((HUGS))))) thread, Guardian)

apart in an on-line BBC or Guardian conversation, helps to explain the vast number of postings in some threads.

Long messages, on the other hand, are viewed as soliloquies (fine for the soapbox but an aberration in conversation) or oddities. They invite comment, censure and even censorship. When veteran BBC poster Mick Anderson01 provides a 700 word exposition comparing religions (20:53 May 7, 2002, Anti-semitism. Why?), it is evidently something of an event and in the ensuing discussion, the author keeps referring back to his post and defending it. This length of argument is apparently considered worthy of particular notice. Similarly, a 300-word posting to Guardian Education Talk provokes the ironic reply: ‘Much amusing stuff to dissect here, which I’ll do later when I’ve finished writing 1,700 words of weak generalisations, padded with non sequiters and plain error [...]’ (JamesIF, 09.49 am May 13, 2002, Sign the Guestbook (please!)). And although a cursory glance through the Guardian threads might suggest that lengthy messages do occur, in most cases they prove to be cut and paste jobs from other websites — perhaps the on-line equivalent to reading aloud bits of the morning newspaper — as opposed to sustained exposition on the part of the person posting the message.

Meanwhile, at the BBC, moderators can actually remove messages for no other reason than that they are too long. One message was culled at 575 words (see Stewart Knight, 16:18 May 5, 2002, Free Speech at the BBC?) and discussion amongst contributors shows that this was no isolated case. Brevity, it seems, is the soul of quality.

In contrast with the fast turn-taking on the U.K. sites, we have the Le Monde contributor who worries that s/he posts too frequently, which might amount to chat:

\[je m’abstiens souvent de répondre de peur de monopoliser les fils … donc dans quelle limite peut-on écrire des messages ? car à trop faire de messages, ce forum deviendrait un ‘chat’, ce qui n’était pas la vocation première je suppose.\]

[I often refrain from responding for fear of monopolising the threads … so how often can one write? Because if there were too many messages, this forum would become a ‘chat-room,’ which was not its prime objective, I imagine.]

(miaou, 16:50 Aug 2, 2000, Nom de la section … [name of the section …])

If the format offers the potential for synchronous dialogue, it also allows for asynchronous interactions, and it is this aspect that is exploited on the French sites: in contrast with face-to-face confrontation, with its immediate, even hasty responses, internet forum discussion allows you the
time to think before replying. And if the emphasis is on taking one’s time, there is an expectation that messages will be more substantial.

Contrast the constraints on length at the BBC with the anxious contributor to a *Le Monde* forum who finds the software unable to cope with the size of his messages and, when advised by the moderator to cut them after every 500 words or so, frets at characteristic length. The unity of his text will be spoiled; it may even be interrupted by other postings from those who reply to his first paragraphs without waiting for their continuation (Brunner, 21:17 Jan 12, 2000, *Cas particulier des messages longs* [The question of long messages] and ensuing discussion). The technical and generic constraints are here in conflict.

A certain length is not just tolerated but expected in the *Nouvel Observateur* debates and hence, whilst we found neither complaint nor apology regarding long messages (and plenty of messages upwards of 500 words), the occasional very short messages seemed to require some self-reflexive remark. In replying simply ‘*oui*’ to the thread question ‘Is the Constitutional Court impartial’, *pepin le bref* uses both his pseudonym (Pippin the Short) and the subject line – ‘en bref’ [in short] – to comment on his own contravention of convention (23:04 Feb 11, 2002). Similarly, Zamil92 prefaces his 3-line message with ‘*au risque d’être un peu court*’ [at the risk of being too short] (11:34 Feb 4, 2002, *La double peine* [Double punishment]). Short messages on both French sites rarely comprise fewer than four lines.

**Conclusions**

We can see that taking oral or written genres as the model for internet discussion has clear consequences for what have quickly become the cultural conventions of participation. Although in both cases, these conventions are consistent with certain other practices of the culture, we argue that they are not simply predictable from them. Nor can they just be extrapolated to the rest of the culture. Indeed they are not necessarily applicable to other genres of CMC (personal emails, video-conferencing, etc.). What happens in one place may not happen elsewhere. If one were to generalise from our sites to verbal communication one would think that French allows for very long conversational turns, without interruption, whilst English begs for interruption. This is in contradiction with the evidence that ‘cooperative interruptions’ are a feature of French oral discussion, expected as an indication of attentiveness and interest on the part of one’s interlocutor (Liddicoat 2000: 61; Béal 1990: 24–25). And if we were to extrapolate to written communication, we might foolishly assume that English speakers can’t keep to the topic or indeed concentrate long enough to construct a written argument, whereas Clyne (1987: 76, referring to Kaplan 1980: 257) suggests that tolerance of di-
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Regression in essays and dissertations is similar in British, American and French academic writing, with a tendency towards more digression in French writing.

Let us return then to the assumptions framing our paper: it might seem that the evidence tends to support the third, that is, the idea that cultural difference is manifested not just in content, but in communicative practices on line. Yet we have also seen the unpredictability of those manifestations, in ways that are not consistent with that assumption. On-line behaviour is not divorced from the rest of the culture: participants apply conventions derived from other forms of cultural interaction, but it is unclear which forms they will be. The validity of hypothesis 3 is therefore limited.

However, neither does hypothesis 4 (whereby the constraints of CMC impact on cultural practices) explain the variation we have found. In our examples we do not see on-line discussion departing from cultural norms in order to converge, displaying similar traits that would be favoured by CMC.

Rather, it seems that since the ways in which a culture engages with a (new) genre depend on the way in which that genre is understood, the result is a function of an interaction between genre and culture that is not pre-determined. In our case study, differences in length and turn-taking can be shown to derive from the (for us) entirely unforeseeable choice of different models, spoken and written. There is therefore no possibility of simple extrapolations between different genres.

Implications for cross-cultural training

Currently language and business communication teachers, among others, use electronic discussion to teach cross-cultural skills, widely assuming that on-line interaction replicates face-to-face experiences. Our study, however, suggests that cultural variables cannot simply be presumed to work in the same way in the two contexts: discussion techniques used on-line are just as likely to backfire face-to-face. Five minute expositions, laced with insult, in the style of the *Nouvel Observateur* contributions will not be tolerated in dinner party debate in France, any more than a personal chat about the weekend’s activities in the middle of a televised debate would be acceptable in the British context. Here extrapolation from CMC is at best unhelpful, at worst misleading.

So what are the implications? Should this widespread practice of using the internet in inter-cultural education be abandoned? Clearly no – but what does need to be rectified is the pervasive blind spot regarding the cultural and generic specificity of internet discussion practices. Like any other sphere of public discussion (whether it be the pub, the letters page of the newspaper, or the bus stop for that matter), the electronic discus-
tion site is culturally defined in terms of purpose and communicative conventions. While this might rightly be understood as curtailing the use of CMC in cross-cultural training, simultaneously it confirms its status as an invaluable tool in this context.

To understand what is learnt on-line as generalisable principles, to extrapolate incautiously from a culture’s behaviour in an on-line forum to a culture as a whole is ill-founded and even dangerous. Internet discussion is not a teach-all. At the same time, since CMC does not take place in a culture-free void, our results confirm that this medium provides spaces in which learners may experience cultural alterity. Students logging on to discussions based in another culture can learn a great deal about cultural practices: we have the opportunity to sensitise them to differences in discourse patterns, explicitness, irony, allusions, etc. as well as different world views and values. And some of these practices will be useful elsewhere: the question is ‘which ones where?’ To articulate the question is to start to understand both the potential and limitations of teaching with genres of CMC.

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Notes

1. Jarvenpaa and Leidner note that ‘[w]hile there is a wealth of research on computer-mediated communication and research on cross-cultural communication, there is a paucity of research on cross-cultural computer-mediated communication’ (1998, cf. St. Amant 2002: 197).
2. Cf. ‘Though International and intercultural e-mail encounters are no substitute for study-abroad and person-to-person cross-cultural experiences, they can play a powerful role in bringing such encounters into the classroom’ (Rice 1996: 60).
3. The Le Monde fora underwent considerable operational and cosmetic transformation in January 2001. Some of our data were collected during 2000, with archives dating back to 1999.
4. ‘[O]n espère que vous participerez à nos petites castagnes amicales’ [‘we hope you will participate in our friendly little punch ups’] is the greeting posted to a self-identified foreigner on the Autres sujets forum (Baguette, 02:00 July 21, 1999, les étrangers, sont-ils bienvenus? [‘are foreigners welcome?’])
5. Our distinction between ‘debate’ and ‘conversation’ parallels the opposition between ‘discussion’ and ‘conversation’ in the literature on verbal interaction. We
have, however, retained the terms adopted on the sites studied, since ‘discussion’ is clearly not used by British participants in the technical sense of competitive, topic-driven, monitored public treatment of a subject (Bublitz 1998: 20; cited Ta-
bensky 2000: 50). Indeed it is construed on both French and British sites in culturally determined ways. Furthermore, as we shall see, the importance of the distinc-
tion — the extent to which debate and chat might share the same space — similarly differs along cultural lines.

6. In quoting postings to the sites, we make no attempt to standardise grammar or spelling, nor to reproduce non-standard expression in our translations.

7. It is worth noting that Light and Rogers’s 1999 article on ‘The Debating Chamber’ (the site set up by the Guardian for discussion of the 1997 UK elections) is entitled ‘Conversation as publishing’.

8. In fact, this preference is still catered for with the ‘See latest messages’ button.

9. The existence of this thread, and the sentiments expressed on it further serve to underline the extent to which interaction on the British sites enacts conversational conventions: ‘Closing down a conversation is a potentially face-threatening act’ (Döpke et al. 1994: 22, referring to the work of Laver 1981).

10. See Hanna (2002) for an extended analysis of the changes and their consequences.

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