Internet Rumors and Intercultural Ethics -- A Case Study of Panic-stricken Rush for Salt in China and Iodine Pill in America After Japanese Earthquake and Tsunami

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Abstract

Internet is a channel of intercultural communication and also a communicative platform. At the same time, Internet rumor always causes serious damage and influences intercultural communication for different people from different countries. The author takes the cases "panic-stricken rush for salt in China and iodine pill in America after Japanese Earthquakes and tsunami for example and analyses the causes of the Internet rumors, and discusses that some basic concepts of intercultural ethnics, so as to protect people from different rumors and to keeps a good channel of intercultural communication on Internet. The research indicates that it is important requirements for different people with different cultural background should have intercultural ethics during their communicating with the other people on Internet, and also basic condition for people to get rid of Internet rumors.

Key words: Intercultural ethics; Intercultural communication; Intercultural literacy; Internet rumor

INTRODUCTION

Internet is a channel of intercultural communication and also a communicative platform for different peoples from different countries. Globalization is a process of mutual influence, in which all cultural groups should share equal power to co-create and negotiate the "communication reality." Thus, establishing a new sense of "community" and learning to become a "global citizen" are the key to survival in human society. A new sense of "community" manifests inclusiveness that draws together people of different races, ethnicities and genders; it mirrors the acceptance of cultural diversity (Cheng, 2010). Meanwhile, with the development of information, technology and telecommunication technology, peoples from different countries are very easy to communicate with each other by Internet computer network, facsimiles, cellular telephone, interactive cable TV systems and etc. Especially, the Internet has connected different countries into a "Global village". Every member of the society in the world has really become a villager in the global village. And global interdependence and interconnectivity has become a norm of life in our world. At the same time, frequent communication between different nations and peoples for economic, political, cultural and educational needs at national as well as individual levels has now turned intercultural communication into reality for all nations and people in this age of globalization and multiculturalization. The coexistence of interdependence and cultural conflicts demands all cultures and nations to go beyond their own cultural bondage and learn to appreciate different ideas and different ways of life, to share with others limited world resources, and to celebrate diversity (Song, 2009).

Therefore, Internet plays an important role in intercultural communication, However, some of the most outrageous news comes from the Internet, a global network of interconnected computer networks. Because many Internet sites lack editorial control, rumors and speculative gossip run rampant. Although the Internet makes large quantities of information accessible t o remote areas, you should always be skeptical of the quality of information found on the Internet (Pearson, 2003). Moreover, the spread of

the Internet also raises a number of other ethical questions about matters like privacy, the security and confidentiality of data, copyright and intellectual property law, pornography, hate site, the dissemination of rumor and character assassination under the guise of new, and much else. We should know some of fundamental concepts about principles of cultural ethics so as to protect people from Internet rumors, when we take an advantage of Internet for intercultural communication with other people in another country.

1. A CASE

The Internet is open to any person, so everyone has access to a means of information. Meanwhile, vast amounts of information from individuals and organizations are released on the Internet every day, and much of it is false. This characteristic of the Internet information makes the fake news or rumors unavoidable. For example, after contaminated water from the ruined nuclear plants was released into the sea following the severe earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan on March 11th, 2011 rumors circulated on the Internet by other means in many cities not only in China but also in the foreign countries, especially in the United States that sea salt was unsafe for consumption.

The rumor triggered panic-buying of iodized salt among residents in a number of cities such as Beijing, Hangzhou and Changsha. The salt was rumored to protect people from radiation. Among the other causes of the panicked purchases of salt were rumors contending that eating iodized salt could prevent people from being named by radiation leaked from a Japanese nuclear plant. Supermarket shelves in places like Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangxi and Sichuan provinces and in target cities like Beijing and Shanghai were nearly devoid of salt by Thursday (Yu, 2011).

However, April 7th, 2011 as rumors spread throughout Korea of "radiation rain", larger numbers of Koreans headed to super markets and other stores to panic buy iodized salt, seaweed, and other products, in hopes of "resisting radiation" (Li, 2011).

At the same time, "the fear that a nuclear cloud could float from the shores of Japan to the shores of California has some people making a run on iodide tablets. Pharmacists across California report being flooded with requests" (John, 2011).

2. ANALYSIS

The Internet has undoubtedly provided on unparalleled channel for information transmission, but at the same time it has made it much easier for lies or rumors to spread quickly and thus inflict serious harm on innocent people.

Internet rumors will often occur before and after natural disasters and man-made disasters. It is quite often that internet rumors about a disaster have been flourishing while no disaster has occurred. Generally speaking, the Internet rumors that have been created under the two circumstances as "disaster and the high attention of people to disasters" are the basic conditions for the creation of rumors. As disasters will happen unexpectedly and can cause severe damages, the incidents that have attracted high attention from the public can easily lead to rumors if they cannot be explained clearly and properly (Liang, 2010).

Especially from the above cases, the peoples from different cultural backgrounds, both the Asian people including Chinese people, Korean people and the Americans, appeared a confusing phenomenon that under the conditions of excessive "presses freedom", a large amount of false information has been spread while the information reflecting the truth cannot be communicated. Why? This is because the instinct to prevent potential danger has made people choose to accept more information that is closely related with their personal interests while the other information has been neglected. With regard to his identity and professionalism, the rumors of Browning forecasting of the earthquake on a certain date and Browning having successfully forecasted an earthquake had attracted more attention from the public. As pointed out by Allport and his associates, rumors have given a false account of the real situation; the rumors have omitted a large amount of details that can help understand the truth. When those details have been deleted, the remaining details will appear more significant and important (Allport, 2003).

Anymore, Internet rumors will definitely result in severe consequences if we keep turning a blind eye to them. First and foremost, made-up scandals directly infringe upon citizens' rights, affecting their daily life and running their public image. Besides, the dissemination of such rumors as those about social or natural disasters causes panic and disorder among society. Last but not least, the spread of rumors on the Internet will undermine the credibility of the net to such a degree that people will no longer trust it in the future (13).

3. SOME BASIC CONCEPTS OF INTERCULTURAL ETHNICS

Intercultural ethics, it is evident that no society can function without at least some degree of intersubjective agreement among individuals with regard to their beliefs, values, and norms and some cohesive framework which regulates interactions between its members. Ethics can thus be seen as a means of coordinating human behavior, ideally in the pursuit of what the members of a given society take to be a "good" life. There can be a great deal of legitimate variety regarding what individuals take as "good", and there be no perfectionist moral conception of

what the "good" life consists of (Evanoff, 2006).

Meantime, ethics are a set of principles of right conduct. Many of our standards for ethical behavior are codified into law. We do not slander or libel someone who is an ordinary citizen. We do not start a panic that can endanger the lives of others. Ethics may be defined as a set of moral principles or values. Ethical standards may vary from one discipline to another just as they differ from one culture to another. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live (Pearson and Nelson, 2003).

In order to establish good communication with people of other cultures on Internet, it is essential to understand their ethical framework. If the people want to learn ethics of intercultural communication on Internet, they should obey the following five fundamental principles of ethics in intercultural communication on Internet.

3.1 Respect Differences
Due to different cultural backgrounds, cultural experiences, ways of thinking, norms of behaviors and customs, it is easy to find that people from different cultures have their own cultural perceptions, beliefs, valves and social customs which greatly determine their communicative ways. It is cultural difference that gives rises to many miscommunication. Therefore, we should respect people from different cultural background.

Especially, Internet sources are sometimes the best available information and sometimes the worst. Show respect for your sources of information by revealing as completely by as possible the credibility of your sources. This rule extends to respect for person you communicate with on the Internet. These people are willing to share information with you, thus, it behooves you to treat them and their information with respect in person and in your communication.

Ethics are culturally informed. "The right thing to do" is not just instinctive in human. Many aspects of what is "good" are taught (consciously and subconsciously) by a person's culture. So, if you want to establish ethical intercultural communication with people of another background, prepare yourself to see the world differently. Do not expect that what seems good to you will also seem good to them, understand that they may view some things as bad that you view as fine or good.

3.2 Learn Differences
To have a good intercultural communicate, people should

ask the question: "What makes a 'good' person in your culture?" Talk with people in the target culture to discover the traits of an ethical person. What attitudes and actions does a good person possess? Does a good person set aside his personal work to take care of his parents when they are elderly? Does a good person practice abstinence in certain areas? You will find, as you look into someone else's culture, that the things that make a "good" person in your culture are not the same things that comprise a "good" person in every culture.

Learning about different ways that people communicate with can enrich our lives. People's different communication styles reflect deeper philosophies and world views which are the foundation of their cultures. Understanding these deeper philosophies gives us a broader picture of what the world has to offer us.

Learning about people's culture has the potential to give us a mirror image of our own. We have the opportunity to challenge our assumptions about the "right" way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches. We have a chance to learn new ways to solve problems that we had previously given up on, accepting the difficulties as "just the way things are".

Lastly, if we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotype separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds.

3.3 Understand Difference
When you know the ways of another culture, the best way to establish good intercultural communication is to understand through action in a way that is considered ethical in that culture. Do and say the things that will express that you have the best interest of those around you in mind. Enjoy the food people prepare for you. If there are certain respectful gestures associated with greeting people older or more prestigious than yourself (or everyone), use them. Learn at least enough of the language to greet people and ask how they are doing in their native tongue. Wear clothing that is culturally appropriate. Respect family organization and methods of doing education and business. On every level of life and society, share in the way people think and act as much as you are able to. This willingness to adopt the standards of another culture is the best way to establish ethical and intercultural communication.

In addition to helping us to understand ourselves and our own cultural frames of reference, knowledge of cultural difference can help us to understand the people who are different from us. An (understanding) appreciation of cultural difference can assist us in processing what it means to different in ways that are respectful of others,

not faultfinding or damaging.

3.4 Cooperation with Different Ways

Although different cultures will have varying expectations and standards as to what is ethical, there are some ethical standards that are universal. Therefore, striving to abide by ethical standards that are universally received, you can take the first step in communicating and connecting well with people of another culture.

According to William Howell in his Ethics of Intercultural Communication, "Two principles that are universal are that no action is ethical if it harms person, accumulates ethical quality." Act in such a way that you do not intentionally bring harm to anyone, and always keep others' best interests in mind. Therefore, people can also learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as a society. Awareness of cultural differences doesn't have to paralyze us either, for fear of not saying the "right thing". In fact, becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively.

CONCLUSION

Although Internet is a channel of intercultural communication and also a communication platform, Internet rumors always causes serious damages in the society. Therefore, the unrestricted Internet freedom will not give sufficient opportunities for communicating the information carrying the truth in order to effectively stop the communication and negative effect of disaster rumors. Meanwhile, it is not easy for website mangers to monitor all the information online, but it is possible for them to seriously deal with those information that may damage the reputation of a personnel, or cause economic losses to a particular business. However, the media have a tendency to exaggerate or emphasize the degree of crisis during its reporting of disaster incidents, and they even become the rumor carriers. What causes such panic buying? Is it really just because of fear? The author believes that fear is only part of the reasons, and the factors that turn fear into panic are multiples. To a certain extend, one reason is that the news media will focus on reporting the worst damage areas and the worst victims while the information that cannot attract the attention from the public has not been mentioned, which give the audience a bad impression of the disaster (Hiroi, 1985). Another is that the general public' s knowledge on nuclear radiation is limited. The word "nuclear" sounds familiar yet alien. What come to minds often are Armageddon-like images from movies such as "The Day after Tomorrow" or "2012" (Li, 2011).

Furthermore, the research indicates that the effective way to resist negative effects of Internet rumors is that people from different countries should learn ethnics of intercultural communication on Internet, especially should obey the four fundamental principles of ethics in intercultural communication on Internet. That means the people from different countries should respect differences, learn differences, understand differences and cooperate with different ways. In this way, the ethical literacy of people from different cultural background will be improved greatly. The rumors will be decreased greatly. However, actually it is not easy to achieve this target. The people in the world should work hard for this target together.

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