

Shifting the Conversation: From Persistent Conversation to Mediated Conversation

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Abstract

In a short introduction to the "Mediated Conversation" HICSS minitrack, the minitrack co-chairs describe why the minitrack's title was changed from its previous title—"Persistent Conversation", describe the topics the minitrack addresses, and briefly introduce this year's papers.

1. Introduction

In 1999 Susan Herring and Tom Erickson established the "Persistent Conversation" minitrack at HICSS. Two decades later, we modified the topic of the minitrack to "Mediated Conversation". This change focuses the attention on the increasing role of mediated conversation, both persistent and ephemeral, in everyday life, in the workplace, and in almost any other aspect of life. In the late 90's mediated conversations were still rare and confined to specific environments, mainly personal computers or computers in the workplace. Furthermore, the persistence of these email, Usenet or IRC based conversations was a novel phenomenon that opened new opportunities for practitioners, managers, designers and academic researchers. Not anymore. As digital media became ubiquitous, mediated conversation is now an intrinsic component of virtually every waking hour of teenagers and adults in developed countries as well as in many developing countries [1], [2]. As each person exchanges dozens and hundreds of messages every day, through abundant, often mobile, and increasingly worn or implanted devices, the persistence of these exchanges is no longer the main novelty of interest. Now, conversations create data that fuel, and often transform entire industries.

Conversations are where our social life transpires. We are submerged in them like fish are immersed in water. Digitization is rapidly transforming conversation, influencing behavior, work, and social

life. These influences are explored in the mediated conversation minitrack. From commerce to health, from conversational agents to MOOCs, from politics to sports, and from organizations to families, mediated conversations evolve and expand. Our goal is to understand its evolution and impact. The papers selected for the minitrack this year focus on the medium itself (Kalman, Aguilar & Ballard), and on the message communicated in the mediated conversations (Kim & Herring).

2. This year's papers

The paper by Kim and Herring focuses on the message, and in particular on the politeness of the message. The study, titled "*Is Politeness Catalytic and Contagious? Effects on Participation in Online News Discussions*" studies one of the more problematic phenomena of online public discourse: abusive postings. Unlike the paper "Is Aggression Contagious Online? A Case of Swearing on Donald Trump's Campaign Videos on YouTube" [3] that was published in this minitrack last year and which examined the contagion of aggression, Kim and Herring study the contagion of politeness in public forums. Specifically, they studied it in the context of reader comments in Korean news websites, websites that are plagued by insensitive and inconsiderate reader comments. In particular, they asked how the politeness of comments influenced subsequent participation and politeness in postings, and paid special attention to the gender of those posting the comments. The results show the extensive prevalence of politeness violations in the forums, as well as provide evidence that in discussions dominated by men, polite comments served as catalysts for more replies, albeit harsh ones. Only in discussions dominated by women, did polite comments lead to polite language, at least in the responses to the original commenter.

The paper by Kalman, Aguilar and Ballard focuses on media, and explores "*The Role of Chronemic Agency in the Processing of a Multitude of Mediated Conversation Threads*". It posits the question how

users manage the daily influx of hundreds of messages and conversational threads, and still manage to identify and act on urgent messages? The researchers demonstrate that users achieve this by prioritizing and closely monitoring a small number of communication media, mainly texting (sending SMSs) and calling (telephoning). Users assign these closely monitored media a high level of *chronemic agency* (temporal agency related to communication), and assign other, less closely monitored media such as Facebook and Instagram, lower chronemic agency. In-depth interviews about the communication norms of 18 undergraduate students reveal how chronemic agency is manifested in the actions and expectations of members of this group, and of those who converse with them. The interviews conclude with the participants visually demonstrating various levels of chronemic agency by marking the place of each communication medium they use along a line that marks the continuum from "not urgent at all" to "very urgent".

3. Conclusion

The study of mediated conversation persists. Technology that builds infrastructure for conversation continues to change. Artificial intelligence and machine generated speech, natural language processing and automated sentiment analysis are making big strides. They continue to reshape the locations,

manners, and outcomes of how we converse. And they also afford new tools for research. What are the contributions of these developments, and what are the risks? What is their impact on human aspirations and on the trust placed in conversations mediated by digital media? The answers to these questions have significant social impact.

We are concerned with how developments in conversational platforms and norms move forward. Will the innovations in system design and usage afford better communication, constrict processes, or change the way we coordinate and organize? You are invited to join us in the discussion of the ongoing evolution of conversation and of how it is mediated.

4. References

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