The Study of Mediated Conversation as a Window onto Contemporary Issues in Media, Technology, and Society

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Abstract

In this introduction to the Mediated Conversation minitrack of HICSS, the co-chairs discuss a series of themes regarding emerging technologies, media, and society that draw together the five papers—representing an interdisciplinary ensemble—that constitute this year's minitrack.

1. Introduction

The five papers in this year's Mediated Conversation minitrack together represent a wide range of topics. They point to an array of critical issues regarding emerging technologies, media, and society that have made the study of mediated communication such a central point of concern for cross-disciplinary scholarship.

In this overview, we consider how the papers touch on the following interrelated themes, all of which are oriented around making sense of conversation in and through a shifting set of technological environments and conditions: (1) the automation of communicative roles and functions, and its implications for human-machine communication; (2) the power of platforms and algorithms as gatekeepers of the social world that people experience online, and the unintended consequences of their influence; (3) the negative or dystopic consequences of mediated conversation; (4) the robustness of mediated communication networks during moments of crisis; (5) the nature of persuasion and performance on social media; and (6) the text-based tools through which mediated conversation is made manifest online.

2. This Year's Papers

First, as machines have assumed a growing degree of human-like communicative capacities, they have been deployed particularly as a means of efficiency and cost-savings for large organizations, such as through automated customer-service voice response systems or, more recently, through web-based chatbots that handle many consumer queries. Researchers have sought to understand how people feel about such interactions: Do they find them satisfactory and trustworthy, or insufficient and frustrating—and why? Extending previous research on this topic and pointing toward a future of ever-more automated communication, Kate Mays, James Katz, and Jacob Groshek examine such issues through a representative U.S. national survey, comparing people's feelings about in-person customer service relative to mediated and automated versions. Their paper, "Mediated Communication and Customer Service Experiences: Psychological and Demographic Predictors of User Evaluations in the United States," takes into account differences associated with demographics as well as personality variables. They also note that their study has implications for the broader and emergent scholarly domain of human-machine communication, which focuses on the study of the "creation of meaning among humans and machines" [2] and seeks to refine theoretical approaches to studying people's interactions with technologies such as robots and other agents that embody "communicative AI" [3,5].

Building on this emphasis regarding the interplay of humans and machines, a second key theme of this minitrack involves taking stock of the power of platforms and algorithms, particularly as they influence what people see and experience about the world online. In their paper, John Paolillo, Brian Harper, Clara Boothby, and David Axelrod assess a source of considerable concern among policymakers, parents, and other groups: that YouTube videos for children have a preponderance of dangerous, disturbing, violent, and otherwise inappropriate material. Examining this claim, Paolillo and colleagues conduct a content analysis of a large corpus of children's videos

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published to YouTube from 2016 to 2018. "Our analysis," they write, "reveals an evolving ecosystem involving a variety of production modes and messages which nonetheless bears the heavy imprint of the algorithm-centered commercial incentives of marketing to children and attracting YouTube advertising." Their article, titled "YouTube Children's Videos: Development of a Genre under Algorithm," goes on to explore how "algorithmic incentives" might be distorting content geared toward children in potentially problematic ways.

A related third theme of this minitrack—visible to some degree in several of these papers—is the potentially negative or dystopic consequences of mediated conversation, which has been a recurring theme lately in the broader study of social media and society [1,4]. This may be evident in potential maladjustments by algorithm, as noted above, or in some of the illicit activity that occurs on the "dark web," as described in another minitrack paper. However, it's important note that the paper in question, "Knowledge Sharing Network in a Community of Illicit Practice: A Cybermarket Subreddit Case," is less concerned with the specific illegalities per se and more so with how knowledge-sharing communities thrive among deviant groups whose practices are outlawed or at least stigmatized in society. In this sense, the paper by K. Hazel Kwon, Weiwen Yu, Stephen Kilar, Chun Shao, Kailey Broussard, and Thomas Lutes contributes to the literature on the networked construction of knowledge by considering the under-researched case of the dark web and its users. Kwon and colleagues examine the July 2017 shutdown of the dark web market Alphabay and its apparent impact on discussion network structures on a related subreddit as a way of untangling how knowledge and resources are shared among users during such moments of crisis. What can be learned about network structures, communication patterns, and knowledge distribution at such times? Their study thereby emphasizes a fourth theme of this minitrack: the robustness of mediated communication networks during moments of crisis—or, the resourcefulness of communicators to reroute and redistribute knowledge and coordination at times when usual modes are cut off.

The fifth theme of this minitrack—the nature of persuasion and performance on social media—is explored by Qi Deng, Michael Hine, Shaobo Ji, and Yun Wang in their paper, "Investigating the Impacts of Brand Social Media Posts' Linguistic Styles on Consumer Engagement." In their study of how the linguistic style of brand posts on social media

influences consumer engagement, they apply the principles of communication accommodation theory, and hypothesize about the role of message complexity and message (in)formality in achieving the holy grail of online marketing—consumer engagement.

The final paper in the minitrack explores the hashtag, a seemingly humble artifact, but in fact one of the most powerful textual elements through which mediated conversation is made manifest online. This sixth theme, of studying these text-based tools, was examined by Isabelle Dorsch in "Hashtags on Instagram: Self-created or Mediated by Best Practices and Tools?" Dorsch used an online survey to question how hashtags used on Instagram became established. This closer look at a tool that is used throughout the world of text-based online communication reveals how hashtags can both enhance as well as obstruct the flow of the global mediated conversation.

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3. References

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