

Navigating a Dynamic Terrain: Influence Through Mediated Conversations

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Abstract

This brief article introduces the two papers that were presented at the 2024 HICSS Mediated Conversation minitrack. These papers deal with the challenge of using mediated conversation to influence the context of a highly dynamic digital environment. They demonstrate the interaction between users who want to have impact with their messages and the ever-changing environment that receives those messages.

Keywords: mediated conversation, communication, computer-mediated communication, artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

The past year has seen particularly impactful shifts in the dynamic environment of mediated conversation that will likely shape what we consider online discourse for years to come and will influence how we understand the value and role of digital discussions.

Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic continues in its fourth year with a new more-transmissible variant (Katella, 2023) that creates new concerns about the ever-present threat of virus misinformation across mediated conversations. The repercussions from Tesla owner Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter in late 2022 continue to reverberate, as Musk laid off half the company's staff, dismantled safeguards against online abuse and rebranded the platform as X (Jikeli and Soemer, 2023). Facebook, which rebranded itself as Meta, launched Threads as an alternative to Twitter, gaining 2 million sign-ups in two hours and putting the two social media companies in direct competition (Zahn, 2023). Meanwhile, artificial intelligence has gone mainstream with easy-to-use chatbots, like ChatGPT, that use natural language processing to create online conversations, raising new questions

about how these tools will be used (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2023).

These developments highlight the societal importance of online conversations in today's highly dynamic media environment. They emphasize the centrality of digital discussions in modern life. They are of particular relevance to the theme of this year's edition of the Mediated Conversation minitrack: the challenge of using mediated conversation to create impact within today's highly dynamic media environment. By a *dynamic media environment*, we mean both one that is hybrid—encompasses older and newer media forms (Chadwick, 2017)—but also one that is rapidly evolving in response to societal forces and technological advances. By *create impact*, we mean have some type of societal influence on behaviors or beliefs.

Both papers employ large-scale longitudinal data and tackle key issues in mediated conversation, such as misinformation regarding climate change, and journalism about the COVID-19 pandemic. In the next section, we highlight some of the key contributions from each of the two papers selected for presentation.

2. This year's papers

In "Exploring the Network and Topic Stability in Climate Change Deniers' Disinformation Network: A Longitudinal Study," the author focuses on disinformation networks, which are networks that form to achieve a specific long-term goal, like spreading false information. To do this, the author analyzed data from climate change deniers' Facebook pages over 10 years. Social network analysis found that climate change disinformation networks remained stable over the period, although sub-groups within the networks surfaced and disappeared all the time. A topic modeling analysis identified more than 80 climate change disinformation topics. An analysis

showed that the topics that were most engaging to the audience were stable over the 10 years, and deniers frequently focused on these topics.

In “Reporting During the COVID-19 Eras: Media Attention and News Framing through a Large-Scale Computational Analysis,” the authors considered the evolution of coronavirus vaccine coverage across five time periods, from the emergence of the initial outbreak to the launch of booster vaccines. They found that how the news was framed—structured to depict specific aspects of a story (Reese, 2007)—was dynamic across the five periods. Frames about health and risk management, for example, emerged as the pandemic progressed, from emergency frames toward highlighting the vaccine as a public health benefit.

Additionally, it’s worth noting that this year the number of papers presented is lower than usual, although the minitrack had nine submissions. We accepted three papers, two of which were presented after one was withdrawn by the author.

4. Conclusion

In sum, these papers deal with the challenges of using mediated conversation to affect today’s dynamic media environment. They show how users who want to have impact with their message interact with the ever-changing environment that receives those messages. These papers signal that the study of mediated conversation must continue to evolve in response to today’s dynamic media environment. We thank the authors of these strong contributions and the reviewers who offered feedback to refine this research for their support of this minitrack and its place in HICSS.

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