

Social Distancing Meets Mediated Conversation

Yoram M Kalman
The Open University of Israel
yoramka@openu.ac.il

Seth C Lewis
University of Oregon
sclewis@uoregon.edu

Sheizaf Rafaeli
Shenkar College
Sheizaf@rafaeli.net

Abstract

In this introduction to the Mediated Conversation minitrack of HICSS, the co-chairs discuss a theme that draws together the six papers that constitute this year's minitrack, and that represents the central role of mediated conversation in a world dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Last year's predecessor of this minitrack introduction [1] described five themes from the sessions of the Mediated Conversation minitrack. This year, a world shaken by the spread of a global pandemic of enormous impact, focused on two of these themes. These two harbinger themes were the robustness of mediated communication networks during moments of crisis, and the negative or dystopic consequences of mediated conversation. This focus on robustness of online communication ecosystems and on the quality of mediated conversation were inevitable in a world where the most ubiquitous reaction to the rapid spread of COVID-19 was social distancing. To be more precise, the reaction was physical social distancing, and, when physical distancing challenged communication and social interaction, individuals, organizations and governments turned to digital devices to keep the conversation alive.

Let's try to imagine what a world afflicted by a pandemic such as COVID-19 would have looked like in 1990, before digital communication media took center stage? Or even 20 years ago, in 2000, before real-time video streaming became a ubiquitous technology? What would have been the pandemic's impact on the global economic system? On commerce? Education? Entertainment and leisure? Interpersonal communication? It is difficult, yet fascinating, to imagine this alternative history where whole sectors of society could not resort to online communication to compensate for social distancing. This intellectual exercise also suggests examining the

robustness, effectiveness and maturity of digital communication alternatives to economic and social activities.

It is tempting to theorize that sectors which thrived during the pandemic (e.g., e-commerce, social media, and digital video streaming) are somehow superior to sectors that did not fare as well (e.g., K-12 and higher education, sports, concerts, and tourism). But this approach is based on a hidden assumption that every human activity can and should be fully digitized. The success of hybrid and blended approaches to, for example (tele)medicine and (online) education teach us that the key to success is often not in the replacement of face-to-face activities with digital ones, but rather in the effective combination of digital and non-digital activities based on the needs, preferences capabilities and circumstances of the participants. Unlike those who mourn the loss of in-person interactions, we believe the epidemic created the opportunity to eventually achieve better synergy between mediated and non-mediated in-person interactions and conversations.

2. This year's papers

In an interesting continuation of last year's themes, this year's six papers all discuss different perspectives on issues related to improving the quality of mediated conversation either by bolstering its ability to achieve desired social goals, or by understanding ways in which mediated conversation can be used to promote negative social outcomes.

First, in light of online commenting threads that seem to so quickly devolve into name-calling and personal attacks, our minitrack offers a perspective on potential interventions for curbing such uncivil behavior. In the paper "Understanding the Bystander Audience in Online Incivility Encounters: Conceptual Issues and Future Research Questions," Yeweon Kim examines how and why bystander theory from 1960s social psychology research might be a useful lens

through which to study toxic commenting spaces today. The bystander effect, Kim notes, describes “a social inhibition phenomenon where an individual’s likelihood of intervening decreases when others are present.” Research on bystanders and how they respond to emergency situations has been extensively studied in the field and through experiments, but less so in the context of online spaces where some users are targets of attack and others are non-target “bystanders” who may or may not choose to intervene to protect the abused or call out misbehavior in these “online emergencies”. By drawing on a model of bystander intervention, Kim presents a theory-driven research agenda for studying “the underlying conditions, causes, and consequences of intervention against online incivility,” while also taking into account the particular constraints and affordances of mediated environments vis-à-vis offline encounters.

Next, and in a similar vein, Yixue Wang and Nicholas Diakopoulos elaborate on the question of online discussion quality by assessing what they consider to be an under-examined dimension: the role of professional moderators in highlighting top comments. Their paper, “The Role of New York Times Picks in Comment Quality and Engagement,” analyzes more than 13 million comments on New York Times stories to evaluate the relative impact of “NYT Picks,” or the fraction of comments that are judged by professionals to be “the most interesting or thoughtful” and which receive a Times Pick badge in the user interface. Does this signal of quality actually make a difference? Wang and Diakopoulos find evidence to suggest that NYT Picks are correlated with users’ commenting quality and engagement. To be specific, having one’s comment selected as an NYT Pick is associated with higher quality in that user’s next approved comment and in the commenting frequency during one’s early stages of commenting on the site. Even simply being exposed to Pick badges appears to have a slight positive relationship with subsequent higher-quality approved comments. While the authors stress that these findings are correlational rather than causal, the results nevertheless matter a great deal for what they indicate about the value and impact of professional comment moderators, and they come at a time when many news organizations have been turning off commenting features or encouraging people to comment via social media (where Facebook, rather than the news sites, has to assume the responsibility for moderation). Importantly, the authors offer some resulting recommendations for user-interface design—such as sending notifications to users when

they have a comment chosen as a Pick—that could be broadly applicable beyond the matter of news commenting spaces alone.

Keeping the focus on mitigating potentially negative effects in mediated communication but with a twist that takes us from commenting spaces to the realm of interactions with chatbots, our next paper—“Resolving the Chatbot Disclosure Dilemma: Leveraging Selective Self-Presentation to Mitigate the Negative Effect of Chatbot Disclosure,” by Nika Mozafari, Welf H. Weiger, and Maik Hammerschmidt—examines what happens when human users become aware that they are interacting with a bot that may seem human but is not actually human. In the future, such disclosures are set to become a legal requirement for many service providers. What will that mean for the nature of these interactions? The authors note that previous studies “hint at a chatbot disclosure dilemma” because “disclosing the non-human identity of chatbots comes at the cost of negative user responses.” Specifically, they say, when such disclosures become apparent, humans express less trust in algorithms. As such, drawing on computer-mediated communication theory, Mozafari et al. explore how this “dilemma” might be reconciled through a process of selectively “pairing” information about a chatbot’s expertise or weaknesses alongside the actual disclosure of the chatbot itself. Whether it’s such a negative thing after all that people respond skeptically when they become aware of bots-masquerading-as-humans is, perhaps, a subject for debate and discussion—but, regardless, in a future of human-machine communication, attending to how chatbots are situated will be important for understanding the character of a growing facet of online communication.

The next paper in this minitrack, “Co-opted Marginality and Social Media in Singapore,” by Claire Stravato Emes and Arul Chib, presents an intriguing issue in the study of mediated conversation: their potential for social media spaces to complicate what it means to be considered “marginalized.” This includes forms of “co-opted marginality,” in which groups or individuals claim to be marginalized when, in fact, their actual standing in society would not justify such claims—as in the case of U.S. men who are white nationalists arguing that they are social underdogs despite their relative position as higher-status individuals because of their race and gender. The authors examine the case of Singapore, where they note that many claims of co-opted marginality have emerged on social media in recent years, particularly as Singaporeans decry their

opportunities compared to those of foreigners. Through interviews with 17 Singaporean citizens, the authors explore people's experiences with immigration both in online and offline contexts. They discover how social media, particularly within a relatively constrained set of legal, social, and traditional media environments, may provide "a platform for a dominant group facing challenges to enact co-opted marginality." The consequences of these dynamics may require some rethinking in the ways scholars understand how identity is constructed and collectively expressed through such platforms.

We conclude with two papers that touch directly on COVID-19. In "Prompt-Rich CMC on YouTube: To What or to Whom Do Comments Respond?" Susan Herring and Seung Woo Chae explored one of the classic topics of this minitrack - conversational coherence in mediated conversation. The researchers studied three comment threads related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the comment threads was linked to one of three videos posted to YouTube in the second half of March 2020, and included hundreds of comments. Content analysis of these threads classified the comments' topic and addressee, as "...thread and topic analyses aim to identify the structure and overall coherence of extended exchange sequences". The analysis demonstrated interesting links between the topic of the comment and the audience it addresses. For example, comments which specifically addressed a person most often addressed the matrix speaker in the video and previous commenters, indicating a high level of interactivity in the thread. Yet, almost 40% of the comments were not addressed to anyone in particular, suggesting "that many commenters see YouTube as more of a declamatory stage". The authors also describe how COVID-19 was discussed in its early stages, using humor, information sharing about treatments and critique of politicians to cope with the crisis.

The final paper in the minitrack deals with a challenge many qualitative researchers faced as COVID-19-related social distancing and stay-at-home orders prevented in-person data collection, interviews and observations. In their paper "Online-Computer-Mediated Interviews and Observations: Overcoming Challenges and Establishing Best Practices in a Human-AI Teaming Context" Keri Stephens, Karim Nader, Anastazja Harris, Caroline Montagnolo, Amanda Hughes, S. Ashley Jarvis, Yasas Senarath and Hemant Purohit describe their experience of developing a methodology for conducting fully mediated qualitative research with screen-sharing and video. They provide both

theoretical insights, as well as contributions to online research method and practical outcomes for the IS community, including two online training videos on "Meeting Research Participants Online" and on "Getting Meaningful Data from Mediated Qualitative Research". We believe researchers will find these insights and guidelines to be helpful in their research not only during pandemic times, but also when in-person research can be resumed.

3. Conclusion

This was a challenging year for many of us, and we wish to thank the many authors who authored and submitted sixteen papers to our minitrack, and to over forty reviewers who provided the feedback which enabled us to select the best papers, and who gave constructive feedback to all of the authors. This spirit of collaborative research continued despite the limitations on in-person interactions, demonstrating once again the power of mediated conversation.

4. References

- [1] S. Rafaeli, Y. Kalman, and S. Lewis, "Introduction to the Minitrack on Mediated Conversation," presented at the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2020, doi: 10.24251/HICSS.2020.333.