

As Mediated Conversation Expands and Diversifies, so do Anti-Social Risks

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Abstract

This brief article introduces the nine papers that were presented at the 2023 HICSS Mediated Conversation minitrack. These studies show that mediated conversation can foster learning, relationships, and community, but also that such domains for conversation face challenges that can make these spaces inhospitable to quality discourse.

Keywords: mediated conversation, communication, computer-mediated communication

1. Introduction

As we return to in-person HICSS meetings for the first time in three years, it is instructive to reflect on what transpired the past several years — and what it could mean for the future of mediated conversation, the subject of this minitrack.

Among other changes in society, the pandemic had a dramatic effect in “pulling forward” demand for using media and technology to facilitate conversation. We all experienced this switch in 2020, and then saw it persist throughout much of 2021 and 2022: from the seemingly ubiquitous Zoom meetings to the growing use of Slack and other chat-based tools to facilitate work-from-home to the way that group text threads and social media apps became more firmly embedded as vital everyday communication infrastructure. All of those things existed before the pandemic, of course — but the place they hold in our lives accelerated in just a short period to a degree previously unimaginable.

Now, several years later and with pandemic fears hopefully receding, there are signs both of how media technologies will continue to claim an essential role in mediating public and private conversations — it’s hard to imagine a world without Zoom meetings anymore — and also of how some devices, services, and platforms may begin to fade or become reconfigured in their import when it comes to conversation. Consider, for example, the turmoil facing major technology

companies: As of this writing in Fall 2022, Meta (the company formerly known as Facebook) had lost nearly 75% of its market value a year after rebranding itself to signal its new emphasis on building the “metaverse,” a still-nebulous idea about a future immersive media experience that, at its core, would be about conversation and community in virtual reality. Meanwhile, Twitter faces an uncertain future as a global platform for conversation after its sale to Elon Musk, who subsequently laid off half of the company’s staff and indicated that a more hands-off approach to content moderation would be adopted — widely seen as a critical change because of the level of harassment, disinformation, and toxicity rife on many social platforms, and which Twitter had sought to tame in recent years. Many users, such as academics in our field, have talked of migrating to Mastodon, which promises a decentralized social media experience that is more akin to a commons-based approach to the internet, one that seems like a throwback to the digital world that was circa early 2000s. And, amid it all, TikTok looms large as a suddenly omnipresent giant in the race to capture attention (particularly among Gen Z), becoming the focal point of global conversation.

Undoubtedly, there will continue to be many twists and turns in the story of mediated conversation in the post-pandemic world that is beginning to emerge, and, therefore, much for researchers to examine as we all attempt to make sense of the consequences of these developments. Of particular relevance for this year’s edition of the Mediated Conversation minitrack are two themes that emerge from the papers accepted for presentation. First, we see the wide variety of contexts and complications associated with a growing array of software, screens, and services that shape mediation and interaction — from emoji in political communication to dynamics of conversation via dating apps to TikTok as a platform for learning. Second, we see a growing awareness of many anti-social outcomes associated with digital technologies generally and social media technologies particularly. This is evident,

for instance, in studies of political polarization, disinformation campaigns, and incivility on subreddits, even as some green shoots of hope may be evident in other studies in this collection, such as those focused on “digital civic sensemaking” through participatory dialogue frameworks as well as collaborative approaches to making journalism more conversational and relational with communities.

In the section that follows, we highlight some of the key contributions from each of the nine papers selected for presentation.

2. This year’s papers

In “What if I Use Help for This? Exploring Normative Evaluations of Relationship Maintenance Behaviors Augmented by External Agency,” Lewen Wei, Jin Kang and Bingjie Liu study the relative appropriateness that participants in mediated conversations assign to augmentation by artificial intelligence or by another human in 25 common relational activities of friendship maintenance.

In “Establishing TikTok as a Platform for Informal Learning: Evidence from Mixed-Methods Analysis of Creators and Viewers,” Sourojit Ghosh and Andrea Figueroa explore the ways that TikTok is used for creating and disseminating new knowledge and skills through informal learning.

In “Digital Civic Sensemaking: Computer-Supported Participatory Sensemaking of Nuanced, Experience-Based Dialogue,” Maggie Hughes, Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, Maridena Rojas and Somala Diby present Real Talk, a hybrid civic technology program that is used for facilitating small-group dialogue and community organizing. They show how it can be incorporated for computer-supported participatory sensemaking of nuanced dialogue data.

In “I 🍷 🍀 🇫🇮 You! — Emojis As Emotional-Political Signifiers in Finnish Election Campaign Discussion Online,” Elisa Kannasto, Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, and Alekski Knuutila provide a framework for understanding how emoji are used to create online affective networks.

In “Pushing for Social Change: How Collaborations Are Recalibrating the Journalistic Mission,” Patrick Walters shows how journalistic collaborations involving a variety of partners (e.g., legacy and non-legacy media, citizen journalists, universities, and nonprofits) play a role in improving journalism’s openness to community input — such that a more conversational style of journalism can be enacted with community members.

Meanwhile, Chris Vargo and Toby Hopp find that political subreddits with complex moderation strategies have less incivility in their paper, “Incivility on Popular Politics and News Subreddits: An Analysis of In-groups, Community Guidelines, and Relationships with Social Media Engagement.”

In their paper “The Impact of Politeness on Conversational Outcomes in Mobile Dating Apps,” Holly Lopez-Long and Pnina Fichman explore the conversational landscape of mobile dating apps, such as Bumble and Tinder, focusing on the impact of politeness strategies and what they mean for conversational outcomes on such platforms.

In “Immunize the Public against Disinformation Campaigns: Developing a Framework for Analyzing Macrosocial Effects of Prebunking Interventions,” Johanna Klapproth, Saïd Unger, Janina Pohl, Svenja Boberg, Christian Grimme, and Thorsten Quandt explore the potential antidotes to disinformation: in this case, the effectiveness of prebunking interventions and their diffusion in social networks.

Finally, in “Great Divisions: The Evolution of Polarization During the Man-made Emergency of January 6, 2021,” Paras Bhatt, Naga Vemprala, Rohit Valecha, Govind Hariharan, and H. Raghav Rao study social media communication before, during, and after the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol, to examine how the evolution of polarization in public discourse surrounding a (political) crisis event of this nature.

3. Conclusion

Overall, these papers signal that the study of mediated conversation will continue to evolve in diversity and complexity alongside the technologies, apps, and services that help structure and give shape to human communication. We appreciate the time and attention invested by the authors of these strong contributions to the literature as well as the feedback provided by the many reviewers who continue to support this minitrack and its place in HICSS.