

Networked Social Communication

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Abstract

Several papers are examined related to the topic of Social Communication via Networks. Papers covering IRC, Virtual World interactions, 4chan, Facebook, and Twitter are discussed, and conclusions are drawn with respect to the state of the field of electronic communications, specifically, what sensible next steps may be.

Research

Papers in the field range from qualitative accounts of social communication with others via networks to statistical analyses of the uses of communication platforms during crisis events or under certain conditions. Broadly, papers could be classified by their subject matter and then by their approach. The technology involved tends to be the primary element of the subject matter: IRC, 'Virtual Worlds', 4chan, Facebook, and Twitter were each topics.

Sources mentioning IRC (Internet Relay Chat) seemed intent on explaining what it is and how it is used, or using it as a source for a foundational element of social interaction on the internet, such as addressivity(Honey), which originated in the 'name: colon' form from early IRC days. Internet Relay Chat is also highlighted in one paper as an often ignored but still vital and active component of the Internet as a whole(Simpson).

'Virtual Worlds' come up in one specific paper, where users try a few different worlds and interact within them over a period of months. This paper was extremely qualitative, focusing most on how the users felt toward each other and about themselves and others while interacting online(Jakobsson). Descriptions of the characters and their actions toward one another made up the lion's share of the content, and conclusions about identity made up most of the rest.

4chan is specifically the focus of one of the papers(Sauthoff), but is mentioned in multiple. It is a message board designed for anonymous posting of images and text which has several million monthly unique users. It has become a powerful cultural phenomenon, causing mayhem and chaos and generally doing whatever it likes. The users of 4chan (and other related websites, referred to as chans) refer to the collection of users as an entity known as "Anonymous". Anonymous has organized protests against the Church of Scientology, it has cyber-attacked FBI investigative teams, and it has performed Distributed Denial of Service attacks against high profile websites like Visa, in support of Wikileaks and Julian Assange. Nearly every internet fad or meme originated within 4chan at some point, from 'lolcats' to 'lulz' to rickrolls. 4chan is clearly one of the cultural bases of today's tech-savvy youth.

Facebook is discussed in two contexts: by a New York Times article covering work being done by researchers studying members of Facebook(Rosenbloom), and in a study done on members of Facebook(Chiu). The study has interesting (but facile) results, namely: social networks that have higher

numbers of users tend to be more popular, and that social networks that are more popular tend to have higher activity. The means by which this is determined (through some statistical inference and psychological theory) is pretty interesting as an explanation of the mechanism behind Facebook's popularity, but the results are not anything that wasn't well known beforehand.

Twitter is examined in terms of its density as a social network(Huberman), in terms of its usefulness for conversations and collaborations(Honey), in terms of how closely its users keep to its suggested topic of "what are you doing?"(Mischaud), and in terms of its use and retention during crisis moments(Hughes). Some suggestions are made regarding interface or functionality changes (in multiple papers) which would improve Twitter. Some of these have already been implemented, as the papers generally came out in 2008/9. It is also determined that while youth are the primary adopters of Twitter, the majority of its activity comes from a slightly older crowd(Lenhart). Finally, that communication via Twitter (and also other similar services) rarely replaces FtF (Face to Face) conversation or meetings, but does augment or supplement them.

Discussion

It is clear that youth make extensive use of social communication tools which operate over networks(Lenhart). Presently, Facebook is the dominant network for management of one's identity(Rosenbloom), and Twitter trails it significantly. Twitter is being used for conversations and collaboration(Honey), which it was not built for, and certain flaws in the functionality of search and in the displays of past tweets / groups of related tweets cause roadblocks for those wishing to use it as a more powerful collaborative tool.

Facebook is nearly the antithesis of 4chan(Sauthoff), in that they take opposite stances on personal identity and result in nearly opposite content. 4chan overflows with inappropriate and foul imagery (which tends to also be very clever and funny), while Facebook is most useful for planning a quick party or talking to family members or distant friends(Rosenbloom).

IRC is kind of lost in the modern era of social networked mobile applications(Simpson), and Twitter is in some ways relatable to it. Both separate subjects by #content identifiers, and both use usernames and maintain persistent conversations. Twitter can be more broad in that you send messages to everyone on your list (though people tend to only directly act with a small number of their followers/followees)(Huberman), while IRC tends to allow for smaller group conversations regularly, but restricts large scale visibility of information.

Conclusions

It is my opinion that a space exists for mobile software which may be more collaborative or more fluid than Twitter. Twitter is in many ways similar to emailing a list of people your short message, while IRC is more like chat-communication. There may be a product which is to Twitter what instant messaging was to electronic mail - not a replacement, but a new class of communication tool.

Collaboration would likely move in the opposite direction, solidifying the available data, presenting it, and allowing for more effective sharing would be excellent.

Identity is an issue which will likely not be resolved soon - 4chan and Facebook both have significant upsides and downsides, and allowing pseudo-anonymity (as in Twitter and IRC) may be the best option, where users are encouraged to pick names for themselves (but not required), and those names may be meaningless or tied to the user's real life situation.

Tools similar to Twitter but more 'real time' or more collaboratively-minded are absolutely a good idea.

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