Erikson and Kellogg are studying a social phenomenon they call social translucence and how that applies to communication and collaboration coherence in digital systems. Social Translucence supports activity by social behavior by making participants and activities visible to one another. The issue today is that that huge part of social information is missing and not being utilized. This radical change when we move into the digital system is generally not how real life works and digital social mediums must address the gap.

Many great illustrations were used to metaphorically describe social translucence and its impact in our behavior. We often will change our own behavior based on what we’ve seen other people do, whether we know them or not. One example would be is when you’re walking down the street trying to pick a restaurant. You hear a murmur of excited conversation and a cozy setting filled with smiling people. Because of what you see and experience about the social atmosphere, you decide to inquire more. That’s how translucence can change behavior. Another metaphor to social translucence is to a window. Often, digital technology imposes walls between people rather than creating windows. An great example in everyday life is solid doors. You can often hit people on the other side but in our fast paced life, opening the door quickly is common and we don’t check to see if that could be a problem. Instead, if a glass door was used instead, other people would be visible, we would become aware of them, and that in turn creates accountability for our actions.

The specific digital area that the research is trying to address is knowledge management. The vision is to create a conversationally based knowledge community. Erikson and Kellogg created a medium called Babble to incorporate the idea of social translucence and observe behaviors that resulted. One key component of Babble is that it shows history of conversation and everyone sees the posts in the same order. Reference to order can then be utilized for discussion. Also, there was a social proxy that was a graphical representation of users that depicts presence and activities. It reminded me of Chat Circles because of the idea that those around you are participating in the same current conversation. Babble also had the same spatial issue the as Chat Spaces in the fact that one person cannot view multiple conversations at once. However, in Chat Spaces you could still notice activity elsewhere even if you couldn’t see the conversation, but in Babble you can’t.

A big part of this implementation of social translucence is that Babble was placed in specific types of communities. These communities were small in size and the participants knew each other and could engage on a higher level of accountability. However, in larger spaces like Wikipedia, I’m doubtful if a significant degree of accountability can be achieved with people you don’t know even if they are similar knowledge based communities. It was also interesting how the presence of strangers provoked
concern about the unguarded conversations. The degree of translucence may really depend on how well the group knows one another.

One final note is that the research was done by IBM. Throughout many of the papers I’ve read for this class, I’ve noticed there is quite a few done by researchers of large companies. In a traditional thought, I would have thought most of this is highly theoretical and therefore not directly applicable to the bottom line of most companies but it seems like they’ve taken an active investment in this area as well.

Supporting community and building social capital: Social translucence: designing social infrastructures that make collective activity visible

This article is a basic summary of the research paper by Erikson and Kellogg which was described above. Many of the same examples were used to help illustrate the concept of social translucence. As social creatures, we make many decisions based on being able to see traces of others’ activities.

The article introduced Babble and its features further. One feature that is not really described in the previous paper is the Babble Timeline. This essentially allows someone to view a big picture of people’s contributions to the conversation as a whole. Also, this article focused a lot more on the applications of Babble. Three that were mentioned are lectures, auctions, and lines. Amusingly, all the formats really resemble how they would look in real life. The lecture application also had an additional feature that was very interesting. When someone would interrupt the lecture too much, the dot representing them would literally be “out of line” – spatially. Auctions are also an interesting, and often missed platform where social translucence is critical because of the lack of spoken or written communication. Many social cues are missed in current online auction interfaces that could be enhanced with Babble. Lines are an important issue to address because much of the anxiety about online silence, especially when it comes to online customer service, is centered on wait time. With a line visualization, the physical resources become more apparent than just having the standard “your call is important to us please remain on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received.”

One particular benefit from this article over the paper is the fact that it had actual color screen shots of the Babble system. Although it seems trivial, seeing the user interface helped me understand more about how I personally would use this. Also, color helped define between different classifications. It’s also more descriptive and includes a lot more user options than the simple example interfaces used in the paper. Also, because this is four years into the deployment of Babble, I’m also guessing significant improvements have been made in the last two years from when the other paper was published. Seeing the change and development improvements for Babble between that time span spoke about the conclusions and using an iterative process to improve Babble based on the conclusions.