

## **CS 598kgk: Social Computer Mediated Communication**

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### **Electropolis**

Elizabeth Reid

This was a pretty comprehensive, and somewhat dense, read. A lot of the references (to multiple definitions of culture, for example) seemed superfluous and a bit pointless – I feel the same thing could have been written much more concisely with less effort, although without the thesis style page-count. However, a lot of the insights were useful. Some thoughts:

- a) The article is pretty insightful considering it is over a decade old
- b) I felt that a lot of the detailed explanations behind the mechanics of it all were unnecessary and intuitive to anyone who knows what IRC is, even if they have never used it (like myself). Perhaps it was necessary at the time though.
- c) I felt some of her conclusions were debatable:
  - i. The significance of the words 'kick' and 'kill' as IRC commands – my understanding is that 'kill', for instance, was used for historical purposes (kill a network connection, etc), and the anthropomorphizing of these commands seems a bit of a reach
  - ii. The section on 'deconstructing boundaries' includes a considerable amount of discussion on gender switches. Although this might have been true (I was eight years old when the paper was written, so I have no idea how it was then!), I have read about research that indicates pretending to switch gender on IRC like environments isn't effective for any amount of real communication. In fact, one of the PI's behind the Turing Game, Amy Bruckman, was unable to convince a group of participants that she was male in an IRC like setting, despite being an expert on gender theory and related issues. (<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/papers/convergence-tg-01.pdf> - It's a very interesting read, I highly recommend it)
- d) I appreciate how she contrasts the good (increased confidence, disinhibition) with the bad (lack of responsibility). I thought it was key to point out that while it might help develop social skills for shy people, it might also discourage the development of social skills for shy people by

acting as a crutch – at the end of the day, what we take away from any technology really depends on us.

- e) I think her pointing out of the effectiveness of speed-of-response as a key metric in IRC-type environments is important. Sometimes I wish people would stop messaging me when I start taking a while to reply.
- f) Another good point she had was that – although the relationships online are 'virtual', the effects of these relationships are quite real. An online argument is just as likely to ruin someone's day as a face-to-face one is.
- g) Her integration of kill-wars and self-imposed social structure is important in realizing the extent of IRC as a community and society with laws unto itself.
- h) Anyone who can justify chatting online as research is cool by definition!
- i) I really wish the article was written without such a tight coupling with IRC. I would be very interested in a similar study into social online communities in light of the properties of just being online instead of being online on IRC.

## **Connections (Chapter 4)**

Sproull and Kiesler

This was an interesting read, although I'm not sure I could clearly define what I got from it. The conclusions that I readily agreed with as evident from the experiments were the ones stated in the beginning of the chapter as 'already known' – such as group extremization and groupthink. I also intuitively agreed with the increased likeliness of useful comments from 'lower-status' members in an online setting. I don't agree with the assumption that an online setting significantly affects the amount of time each member gets to talk – the results shown are only for three-person groups and I am not convinced that they will hold for larger groups. Instinctively, I would feel that small groups behave very differently from larger groups and would have thought it useful for their results to have used group size as an axis for comparison as well. Some opinions I don't agree with – they mentioned that it takes longer to reach a decision online than in person, but that this is okay because meeting in person includes transit time and the like that are not measured in a lab setting. I think that's a bit of a debatable point – online meetings do have costs as well, for configuration and training and the like. I found one of the latter sections 'When are electronic groups appropriate?' section to be the most useful in terms of summarizing the

strengths and weaknesses of each type of communication. One of the most interesting and insightful conclusions I came across was the realization that perceived and actual group performance were almost inversely related – that an overly-critical member was much more useful in terms of quality of output than an overly-supportive member. I think the experiment was a bit unfairly designed, despite the author's best intents – the metrics used to evaluate the two communication strategies were those that have evolved over years of face-to-face communication. In this light, electronic communication was used to mimic or replace face-to-face communication, without regard to those facets of electronic communication that set it apart from face-to-face communication – such as the ability for all members to be situated in their natural environments (offices) where they have access to all their files and figures and resources.

### **Communication Systems: A Comparison across a Set of Major Axes**

Kyratso Karahalios

Who would have thought there were eight separate axes for communication systems? I found a few axes that I wouldn't have thought of myself (history, moderation, abstractness) and a few that I weren't sure should be separated (graphics, 3d), but on the whole, I thought it was a useful framework within which to think about communication spaces. Some thoughts:

- a) I wasn't sure why 3d and graphics were separate axes – I would have thought they would have been different points on a 'realism' axis. Admittedly, this would have made it difficult to discuss the ChatCircles work, but that seems more natural to me, probably because there is some subtle aspect I'm not getting.
- b) I thought the ChatCircles work was fascinating. It was interesting to see how it 'crossed-over' on axes – a lot of things tended to be included together across axes, and this one switched from one group to the next.
- c) I would be curious to see how some other work would relate (such as GoodNews | BadNews at [typorganism.com](http://typorganism.com), or the concept of blogs, forums, etc), although I do realize they weren't as prevalent at the time of the writing.
- d) I like how each axis is projected against the 'face-to-face' versus 'mediated' axis – I thought it was useful to be able to relate each concept to a familiar 'face-to-face' context.