Social Translucence: Designing Social Infrastructures That Make Collective Activity Visible

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*Social Translucence* is an intriguing and thought-provoking article. Social Translucence is what the authors define as a term that, although implicit, means *transparence* in actuality, in online socializing spaces. The aim of this study was to oversee online social interactions and gauge how people behave in online social spaces. This was done by designing a tool that enabled visually representations of users’ social nuances and cues in online interactions. The authors of this article have designed, deployed and studied the workings of Babble and the outcomes thereof. The purpose behind the Babble prototype is novel - a system that “allow groups to collaborate”¹ and to “design systems that make progress over a common goal”²

I was impressed that the authors (who I assume are computer scientists) have applied sociology and ethnomethodology in their research. Being especially in this area of online social interactions, it is almost reaffirming that qualitative research can be pervasive. The authors also give examples of areas where Babble can be applied to increase the productivity (Lectures), speed up progress (Lines), and enhance interactivity (Auctions). Near the end, the authors also discuss the opportunities and consequences of the Babble prototype.

¹,² Social Translucence: Designing Social Infrastructures That Make Collective Activity Visible by Thomas Erickson, Christine Halverson, Wendy A. Kellogg, Mark Laff, Tracee Wolf, Pg 1

³ Social Translucence: Designing Social Infrastructures That Make Collective Activity Visible by Thomas Erickson, Christine Halverson, Wendy A. Kellogg, Mark Laff, Tracee Wolf, Pg 2, boldface added.
The authors note that it “is crucial to maintain such socially useful ambiguities”, which I assume acts as an attempt to bring in “randomness” or a true/real-life setting with all the “noises” around, I think that the concept of social translucence in untenable on some grounds. The basic idea being our online persona and our real persona varies in degrees. One may adopt a role of being more receptive when being monitored in a lecture administered on Babble, whereas in the absence of a watch, one may slip back into his real self of being lazy and slacking off. Also, still in its research stage, Babble seems to show only a few behaviors and relationships, for example, Babble shows who is chatting with whom but does not and cannot show attention levels or if a conversation is turning out positive or negative. Also, for example, a student moving more towards the left of the lecturer (Fig. 3) shows there is an interaction going on, but doesn’t show if it is an agreement or disagreement.

The visualization of Babble is pleasing and engaging; however, what concerns me the most is the implications of using Babble surrounding issues of privacy and control. Although the authors mention that Babble was designed for small and mid-sized corporate groups, their ideas on governing ones actions and applying this in “semi-private online conversation area[s] where members of groups, such as teams, work groups, committees, and special purpose task forces”, is stretching from a low level privacy risk of standing in line for customer support, to a high level privacy risk of having every move under scrutiny. The authors’ collective views that “[Babble] illustrates the power and flexibility of social proxies” and their instantaneous attempt at validating that “[Babble is a] collective resource and not a straightjacket” makes me feel that

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research on social interaction can raise inflammatory questions on trustworthiness and privacy in the hands of policy-makers. It makes me wonder that if Babble was released or launched, who would get the rights to decide the caveat on privacy and anonymity. If the online space is undergoing a transformation with the Web 2.0 revolution, the line between personalization and intrusion grows thinner and thinner.